

THE *October 15, 2005* STANDARD BEARER

A REFORMED SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE



Special Reformation Issue:
John Wycliffe

- ◆ The Leper and the Centurion 26
- ◆ The Church of Christ: The Company of the Elect 27
- ◆ John Wycliffe — A Brief History 30
- ◆ The Church in Wycliffe's Day 33
- ◆ John Wycliffe on Evils in the Church 35
- ◆ Wycliffe's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper 37
- ◆ John Wycliffe: Father of the English Bible 39
- ◆ The Lollards: Brief Legacy of John Wycliffe 41
- ◆ John Wycliffe: A Fruitful Tree 44
- ◆ News From Our Churches 46

Volume 82 ◆ Number 2

The Leper and the Centurion*

* NOTE: This is a sample of Wycliffe's Postills, or sermons, that have been preserved. In this sermon, as in others, Wycliffe shows both that he was one of the faithful in whom God preserved a sense of sovereign grace and the need to preach the gospel antithetically, and that he is a part of the corrupted Roman Catholic Church of his day. His sermons manifest a special interest in maintaining the divinity of Christ and the grace of salvation. In his preaching this gospel unashamedly, Wycliffe was "condemned as an heretic for denying the pope's supremacy," and for calling the pope *Potissimus antichristus* (Most especially antichrist). From *Writings of the Reverend and Learned John Wickliff, D.D. Professor of Divinity in Oxford, and Rector of Lutterworth, in the Fourteenth Century...* Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1842, pp. 191-4. The sermon has been edited slightly to remove the hindrance of the pre-reformation style.

Editors

*"And behold there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, etc.
And there came unto him a centurion beseeching him, etc."*

Matthew viii.

This gospel tells of two miracles that Jesus did and contains much instruction about these two miracles. The history tells how Jesus came down off the hill, when He had given His law to His disciples. Much people followed Him, for the devotion that they had to His law and His words. And, lo, there came a leper man and bowed to him, and said, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou mayest heal me." And Christ said He would, and bade him to be whole.

It is commonly supposed that this leprous man knew that Christ was both God and man, and so that Christ might heal him, but in his own worthiness he trusted nothing. And therefore he said that if Christ would, He might heal him of his leprosy. Thus Christ was God; and God willed that proud men and heretics would well confess the faith, and then should be whole. So Christ stretched out His hand and touched him, and said, "I will make thee whole, and enable thee thereto." And thus does God to whom He gives His grace. And straightway the leprosy of this man was cleansed. And this speedy healing betokens this miracle.

And that Christ touched this leprous man teaches us now that the manhood of Christ was servant to His Godhead, for to do miracles that He willed were done. And [it

teaches] that the touching of leprous men that would help them was lawful to men. But Christ must not be blemished with touching of this leprous man. And so Christ taught His everlasting good will, and taught us to perform the good will that we have.

Afterwards Christ bade him, "See that thou tell no man, but go and show thyself to the priest, and offer that gift, which Moses bade, in witness of such health." Men say this word may be understood in three ways. First, that this man should tell no man before he had offered what Christ bade him. Second, and better, that Christ bade this to teach us to flee boasting and thanks of men to whom we do good; and thus we should not tell others, to obtain men's thanks. Third, that Christ bade this to flee slandering God's law among men,

Sermon of John Wycliffe.

The Standard Bearer (ISSN 0362-4692) is a semi-monthly, except monthly during June, July, and August, published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association, Inc., 4949 Ivanrest Ave., Grandville, MI 49418.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Standard Bearer, P.O. Box 603, Grandville, MI 49468-0603.

REPRINT POLICY

Permission is hereby granted for the reprinting of articles in our magazine by other publications, provided: a) that such reprinted articles are reproduced in full; b) that proper acknowledgment is made; c) that a copy of the periodical in which such reprint appears is sent to our editorial office.

EDITORIAL POLICY

Every editor is solely responsible for the contents of his own articles. Contributions of general interest from our readers and questions for The Reader Asks department are welcome. Contributions will be limited to approximately 300 words and must be signed.

EDITORIAL OFFICE

Prof. Russell J. Dykstra
4949 Ivanrest
Grandville, MI 49418
(e-mail: dykstra@prca.org)

BUSINESS OFFICE

The Standard Bearer
Mr. Timothy Pipe
P.O. Box 603
Grandville, MI
49468-0603
PH: (616) 531-1490
(616) 538-1778
FAX: (616) 531-3033
(e-mail: doezema@prca.org)

CHURCH NEWS EDITOR

Mr. Ben Wigger
6597 40th Ave.
Hudsonville, MI 49426
(e-mail: benjwig@juno.com)

NEW ZEALAND OFFICE

The Standard Bearer
c/o B. VanHerk
66 Fraser St.
Wainuiomata, New Zealand

UNITED KINGDOM OFFICE

c/o Mr. Sean Courtney
78 Millfield, Grove Rd.
Ballymena, Co. Antrim
BT43 6PD Northern Ireland
(e-mail: cpraudiostore@yahoo.co.uk)

SUBSCRIPTION PRICE

\$17.00 per year in the U.S., US\$20.00 elsewhere.

