

John Wycliffe: The Morning Star

PROGRAM 1

INTRODUCTION:

The Protestant Reformation was an important movement in shaping our modern world. (The name “Protestant” was first used by the Lutheran party in 1529 when they formally protested a decree of the emperor Charles V and the Diet of Spires. The name “Protestants” was later extended to the followers of Calvin and those of the Reformed churches.) In many ways the Reformation broke with traditions which had built up during the Middle Ages. In fact, as we look at John Wycliffe (our first important person in this Reformation series), we will be in the Middle Ages or the Medieval Period—this was the period of knights, castles, cathedrals, and a centralized church with vast wealth, authority, and power.

TEACHER BACKGROUND AND INFORMATION:

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY WORLD

Barbara Tuchman in *The Distant Mirror*, a masterful history of the fourteenth century, noted that the century had long been ignored by the historians because it was so dismal. Corruption in government, decadence in morals, natural disasters, warring nations, and an antique economic system all worked together to produce a dark and bleak century.

In England, William Langland wrote a satirical allegory, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, to point out the clerical abuses, the decadence of the courts, the hard conditions of the day laborer of the period, and the general corruption which abounded on all sides and in all areas of life. As new issues came to the fore, Langland revised his work several times between 1362 and 1393. Throughout these revisions he continued to look for a coming reformer who would change the world. Langland recognized that the solution to the many problems facing England was a good plowman who, following the teaching and example of Christ Himself, would produce and provide spiritual food for the people.

John Wycliffe seemed the answer to Langland’s dream. Wycliffe saw beyond the need for surface changes in the medieval system and called the people and the leaders back to the Bible. He believed the Bible, not church traditions, provided guidance and direction for individuals and society at large.

WYCLIFFE’S RESPONSE TO MEDIEVAL CHURCH

Wycliffe found no basis in Scripture for three major aspects of the medieval church of his day—indulgences, transubstantiation, and papal authority. What was the medieval teaching on these subjects?

Indulgences: The Church taught that there was a treasury of merit bought with the suffering and righteousness of Christ and the saints. The Pope, as the keeper of the keys of St. Peter, could unlock this treasury and bestow a remittance from punishment for sins, both in time and in purgatory. In Wycliffe’s day and later, such indulgences could be bought for a price. It was possible to lessen one’s time in purgatory—or a loved one’s time in purgatory—by buying an indulgence. (Purgatory according to Catholic doctrine was an intermediate place where souls went after death for sins to be purged in preparation for Heaven.) Indulgences could also be obtained by saying prayers or performing certain religious acts (ex. going on pilgrimages or visiting certain holy shrines). The earliest record of an indulgence was in 1016 when the archbishop of Arles gave an indulgence of a year to those who helped erect a church building. Popes regularly granted indulgences to those who participated in the crusades.

Wycliffe opposed the entire concept of indulgences, especially the selling of them. He reasoned sin cannot be pardoned for money, and righteousness cannot be bought and sold. If the pope had the power to unconditionally forgive sin, he should forgive the sins of everyone!

Indulgences remain part of Roman Catholic doctrine today, but since the Reformation the buying and selling of indulgences has been strictly prohibited.

Transubstantiation: Transubstantiation was introduced into the church in the eleventh century, and by 1215 Pope Innocent III had sanctioned it as an official doctrine of church orthodoxy. Most simply, transubstantiation means that the words of consecration at the mass transformed the bread and wine of the Eucharist into the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ, though in appearance (“accidence” was the technical term from medieval philosophy) the elements continued to be that of bread and wine. This doctrine elevated the importance of the mass itself into a repeated sacrifice of Christ’s body and blood. The priest’s power was greatly increased with his claim to offer the actual body and blood of the Savior. The cup was no longer given to the laity for fear of spilling the very blood of Christ.

Wycliffe regarded transubstantiation as a recent doctrine without Scriptural warrant and opposed it as such.

