

Article 5 - John Wycliffe and the Lollards: The First English Reformation

As we continue our journey through the history of the Anglican Church, we arrive at a figure who lived nearly 150 years before Martin Luther and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. His name is John Wycliffe, and he has often been called the “Morning Star of the Reformation.”

The title is fitting. Like the morning star that appears before sunrise, Wycliffe’s ideas anticipated several of the reforms that would later transform Christianity in Europe. He challenged the wealth and political power of the medieval Church, argued for the supreme authority of Scripture, and supported making the Bible available in the language of ordinary people. His teachings influenced a movement known as the Lollards, whose presence continued in England long after his death.

To understand Wycliffe, we must first understand the troubled world in which he lived. The fourteenth century was a difficult time for England and Europe. War, famine, and disease disrupted society on an enormous scale. The Black Death swept across Europe beginning in 1347 and reached England in 1348, killing perhaps one-third to one-half of the population. Families and communities were devastated, and the social and economic consequences were immense.

The papacy had also become deeply entangled in European politics. From 1309 to 1377, the popes resided at Avignon rather than Rome. Soon afterward, the Great Western Schism began, with rival claimants to the papacy competing for authority. Questions about wealth, corruption, and spiritual authority became increasingly urgent.

This was the world of John Wycliffe.

Wycliffe was born around 1328 in Yorkshire, England. Very little is known about his early life, but he received an excellent education and eventually became a prominent scholar at the University of Oxford, one of Europe’s important centres of learning. He distinguished himself as a philosopher, theologian, and teacher.

As Wycliffe studied theology and reflected on the state of the Church, he became increasingly convinced that reform was necessary. Like many reformers, he did not begin by trying to establish a new church. He sought instead to address what he believed were serious problems within the existing Church.

At the heart of Wycliffe’s thought was his conviction about the authority of Scripture. The medieval Church valued Scripture deeply, but Christian teaching was also shaped by the Church’s tradition, canon law, councils, theologians, bishops, and papal authority. Wycliffe increasingly insisted that Scripture possessed supreme authority and that ecclesiastical teaching must be judged in light of it.

This conviction led him to question aspects of church life that he believed could not be adequately supported by Scripture.

Wycliffe became particularly concerned about the wealth and political power accumulated by the Church. The medieval Church owned extensive lands and exercised considerable influence in public life. Wycliffe argued that wealth could corrupt spiritual leadership and distract the Church from the poverty and simplicity exemplified by Christ and the apostles.

His criticism was not directed against Christianity itself but against what he regarded as the misuse of ecclesiastical wealth and authority. His arguments also appealed to political leaders who were eager to limit papal influence and gain control of church property.

One of Wycliffe's most enduring legacies is his association with the translation of the Bible into English. He believed that Scripture should be accessible to Christians in a language they could understand.

The first complete translation of the Latin Vulgate into Middle English appeared in the late fourteenth century and became closely associated with Wycliffe and his followers. Scholars today are cautious about describing it simply as "Wycliffe's Bible." There is no convincing evidence that Wycliffe personally translated the entire Bible, and the translations were probably the work of several scholars connected with his movement. Nevertheless, his teaching strongly encouraged the conviction that Scripture should be available in English.

For Wycliffe, Scripture also needed to be preached. During his years at Oxford, he encouraged preaching and emphasized the responsibility of clergy to proclaim the Gospel faithfully. A group of travelling preachers sometimes called the "poor preachers" became associated with his reforming ideas.

Later tradition sometimes presents these preachers as a well-organized missionary movement personally directed by Wycliffe, but the historical picture is less certain. What is clear is that vernacular preaching and biblical instruction became increasingly important among those influenced by his thought.

The movement that eventually became associated with Wycliffe's teachings was known as Lollardy. The origin of the word "Lollard" is uncertain and was initially used as a term of contempt.

The Lollards were not a single, centrally organized church. They represented a diverse movement whose beliefs developed over time. They emphasized the authority of Scripture, valued preaching and vernacular religious teaching, and criticized practices they believed were inconsistent with the Gospel. Some questioned clerical wealth, pilgrimages, images, devotion to saints, and other aspects of medieval religious life.

Not all Lollards believed precisely the same things, nor can every later Lollard belief be attributed directly to Wycliffe. His ideas often developed in more radical directions among his followers after his death.

As Wycliffe's own ideas became more controversial, opposition increased. Particularly contentious were his teachings about the Eucharist.

The medieval Western Church increasingly taught that, in the Eucharist, the substance of bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of Christ while their outward appearances remain those of bread and wine—a doctrine known as transubstantiation. Wycliffe rejected the accepted philosophical explanation of this doctrine and argued for a different understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

His position caused enormous controversy because Eucharistic teaching stood at the heart of medieval Christian worship and theology.

In 1382, a church council held in London condemned a number of propositions associated with Wycliffe. His influence at Oxford declined, and he withdrew to his parish at Lutterworth.

Wycliffe was not imprisoned or executed. He suffered a stroke and died at Lutterworth on December 31, 1384.

His death, however, did not end the controversy.

Lollard communities continued to exist in England during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Authorities increasingly regarded the movement as heretical, and some Lollards were imprisoned or executed. Despite persecution, Lollardy survived underground in various parts of England.

Decades after Wycliffe's death, the Council of Constance condemned many teachings associated with him. In 1428, following orders issued by church authorities, his remains were exhumed from Lutterworth, burned, and the ashes reportedly scattered in the River Swift.

What does Wycliffe mean for Anglicans today?

The answer requires some care. Wycliffe was not an Anglican. Anglicanism did not yet exist, and he lived within the medieval Western Church. Nor would later Anglicans agree with all of his theological conclusions.

Yet several themes associated with Wycliffe would become important during the English Reformation and within later Anglicanism.

His emphasis on the authority of Scripture resonates with Article VI of the Thirty-Nine Articles, which declares that Holy Scripture contains "all things necessary to salvation." The Articles emerged during the English Reformation, were agreed upon in 1562, and reached their definitive form in 1571. They express important doctrinal positions of the reformed Church of England rather than simply providing a compromise between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

His support for vernacular Scripture also anticipated one of the great developments of the English Reformation: the widespread availability of the Bible in English. Later translators such as William Tyndale would work directly from Hebrew and Greek, and their efforts eventually contributed to translations including the King James Bible of 1611.

It is therefore tempting to draw a straight line from Wycliffe to the English Reformation. History, however, is rarely that simple. The relationship between medieval Lollardy and the Protestant Reformation remains debated. Some Lollard communities survived into the sixteenth century and may have helped create an environment receptive to reform, but Luther, Tyndale, Cranmer, and other Reformers emerged from circumstances very different from those of fourteenth-century England.

Wycliffe's importance does not depend upon making him a Protestant before Protestantism existed.

His significance lies in the questions he raised.

What is the proper relationship between Scripture and the authority of the Church? How should Christians respond when wealth and political power threaten the Church's spiritual mission? Should ordinary Christians have direct access to Scripture? What responsibility does the Church have to proclaim the Gospel in words people can understand?

These questions did not disappear with Wycliffe's death.

More than a century later, they would emerge again with tremendous force during the Reformation. In that sense, the traditional title "Morning Star of the Reformation" captures something important. Wycliffe did not begin the Reformation, nor did he foresee everything that would follow. But in the darkness of the fourteenth century, he raised questions that would continue to illuminate the Church for generations to come.