ADVERTISING POLICY

The Standard Bearer does not accept commercial advertising of any kind. Announcements of church and school events, anniversaries, obituaries, and sympathy resolutions will be placed for a \$10.00 fee. These should be sent to the Business Office and should be accompanied by the \$10.00 fee. Deadline for announcements is at least one month prior to publication date.

16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm and 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms International.

Website for RFPA: www.rfpa.org
Website for PRC: www.prca.org


and to flee boasting of Himself, and the conceiving evil of God. And as the old law was then ceased, Christ bade fulfill this law as the author thereof. And thus, when a man shows by his holy, active life (as by two doves), or contemplative life (that is, by a pair of turtles), by these signs he shows that his sins are forgiven ... and that, unto priests who well understand this (Leviticus 14). And thus sinful men should counsel with priests, and take from them medicine to flee more sin.

The second miracle teaches how Christ healed a heathen man, out of love for the centurion [knight] that kept Capernaum, the head town of Galilee. This centurion told Christ that his child [servant] lay in his house, sick of the palsy, and was evil tormented. But Luke tells how this centurion conveyed this by old Jews who much praised this centurion as their friend who had built them a synagogue. Christ came with them nigh to this knight's house; and this knight said to Christ, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou enter under my roof; say only a word and my servant shall be whole. For I am a man put in this place by power of the emperor, having other knights under me to do my office. And I say to one, Go, and he goes; and to another, Come, and he comes; and I say to my servant, Do this, and he does it." And by this the knight would mean that

Christ had not need to enter into his house to heal his sick man, since Christ is God almighty, under no authority. And Jesus, hearing these words, wondered, although He knew and ordained before that this knight should be thus true. And therefore Christ said to the folk that followed him, "Truly I say unto you, I found not so much faith in all the folk of Israel, neither priests nor commons...." And Jesus said to this knight, "Go, thy servant shall be whole; for as thou believedst, by my grace, be it done unto thee." And the child was made whole in the same hour that Christ spoke thus.

We shall know that faith is a gift of God; and so God gives it not to man unless He gives it graciously. And thus all good things that men have are gifts of God. And thus, when God rewards a good work of man, He crowns His own gift. And this is of grace, for all things are of grace that men have from the will of God. And God's goodness is the first cause which gives men these good things. And so it may not be that God do good to men unless He do these good things freely by His grace. And with this we shall grant that men deserved of God, for in grace they make them worthy to have this good of God.* But we shall not understand that each grace of God may not be by itself, but grace is a manner in man, by which he is

gracious to God. And other grace on God's side is good will of God; and for which grace in God men receive grace in them. And the chiding of idiots, such as was Pelagius and others, who conceive not that a thing may be unless it may be by itself, as substances are, is to be scorned, and to be left to fools.

But we leave this, and learn of this knight to be meek in heart, in word, and deed; for he granted first that he was under man's power; and yet by power of man he might do many things. Much more should we know that we are under God's power, and that we may do nothing but with power of God. And if we disuse this power, woe shall be to us therefore. So this root of meekness shall get other virtues to us, and grace of God to deserve reward of heaven and good things of glory, as it was in this gentle knight. 

* From this sentence to the end, Wycliffe is difficult to understand. However, it appears that in spite of his emphasis on the power of God's grace, Wycliffe was not entirely free from the errors commonly held by the theologians of the late Middle Ages. They taught that, since the grace of God works in a man to make the man himself gracious, man can, by that graciousness, earn further blessings from God. The idea of merit was not completely rooted out until the Reformation.

Editorial

Prof. Russell Dykstra

The Church of Christ: The Company of the Elect

What a clear and lovely thought in the midst of the hopeless confusion of Pelagianism! The church of Christ is the company of the elect! A ray of hope it was in the theo-

logical darkness of the fourteenth century church, which in effect construed the church as a man-made institution, what with a man as its head and salvation dependent on the works of men. Over against

that is the heartening word, the church is the company of the elect!

It was the 1370s in England, and John Wycliffe was engaged in a fierce controversy with the hierarchy of the church. He was not

October 15, 2005/Standard Bearer/27

alone. There was an increasing awareness of the vile corruption in the clergy at all levels. Wycliffe and others denounced the selling of offices in the church and the immorality, ignorance, and unfaithfulness to the office of the great majority of the clergy. Wycliffe questioned the papacy's claim of infallibility and the assertion that the pope was the vicar of Christ and the head of the church on the earth. He decried the church's involvement in secular affairs and rejected the claim that the pope could grant indulgences for forgiveness of sins.