Papal authority and priestly privileges: Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), who had officially sanctioned transubstantiation, also did much to assert the spiritual and temporal authority of the papacy and the idea of papal infallibility. As Christ’s representative on earth, the pope had dominion over the church and over the whole world. As God gave Christ power in heaven and earth, so Christ entrusted such rule to Peter and his successors in the papacy. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII even more forcefully stated in his *Unam Sanctum* that the pope was the head of the Church and all Christians were to be subject to him for salvation. The pope was superior to all human authority and was to be judged solely by God. All Christians owed him obedience.

Wycliffe vehemently attacked such papal claims and boldly called the pope the antichrist (among other things)! He wrote that the Great Schism, when there were two or more popes vying for authority, was the Lord’s gracious means of exposing the papacy’s evil. Wycliffe wrote that the popes and their cardinals were positions created by the devil, not Christ. Christ paid tribute to Caesar and so should the pope—papal aspirations to temporal, earthly authority should be abandoned. The keys of the kingdom were the spiritual power given not just to Peter but to all believers.

Wycliffe equally ridiculed the false priests who did not know or follow the law of Christ.

CHURCH AND STATE

Wycliffe also had important thoughts on the proper relationship of the Church and the State or the government. He wrote that all rule or dominion, both of the State and the Church, comes from God. The State holds temporal power while the church has spiritual authority, but both hold their authority from God. According to God’s law outlined in Scriptures, the church is not to hold temporal power. Christ Himself taught that the State or Caesar was to have dominion over temporal affairs. Wycliffe held that Christ also encouraged His followers to live in poverty, without accumulating temporal wealth. When wealth was accumulated and misused as it had been in the monasteries, the State, under God, had the right to take the property and redistribute it. It is interesting to note that when reform did finally come in the English church, it began in a way similar to that outlined by Wycliffe—with the State disendowing the Church.

Wycliffe also held that the true Church is made up of those predestined by God. Many in the visible Church, including popes, might not even be part of the true Church. Therefore, it was necessary for the government to properly assert its authority under God in areas where the visible Church erred.

PEASANTS’ REVOLT

In 1381 England suffered from the Peasants’ Revolt led by Wat Tyler and John Ball, among others. John Ball claimed to have Lollard (a name for Wycliffe’s followers) sympathies, and several writers accused Wycliffe’s “poor priests” of being responsible for stirring the people up to revolt against their lords. No legal accusations were ever brought against the poor priests, however, and Wycliffe soon brought out a tract outlining the Biblical duty of servants to their masters. Wycliffe showed from Scriptures that the Christian servant is especially to have a pleasing attitude to his master. From both the Old and New Testaments Wycliffe showed what the proper relationship between the servant and the lord should be, while also recognizing that the lords do often wrong poor servants. Even though Wycliffe had neither encouraged nor approved the Peasants’ Revolt, his influence suffered from it.

WYCLIFFE CHRONOLOGY

c. 1330	Born in Yorkshire
1337	One Hundred Years War Begins
1345	Entered Oxford
1360	Master of Balliol College
1362	English officially became the national language [after French dominating since the Norman Invasion of 1066]
1366	Becomes one of the king’s chaplains
1372	Doctor of Theology
1374	Among commissioners to Bruges negotiating problems of papal & royal jurisdiction
1377	Pope Gregory sent bulls to England condemning Wycliffe’s writings as dangerous to Church & State. Began sending out poor preachers.
1378	Lambeth Palace—Wycliffe explained his views to the archbishop and bishops Queen Mother urged council not to bring judgment against Wycliffe Wrote <i>De Ecclesia</i> on the nature of the church
1379	Wrote against doctrine of transubstantiation
1381	Peasants’ Revolt
1382	Blackfriars’ Synod summoned by Archbishop Courtney to consider Wycliffe’s views; views pronounced as heresies Forbidden to teach at Oxford Retired to pastoral living at Lutterworth Stroke left him partially paralyzed, but work continued
1384	Second stroke and death
1415	Council of Constance posthumously condemned Wycliffe
1428	Wycliffe’s remains disinterred, burnt to ashes, & cast into the River Swift