However, what distinguished Wycliffe from the overwhelming majority of the church's critics was the doctrinal foundation for his attacks on the hierarchy. That doctrinal foundation is predestination, God's sovereign and free election of every member of the church of Christ. Wycliffe's theology of the church was so governed by election that his standard definition of the church was "the company of the elect." He recognized that the evils in the church ran deeper than merely corruption among priests, cardinals, and popes. His pointed attacks on the evil monstrosity that prefigured the whore of the Antichrist were grounded in God's eternal decree of sovereign predestination. This, more than anything else, qualifies Wycliffe to be called a forerunner of the great sixteenth century Reformation.

Wycliffe's ecclesiology, therefore, is worthy of our attention. It was, to be sure, a mixture of medieval theology with Augustinian teaching, along with some elements of his own. Wycliffe believed in purgatory. He followed the scholastic division of the church into three parts — the overcoming part already in heaven, the sleeping part that no longer sins but is being purified in purgatory, and the fighting church on earth. On a better note, he emphasized that the church is one, with Christ as its only head. And he confidently af-

firmed that "the church is the mother of every man who shall be saved, and containeth no other."¹ The church is nothing other than the total number of the elect.

Wycliffe's teachings opposed the conception of the church that prevailed in his day. Indeed, Martin Luther was still contending against the erroneous view of the church 150 years after Wycliffe. That error is that the clergy constitute the church. The clergy insisted that the visible Catholic Church, that is, the organized hierarchy of the clergy with the pope at its head, *is* the church of God. The ordinary members are not the church, but are dependent on the church for their salvation. The theologians maintained that this Catholic Church is the repository of grace, and the church dispensed this grace to the people through the sacraments. The clergy are the mediators between God and the people.

Wycliffe's understanding was radically different. He distinguished the visible church on earth, manifest in his day in the Catholic Church, from the church of Christ. Since the true body of Christ is determined by election, not all the clergy were necessarily included in that true church. Concerning the immoral and worldly clergy Wycliffe wrote, "They are indisputably no members of the Holy Church but members of Satan, disciples of Antichrist, and children of the synagogue of Satan."² Since the reprobate are excluded from the "company of the elect," any members of the visible church who are unbelievers, be they hypocrites or openly ungodly, are not part of the church of Christ, the "Holy Church."

Wycliffe carried the principle of election through. He insisted that the individual soul is not incorporated into Christ by any act of man or by any earthly means or visible signs. Rather, this union with Christ, also described as a betrothal, is by God's decree, accord-

ing to His election in eternity. Each Christian owes all his spiritual gifts to regeneration, and that is the first fruit of election. Lechler summarizes Wycliffe's position: "It is only by virtue of the gracious election of God that the individual belongs to the number of the saved, and is a member of the body of Christ, a child of the Holy Mother Church, of which Christ is the Husband" (p. 289).

Because Wycliffe's doctrine of election governed the doctrine of the church, it prepared the way for later development of the truth over against the errors of Rome. It implies that the clergy are not the mediators between God and man, the mediators who dispense the grace of God to the believer. Implied in Wycliffe's view is the truth that every believer has direct access to the grace of God in Christ Jesus. This would be set forth by Luther as the truth of the priesthood of believers.

Wycliffe based this doctrine of predestination squarely on the sovereignty of God. Wycliffe taught double predestination. God foreordains some to salvation and glory by the decree of predestination. Wycliffe ordinarily refers to the non-elect with the term "foreknown," by which he did not mean that the decree of God is due to His knowing before who would reject Him. Rather, by this he means that God appointed them to everlasting punishment, and the ground for their punishment would be their sins, which God foreknew. Wycliffe is thus careful to maintain that the cause of the condemnation of the reprobate is their own sin, something that the Reformed theologians at Dort would later be equally careful to explain (I, 5, 6). Wycliffe does not in the least minimize the sovereignty of God. Only those predestined to eternal life are saved.

Wycliffe recognized that the church as manifest on the earth contains both elect and reprobate. He writes, "There are here two

manner of church, Holy Church or Church of God,...and the church of the fiend [Satan, RJD] that for a time is good, and lasteth not; and this was never Holy Church, no part thereof."³

Wycliffe maintained, therefore, that the real members of the church, or of the true body of Christ, are exclusively those who have been chosen by God unto salvation. These persevere to the end by God's grace. All is of God, all of grace, rooted in the decree of predestination. An election doctrine of the church, it might be called.

On account of this emphasis on predestination, Wycliffe is rightly regarded as a pre-Reformer, for predestination is a core doctrine of the Reformed faith. The Reformers called election the *cor ecclesia* — the heart of the church. The Reformed confessions confirm Wycliffe's emphasis. The Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 21) confesses that the church is "chosen unto everlasting life." The Westminster Confession (Chapter 25, Art. 1) describes the church in language that could almost have been written by Wycliffe. "The catholic or universal church which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof...." In 1618-'19 in Dordrecht, the Reformed churches affirmed sovereign, double predestination as the first of the "five points of Calvinism" — unconditional election!

Wycliffe stands in a proud tradition of learned theologians who defended sovereign grace and sovereign predestination. He follows such stalwarts as the fifth century Augustine, who did valiant battle against Pelagius' damnable heresy that man could save himself by his own efforts. He stands in the tradition of Gottschalk, who paid for his defense of double predestination with his life. Other, lesser known, theologians valiantly set forth this doctrine, passing on the

torch to Wycliffe, who passed it on to John Hus, and he to Luther and to Calvin. Even to the present day the truth is maintained and defended by faithful, Reformed men.

As well it must be. Election is the key to the right doctrine of the church. Without it, the church becomes a work not of God, but of man.

In spite of its crucial importance, predestination is rarely maintained for very long by any given church. It is vilified and perverted by the open enemies of the Reformed faith; it is neglected by those in the Reformed camp who dare not stand for this hard doctrine. It conflicts with the well-meant offer of the gospel; it leaves no room for man to contribute to his salvation.

Predestination is, admittedly, a hard doctrine. No other doctrine in all of Reformed theology so clearly maintains the sovereignty of God as does predestination. God, altogether apart from any work of man, or any character traits good or bad, but only according to His own good pleasure, determines from eternity where each man, woman, and angel will spend eternity, whether in heaven or in hell. All for the glory of His own name. God is God.

That is Reformed because it is the teaching of the Bible. Every Reformed man confesses it.

Election determines the members of the body of Christ. Election determines who is saved. Election is the fountain of all the blessings of salvation, including faith, regeneration, and holiness.

One has to wonder, then, why it is so hard for Reformed churches to confess that sovereign, unconditional election also governs the covenant. The covenant is inseparable from the rest of God's work of salvation. Why, then, at this point in the doctrine of salvation, would a Reformed man want to introduce man's ability and man's works? Why here, in God's covenant of grace, do conditions suddenly ap-

pear? Election is unconditional. Salvation is unconditional. But the covenant is conditional?

Salvation, the blessed state of living eternally with God in heaven, is for those whom God has chosen, and for them only. But in time and on this earth, God supposedly establishes His covenant with and gives a life of friendship to all the Jacobs and the Esaus who are born in the sphere of the covenant?

Let God be God.

To all who struggle to know the relationship between election and the covenant, I urge you to follow the Reformed way. Let God be God. Follow the Reformed way of sovereign predestination. God's unchangeable election determines not only the church members, but the covenant members. What is the church that God saves? The company of the elect. Who are the covenant people, that is, those with whom God establishes His everlasting(!) covenant of grace? The company of the elect.

As there were in Israel those who were not true Israelites (Rom. 9), so there are church members (i.e., members of the institute) who are not of the body of Christ. And so are there children and adults in the sphere of the covenant with whom God does not establish His covenant.

With thankful hearts we claim the legacy of John Wycliffe in his election theology of the church. In his desire for reform in the church, he saw the need for the proper doctrinal foundation of the church of Christ, a church determined by

1. From a treatise of Wycliffe on the church entitled *De Ecclesiae Domino*, quoted in *Tracts and Treatises of John De Wycliffe, D.D.* (London: The Wycliffe Society, 1845) p. 74.

2. *Saints Days Sermons*, No. 2, quoted in Gotthard Lechler, *John Wycliffe and His English Precursors*, translated by Prof. Lorimer. (London: The Religious Tract Society: 1884), pp. 292-3.

3. From a sermon, quoted in Lechler, *English Precursors*. p. 293.


God. More would be needed. The great Reformation was not brought about through Wycliffe. In the plan of God, John Hus picked up this key element of Wycliffe's teaching. Then a Martin Luther was needed to develop a doctrine of salvation in harmony with election — justification by faith alone. And John Calvin was God's instrument to set forth a full-orbed theology consistent with sovereign predestination.

Yet, still more was needed to establish the complete doctrine of the Reformed truth — the doctrine of the covenant. Reformed theologians labored to set forth a doctrine of the covenant that was consistent with the whole of established Reformed theology. Not, you understand, because they simply wanted a tidy system. Rather, they were convicted that the Reformed truth is the truth of the

Bible, and the doctrine of the covenant must be in harmony with the rest of Scripture.

Hence God raised up Reformed, covenantal theologians to face the question of the relationship between election and the covenant. Geerhardus Vos ("The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology") maintained that "there must not only be a place in [the covenant] for the idea of election, but it must be permeated by that idea."⁴ He demonstrates how that has been true in Reformed theology. Olevianus wrote a work entitled, *Concerning the Substance of the Covenant of Grace Between God and the Elect*. And Polanus wrote, "God made both covenants (old and new) only with the elect." Likewise Bavinck insisted that "election is the basis and guarantee, the heart and core, of the covenant of grace."⁵ Hoeksema and

others insisted that God's covenant of grace is established not with all children of believers head for head, but with the elect in Christ. The English divines made it confessional in the Larger Catechism when they answered the question, "With whom was the covenant of grace made? — The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed."