LOLLARD PREACHERS AND THE ENGLISH BIBLE

In his move to return to the strength of the primitive church, Wycliffe did not set up a new order of monks as previous medieval reformers had done. Rather, he sought to strengthen the teachings and moral character of the parish priests. Wycliffe's Christianity was more Scriptural than sacramental, and he saw the role of the parish priest as primarily teaching the Scriptures to his flock. The sermons of the friars consisted mostly of legends and tales of saints. Wycliffe showed his true opposition to the contemporary medieval tradition in his strong emphasis on Scriptural exegesis in his sermons. This of course led to the translation of the Bible into English for even the common people to read. Though Wycliffe did not translate the entire Bible himself, it is indisputable that he was the inspiration and guide behind the translation work.

Wycliffe in his *On the Office of Pastor* outlined three main duties for the pastor. First, he must preach the gospel. Declaring God's Word was the most worthy deed the priests could do. Standing contrary to the entire religious establishment of his day, Wycliffe taught that preaching was more important than administering the sacraments, since it was by preaching the Word of God that Christ's Body, the Church, was truly built up. Besides preaching God's law, the pastor also had the duty of keeping his sheep from wolves, whom Wycliffe primarily interpreted as the friars. Thirdly, the shepherd should "grease" or anoint the "scabbed sheep," giving them the medicine of God's law whereby they can be made whole. Wycliffe sent out his poor preachers into the countryside on the premise that right thinking leads to right living. By teaching the truth to the people, their lives would naturally become more Christian.

Wycliffe's method of sending out preachers to teach the people God's law was in some ways similar to the program of John Wesley centuries later. Both reformers recognized that only by the people of England receiving instruction in the truths of God could a true reformation take place resulting in a regeneration of English life in all areas.



DISCUSSION AFTER VIEWING FILM:

1. What were the social, economic, political, and religious problems/conditions of Wycliffe's world? *Black Death, 100 Years War, Great Schism, superstition in religion*

2. Wycliffe protested several of the teachings and practices of the medieval church. Name three medieval practices and teachings to which Wycliffe objected. *Indulgences, transubstantiation, papacy*

What was the root cause to his objection to all of these practices? *They were not taught in the Scriptures.*

3. In what situations did Wycliffe believe the State could exercise authority over the church? *Wycliffe taught that all dominion, both spiritual and governmental, comes equally from God. If the church misused or corrupted its authority, then the civil authority had the right and duty to correct that abuse.*

What support for his theory of dominion (or the authority of the Church and the State) did he find in Scripture? *The Church should follow the pattern of Christ and the apostles and live in poverty, not accumulate earthly wealth to itself. The Church's true authority should be the Word of God, not an earthly hierarchy.*

Do you believe his arguments for the State's right to take over church property are valid? Why or why not?

4. How did Wycliffe believe the Church should use its wealth? *To feed the poor and starving.*

5. When Wycliffe and John of Gaunt were discussing transubstantiation, John of Gaunt said, "It is believed throughout the whole of Christendom." Wycliffe replied, "The fact that something is believed by the multitudes does not necessarily make it true." What in the church today might have a "majority rule" but which does not follow Scripture?