That is the legacy of John Wycliffe brought to its rightful, glorious conclusion in the Reformed faith. The company of the elect. 

4. *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.: 1980), p. 257.

5. *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: 1956), p. 273.

Rev. Ken Koole

John Wycliffe — A Brief History

In the celestial firmament of the New Testament church age some luminaries have burned more brightly than others. Amongst these "brighter luminaries" John Wycliffe (c. 1320-1384) of England deserves to be numbered.

He is universally acknowledged as "The Morning Star of the Reformation." And not without merit. Through his careful study of God's Word he arrived at doctrinal positions (and criticism of Rome's major errors) that anticipated and prepared the way for Luther and the sixteenth century Reformers. No less a pre-Reformer than John Hus of Bohemia was

deeply indebted to Wycliffe for his own doctrinal stands and insights (re predestination, justification by faith alone, and the error of transubstantiation).

But not only was Wycliffe a forerunner of the great Reformation, he was also one of those used by God to preserve His truth, and thereby His saints and church, through the dark and evil times known as the Middle Ages.

John was born in northern Yorkshire, near the village of Wiclif-on-Tees (hence his name).

Little is known about his youth, other than that, by God's good wisdom, during Wycliffe's youth the area of his family's estate came under the rule and patronage of Prince John of Gaunt, a son of King Edward III. Duke John of Lancaster (as he would be known)

would prove to be Wycliffe's sponsor and, in time, protector as well. This was a most providential arrangement, without doubt keeping Wycliffe from an untimely death. It was Wycliffe who, through his bold, biblical teachings, challenged Rome's errors and exposed Rome's evils as up to this time few had dared, arousing the fury of her prelates. It was King Edward III's own son who would keep Wycliffe's enemies at bay.

His intellectual gifts were recognized early on, and in his mid teens he was enrolled in Oxford, the leading English university of his day. In 1356 he was accepted as a Fellow of Merton College (one of the many that made up Oxford U.), and in 1360 was elected as Master of Balliol for a year. From this seat of learning and influence

Rev. Koole is pastor of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan.

it did not take long for Wycliffe to receive recognition as the foremost philosopher and then theologian of his day, his fame through his writings spreading through the whole of Europe. He would end his days as the rector and pastor of the Lutterworth parish (1374 onwards).

It was while at Oxford that he became familiar with the writings of Augustine, coming under the influence of his older contemporary Bradwardine, who was a professor at Oxford and a staunch Augustinian. The godly Bradwardine would die of the Black Plague in 1349 (which wasted at least a third of the population of England and Europe, it is said), but not before introducing Wycliffe to the value of searching the Scriptures. These God used for Wycliffe's thoroughgoing conversion to biblical authority and truth, and to salvation all of sovereign free grace.

We could do worse than to quote the popular (and unbelieving, humanistic) historian Will Durant for a most interesting and insightful summary of Wycliffe's work and theological focus. Durant's very unabashed anti-Calvinistic bias puts Wycliffe's life's work and the theological emphasis into perspective.

He was ordained to the priesthood, and received from the popes various benefices or livings in parish churches, but continued to teach at the University. His literary activity was alarming. He wrote vast Scholastic treatises on metaphysics, theology, and logic, two volumes of polemics, four of sermons, and a medley of short but influential tracts, including the famous *Tractatus de civili dominio*. Most of his compositions were in graceless and impenetrable Latin that should have made them harmless to any but grammarians. But hidden among these obscurities were explosive ideas that almost severed Britain from the Roman Church 155 years before Henry VIII, plunged Bohemia into civil war, and anticipated nearly

all the reform ideas of John Huss and Martin Luther.

Putting his worse foot forward, and surrendering to Augustine's logic and eloquence, Wyclif built his creed upon that awful doctrine of predestination which was to remain even to our day the magnet and solvent of Protestant theology. God, wrote Wyclif, gives His grace to whomever He wishes, and has predestined each individual, an eternity before birth, to be lost or saved through all eternity. Good works do not win salvation, but they indicate that he who does them has received divine grace and is one of the elect. We act according to the disposition that God has allotted to us: to invert Heraclitus, our fate is our character. Only Adam and Eve had a free will; by their disobedience they lost it for themselves and for their posterity.

God is sovereign lord of us all, the allegiance that we owe Him is direct, as is the oath of every Englishman to the king, not indirect through allegiance to a subordinate lord, as in feudal France. Hence the relationship of man to God is direct, and requires no intermediary; any claim of Church or priest to be a necessary medium must be repelled. In this sense all Christians are priests, and need no ordination. (*The Story of Civilization*, "The Reformation," p. 31)

The unbelieving Durant could not avoid noting that what characterized this Wycliffe, a man of unquestionable courage and integrity, willing to oppose unrighteousness in the affairs of men, was the same doctrinal conviction that would characterize the other, later great Reformers, men of courage and integrity all, men such as Hus, Luther, and Calvin (and Augustine before them) — namely, faith in a predestinating God of sovereign free grace. And what Durant despises Wycliffe for, we love him.

About the only doctrines of importance that Wycliffe dealt with that Durant fails to mention in his resumé are the supreme authority of Scripture (vs. the tradition of mere men) and Wycliffe's rejection

of the error of transubstantiation (addressed by Wycliffe towards the end of his life).

In the affairs of men and for the salvation of His church, God's timing is always exquisite. It is striking how often, just when the church needs a man of special gifts and character, God prepares and raises up such a man or men, and then sees to it that political, worldly circumstances are such that they can survive and function.

The simple fact is that historical circumstances in England contributed largely to Wycliffe's being able to challenge Rome's very doctrinal foundations in such explicit fashion without being silenced by the agents of Rome. When Wycliffe came on the scene, England's nobles were in the process of trying to shake themselves free from the financial stranglehold Rome had upon the nation. More than a century earlier the weak and infamous King John had challenged the authority of Pope Innocent III and had lost, succeeding only in getting the whole nation placed under the dreaded interdict. In 1213, in order to persuade the Pope to lift the interdict, King John had pledged the realm of England to a heavy tribute, to be paid annually to papal coffers. Added to this was the practice of Rome to appoint whom she pleased to high ecclesiastical office in England, many of whom were foreigners, Frenchmen in fact. It was estimated that more English money went to the pope and absentee bishops residing in France than to the state or the king, and this at a time when England was at war with France. Her own money was being used to finance battles against her own English troops.

Understandably, an anti-clerical party arose in England at this time. And it was headed by none other than Prince John of Gaunt.

In 1333 the King, with Parliament's backing, refused to pay the tribute any longer, and in 1351 the Parliament enacted the

Statute of Provisors. This forbade Rome from installing any into various high ecclesiastical offices without the approval of the English parliament. And in that day and age bishops and cardinals commonly exercised authority in civil affairs as well, usually because they were of the nobility to begin with. This Act was, as one might expect, challenged by Rome. The anti-clerical party would look to Wycliffe to answer Rome's challenge and refute her claim of divinely appointed authority, supposedly supreme even in matters pertaining to the state and civil affairs.

Wycliffe's opposition to the evils of Rome and her clergy was well known by this time. He had witnessed firsthand the abuses of the clergy, especially of various mendicant orders — whose origin lay in vows of poverty, but who now brazenly compelled the common people to pay them large sums of money in return for various spiritual services, and had come to hold vast tracts of property. They were notorious for their greed, gluttony, and immorality. Wycliffe had taken the lead in inveighing against them with public words and various pamphlets.

In light of the Gospel record of Christ's self-imposed poverty and the apostles' disregard for worldly goods, Wycliffe began calling the church to divest itself of its vast holdings and property. He pointed out that God is the supreme ruler and ultimately owns all things, and then reasoned that those who are living in sin against God really forfeit all right to rightful possession at all. Especially this was true of the church and clergy who were supposed to represent the righteous God, but who were instead living in such unrighteousness and sin. Their very holding of property in such a state of guilt constituted sin.

Such words were music to the English monarchy's ears.

In 1376 Wycliffe was sent as part of the King's delegation to

Bruges to argue the crown's continued refusal to pay King John's tribute to Rome anymore. From this point on, Wycliffe became the chief spokesman of the crown and nation, disputing the church's authority over the State in temporal and civil affairs. He began to ask, who is this Bishop of Rome, self-proclaimed head of men, when in fact, according to Scripture, Christ is the one supreme head of the church and of all things? Kings and princes derived dominion (authority) from and were answerable to this Lord of all dominion alone, not to a self-appointed head of a corrupt church. He even went so far as to begin to preach that the church ought to begin to return property stolen by dishonest means and improper claims back to the crown and nation.

In early 1377 Wycliffe was summoned by Bishop Courtenay of London to answer to charges of heresy. Sir John of Gaunt appeared as well, and with him a retinue of soldiers. The bishops decided discretion was the better part of valor, and dismissed the proceedings. Back in Oxford, Wycliffe continued with greater vigor to declare that the state should consider itself supreme under Christ in temporal, secular affairs, and that priests and bishops should remove themselves from lordship in temporal and civil affairs, contenting themselves to living simply by means of contributions from the people. He was Protestant before its time.

In March of 1378, at the behest of a Papal Bull to arrest this heretic, Wycliffe was summoned once again to appear before an assembly of bishops, now at Lambeth. This time the Queen mother intervened with a letter, warning the Papal delegates of severe consequences should they dare condemn this man of God. So popular was Wycliffe amongst the commoners by this time that, hearing of Wycliffe's arrest, a sizable crowd gathered in the streets. Should Wycliffe's person be threatened,

the bishops would answer to a mob reaction in the streets. Again the bishops dispersed, daring to declare nothing decisive.