6. The authorities tried to weaken Wycliffe's influence by removing him from Oxford. As the film notes, however, "a great loss can provide great opportunity to reassess one's life, to discover a new direction." How did Wycliffe's influence actually increase after he left Oxford? *His encouragement of Bible translation and training of preachers caused his Scriptural teachings to spread throughout the English countryside.*

7. What were some arguments the Church used against putting the Bible in English? *Latin is the language of learning; translating the Scriptures into the common language would debase the Scriptures and strip them of meaning. The common language cannot adequately convey the meaning or the wisdom of the Bible. If the Scripture is placed in the hands of the common people, they will abuse, misuse, and misinterpret the Scriptures.*

What counter arguments could Wycliffe and his followers use for putting the Bible in English? *Men cannot live under the authority of the Word of God unless they know the Word of God. Most of the clergy don't know Latin and so they too are cut off from the Scriptures. Keeping the Scriptures away from the common people has not prevented their abuse at the hands of the church hierarchy. The Holy Spirit will guide God's children in the interpretation of the Scriptures.*

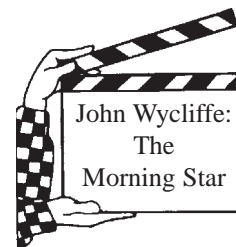
8. In what ways was Wycliffe's influence still felt after his death? *Wycliffe's "poor preachers" continued to carry forth his teachings, though hunted down and suppressed. Many of his writings were carried to Bohemia where they influenced the teaching of John Hus.*

CONCLUSION:

John Wycliffe lived in a period of the church when tradition and custom were replacing the Bible's authority. What traditions and customs are we following today which have usurped the Bible's authority? How can we apply the lessons of Wycliffe's life and ministry to our times?



Archbishop Courtenay saw Wycliffe as a danger to church and determined to stop him.



Behind the Scenes

with Ken Curtis

During the preparation phase of the production, our director, Tony Tew and his family, moved from London to Dorset in the south of England. One day a woman in her eighties welcomed him to the neighborhood. She inquired about Tony's profession. He told her he was a filmmaker preparing a film on a late medieval clergyman named John Wycliffe. The dear lady was stunned and almost passed out. When she was able to speak she revealed her name as Marcella Wycliffe-Thompson, the only known living descendant of John Wycliffe, from the lineage of Wycliffe's sister. She had lived her life as a Christian and devout daughter of the Church of England and never heard the life and ministry Wycliffe emphasized. That a film would now be made on his life exceeded her fondest dreams that her ancestor would not be forgotten. What a joy it was to bring this aged woman to the set and let her meet the actors. She gazed for a long time into the face of Peter Howell, who played the role of Wycliffe, in beard and costume. Then she asked him a few questions, before turning to me to say—"yes, that is he all right!" She of course had drawn her impression of Wycliffe from historic paintings just as we had in preparing the actor.

This film played an unusual role in sparking another film, the story of William Tyndale, titled *God's Outlaw*. See the "Behind the Scenes" for that on page 43.



OPTIONAL BIBLE STUDY FOR PROGRAM 1: JOHN WYCLIFFE Knowing and Studying the Scriptures

Sola Scriptura

John Wycliffe's Rules for Studying the Bible

- Obtain a reliable text
- Understand the logic of Scripture
- Compare the parts of Scripture with one another
- Maintain an attitude of humble seeking
- Receive the instruction of the Spirit

Wycliffe on Christ

Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on His sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation. There must be atonement made for sin, according to the righteousness of God. The Person to make this statement must be God and man.

Wycliffe on Preaching

The highest service to which man may attain on earth is to preach the law of God. This duty falls peculiarly to priests, in order that they may produce children of God, the end for which God had wedded the Church. For this cause Jesus Christ left other works and occupied himself mostly in preaching. So did the Apostles and on this account God loved them. But now priests are found in taverns and hunting; and playing at their tables, instead of learning God's law and preaching.

INTRODUCTION:

How important is the Bible to the Christian faith? After all, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds don't mention the authority of Scriptures at all. Is this a minor issue? John Wycliffe and the leaders of the Reformation didn't think so! *Sola Scriptura*, the Scriptures alone, was one of the battle cries of the Reformation.

Christianity's uniqueness is that God has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures. When God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, He revealed His law and actually wrote out His Word for man—"The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets (Exodus 32:16)."