That very month Pope Gregory XI died. Upon his death the great papal schism occurred, two popes chosen by two different bodies of Cardinals. One took up residence in Rome, the other in Avignon. For the time being the church had other things to occupy herself with than with heretics and kings who refused to pay tribute. Accordingly, Rome's threat to the crown in England diminished for a time, and Wycliffe's involvement with such matters as well.

Wycliffe's own spiritual development did not end, however. It was about this time that he began to question the doctrine of Rome's mass, transubstantiation, and the power it gave to mere, corrupt men. Here he put his finger on the heart and soul of Rome's evil and error. Here, however, neither the crown nor most of the people were ready to follow. John of Gaunt urged him to leave the Eucharist alone. He refused. His popularity waned as a result.

In addition, it was at this time that social uprisings occurred in England, peasants rising up to demand rights before courts of law and for the right to hold property — if the clergy were guilty of stealing property from the nation, how much more so had this not been true of the nobility from the common man! And because the uprisings that occurred were led by men who quoted from the writings of Wycliffe, the nobility and property owners wasted no time in calling into question many of the teachings of this 'radical reformer,' this John of Wyclif.

The bishops were emboldened by the changing tide. Charges of heresy were once again filed against Wycliffe, various propositions were condemned by the council of bishops, and the chancellor of Oxford was commanded to forbid Wycliffe from further teaching.


King Richard II, hard pressed to put down the social revolt from within, concurred, and ordered Wycliffe expelled from Oxford. He retired to Lutterworth.

It was in his last few years at Lutterworth, however, that Wycliffe proved most useful for the faithful in England. He set about, with assistance, to translate from the Latin the whole of the Scriptures into English for distribution to the people. And he organized a new order of men, preaching friars, who went about in simple black robes practicing what Wycliffe had taught, namely, that true servants of Christ ought to be teachers of God's Word, going from village to village with the gospel, living in simplicity and piety of life. This they did with remark-

able 'success.' The Lollards, as they would be known, would continue to teach God's Word for some time after Wycliffe's death, and have a reputation for godliness and humility that put the priests of Rome to shame. No less a writer than Chaucer, loyal son of Rome though he was, would write of these humble, pious preachers, expressing admiration for their true Christianity.

In late 1384 Pope Urban VI summoned Wycliffe to Rome to be tried for heresy yet again. But, as Durant puts it, "A different summons exceeded it in authority. On December 28, 1384, the ailing reformer suffered a paralytic stroke as he was attending Mass, and three days later he died" (*ibid.* p. 37).

Rome was not done with Wycliffe yet, however. Enraged by the spread of his teachings and that he who had defied her so often had escaped unscathed, Rome exhumed his bones in 1415, burned what was left of him, and cast the residue into a nearby stream. His writings were ordered to be gathered and burned as well. An act of frustration, proving yet again the vanity of the strivings of Hell against the elect and the truth of God. Because the truth of God trumpeted by Wycliffe lived (and still lives) on.

Thanks be to God for this man of courage and conviction in the starry firmament of His preachers and saints, a man used by God to prepare the way for greater things to follow. 

Rev. Angus Stewart

The Church in Wycliffe's Day

In John Wycliffe's day (c. 1324-1384), most of Europe professed to be Christian. The Roman church was dominant in the west and the Orthodox churches in the east. Godly Waldensians worshiped in the Alps and their environs, and there were also heretical groups in diverse places. In Europe, only Lithuania yet remained pagan, and southern Spain was under Muslim control.

Babylonian Captivity, Papal Schism, and Black Death

Two major events lowered the status of the papacy in the fourteenth century. First, during the "Babylonian captivity" (1309-1377) the papal court, after a millennium

at Rome—the eternal city, with all its sacred associations—moved to Avignon in southern France. Second, the Babylonian captivity was soon followed by the "papal schism" (1378-1417), with two or three rival claimants to the papal tiara fulminating anathemas against each other. Wags asked the question, How many pontifical bottoms can sit on the one papal chair? Many churchmen (known as the conciliarists) looked to a general council in the west to solve the problem. The popes, of course, did not take kindly to answering to a general council, for this compromised their papal supremacy.

The fourteenth century also saw the advent of the Black Death (especially 1348-1349). In two short years about a third of the population of Europe was dead. "Why could the holy Roman Catholic Church not do anything about it?" people wondered. "The pope,

Christ's vicegerent on earth, seems impotent." Some, especially in southern Germany, resorted to whipping themselves with the scourge (*flagella*). The flagellants believed that their self-inflicted tortures would appease the divine wrath.

The Need for Reform

There was a widespread recognition that something was wrong and that some sort of church reform was necessary. While the conciliarists urged reforms of administration and church polity, and the flagellants tried self-sacrificial propitiation, the mystics preached personal inner renewal through union of the soul with God. Those drinking at the southern European waters of renaissance humanism presented classical learning and moralism as the panacea. Others looked to the Holy Roman emperors or powerful Christian kings to

Rev. Stewart is a missionary in the Protestant Reformed Churches, currently working in Northern Ireland.

reform the church. Only a few, like the Waldensians and Wycliffe, understood how far the Roman Church had departed and that the heart of her problem was doctrinal.