Wycliffe was the driving force behind the first complete translation of the Bible into English. Historian Barbara Tuchman in *A Distant Mirror* wrote of the great appeal the Wycliffe Bible had: *In the...fierce reaction after the Peasants' Revolt, when Lollardy was harried as the brother of subversion, and mere possession of a Bible in English could convict a man of heresy, the making of multiple copies of the manuscript Bible was a labour of risk and courage. In view of 175 copies that still survive and the number that must have been destroyed during the persecutions and lost over the centuries, many hundreds must have been laboriously and secretly copied out by hand.*

TEACHER INFORMATION:

Some quotes by Wycliffe on the importance of the Scriptures:

Neither the testimony of Augustine nor Jerome, nor any other saint should be accepted except insofar as it was based on Scripture...Christ's law is best and enough, and other laws men should not take, but as branches of God's law.

Science of God feeds men well, other science is meet for hogs, and maketh men fat here but not after doomsday.

The New Testament is full of authority, and open to the understanding of simple men, as to the points that be most needful to salvation...He that keeps meekness and charity hath the true understanding and perfection of all Holy Writ...Christ did not write His laws on tables, or on skins of animals [i.e.parchment], but in the hearts of men...the Holy Ghost teaches us the meaning of Scripture as Christ opened its sense to His Apostles.

[To inquire whether the pope's orders are in conformity with the Bible] *is the reason why every catholic ought to know the sacred scriptures.*

...to be ignorant of the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ.

[All those who love Christ, whether priest, knight or laborer, must] *carefully study the gospel in that tongue in which the meaning of the gospel was clearest to them; for all the faithful were bound to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, and the more closely they followed Him, the more and the better did they love Him; and, since the deeds and teaching of Christ were more clearly expressed in the gospel than elsewhere, it was obvious how much the careful study of this book profited the faithful.*

Christ and His apostles converted much people by uncovering of scripture, and this in the tongue which was most known to them....why then may not the modern disciples of Christ gather up the fragments of that same bread? The faith of Christ ought therefore to be recounted to the people in both languages.

[There was] *no man so rude a scholar but that he might learn the words of the gospel according to his simplicity,...and that these considerations should move all the faithful to learn the gospel...*

From Wycliffe's A Short Rule of Life

First, when you are fully awake, think upon the goodness of your God...

Second, think on the great sufferings and willing death that Christ suffered for mankind...

Third, think how God has saved you from death and other mischief ...And for this goodness and mercy, thank God with all your heart. Pray him to give you grace to spend in that day, and evermore, all the powers of your soul (as mind, understanding, reason, and will) and all the powers of your body (as strength, beauty, and your five senses), in his service and worship, and in nothing against his commandments, but in ready performance of his works of mercy, and to give good example of holy life, both in word and deed, to all men about you.

Be well occupied, and no idle time, for the danger of temptation.

Take meat and drink in measure, not too costly, not too lickerish, and be not too curious thereabout. But such as God sends you with health, take it in such measure, that you be fresher in mind and understanding to serve God. And always thank him for such gifts.

Besides this, do right and equity to all men, your superiors, equals, and subjects, or servants; and stir all to love truth, mercy, true peace, and charity; and help all people to be in harmony with one another.

Most of all, fear God and his wrath; love God and his law, and his worship; and ask not principally for worldly reward...but maintain a virtuous life.

At the end of the day, think about how you have offended God...and amend it while you may. And think...how graciously God has saved you ...And pray for grace that you may dwell and end in his true and holy service, and real love, and according to your skill, to teach others to do the same.



EXAMINING THE SCRIPTURES:

Go to the accompanying study sheets on *Knowing and Studying the Scriptures.*

PAGES 1-4

CONCLUSION:

In his last epistle, Paul encouraged Timothy with words which would also encourage Wycliffe and the Reformers—II Timothy 4:2-5. What do we need to do in our lives and churches to similarly stand firmly on the authority of the Word of God?



Every copy of Wycliffe's Bible was done by hand. It could take up to a whole year for a single copy.