But, more specifically, what were the problems in the Roman Church in Western Europe? A treatise by William Durand, absentee Bishop of Mende in France, was submitted to the Council of Vienne (1311) containing these words:

The whole Church might be reformed if the Church of Rome would begin by removing evil examples from herself ... by which men are scandalized, and the whole people, as it were, infected.... For in all lands ... the Church of Rome is in ill repute, and all cry and publish it abroad that within her bosom all men, from the greatest even unto the least, have set their hearts upon covetousness.... That the whole Christian folk take from the clergy pernicious examples of gluttony is clear and notorious, since the clergy feast more luxuriously ... than princes and kings.¹

One need only read Geoffrey Chaucer's (c. 1345-1400) *Canterbury Tales* to see that these indictments of the whole Roman Church also applied to England.

Church Wealth

Most obviously, the church was grotesquely wealthy. It is estimated that she owned a third of the land of England. Many bishops lived in opulence, and many churchmen served and drew monies as royal civil servants, mere "Caesarean clerics" (as Wycliffe called them) who served the king ("Caesar") in pursuit of worldly wealth and position. Then there was pluralism (churchmen holding and being paid for more than one church position) and its resulting absenteeism (churchmen never seen in their parish or bishopric). Wycliffe himself was guilty of these sins in his younger days, for in this way he was funded for his Oxford

University education. As one would expect, the English were especially grieved at those absentee churchmen who were also foreigners. The papal court in Avignon (1309-1377) also required English money because, not only did the popes need to finance their Italian wars and to patronize literature and art, but they also needed to build their new French papal palace.

Corrupt Church Leaders

By the fourteenth century, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, which were founded in the previous century and had been widely seen as agents of renewal, were now almost as widely seen to be as decadent as the other monastic orders. Fourteenth century Englishman William Langland, in his famous *Piers the Ploughman*, denounced the four orders of mendicants (beggar monks)—Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians, and Carmelites—as covetous Scripture-twisters, declaring that they

Preached the people for profit and
themselves
Glosed the Gospel as them good
lyked.²

Calling the Dominicans and Franciscans by their other names (Jacobites and Minorites respectively), Wycliffe formed the first letters of the four mendicant orders into an acrostic, "Cain," for he reckoned they were like the first murderer. Their convents he dubbed "Cain's castles." Wycliffe levelled his artillery against Cain's castles in *Objections to Friars* (1382). In his *On the Pastoral Office*, Wycliffe widened his attack to include the four "sects" (bishops, monks, and canons, as well as friars) stating that they were "obviously harmful to the edification of the church." Priestly celibacy had been decreed by Pope Boniface VIII in 1079, and this "doctrine of devils" (I Tim. 4:1-3) led to widespread fornication amongst the Roman clergy.³ Time and time

again, Wycliffe criticized the clergy for their gross ignorance of the Holy Scriptures. Wycliffe came to view the papal claims as blasphemous and even identified the pope as Antichrist.

False Doctrine

In describing the state of the Roman Church in the fourteenth century, we need not only speak of her wealth and the corruption of her clergy; we also need to consider the development of her false doctrine. Pilgrimages; prayers for the dead; veneration of angels, relics, and saints; idolatrous devotion to Mary—all of these entered the church in the first half millennium. Soon purgatory was being widely preached. Early in the second millennium indulgences for the remission of temporal punishment in purgatory were bought and sold. The Council of Verona instituted the inquisition of heretics in 1184. The fourth Lateran Council of 1215 delivered the dogma of transubstantiation (the miraculous transformation of the wafer by the priest into the literal body, blood, and divinity of Christ in the mass). The Council of Valencia (1224) forbade the Bible to laymen and placed the Word of God on the Index of Forbidden Books.⁴ These are just some instances of the idolatry and corrupt teaching of the Church of Rome by the fourteenth century, by which she was more and more manifesting the marks of the false church (*Belgic Confession* 29).

Free-Willism

The worst heresy of the Roman Church, and the root of so many of her other departures, was her heresy of free will. Augustine (354-430) fought manfully against Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism by and for the grace of God. But the Council of Orange (529) made fatal concessions to free will. In the centuries to come, most church leaders professed to be followers of Augustine, but they were not faithful to the truth of God's sov-

ereign grace. The Florentine Dante (1265-1321), in his *Divine Comedy* (c. 1307-1321), is typical of his age in his praise of free will. As in our own day, though most were deceived by this false doctrine, some were graciously given spiritual discernment. Thomas Bradwardine (c. 1290-1349), Oxford University professor and Archbishop of Canterbury (1349), protested that the church was running after Pelagius. Romans 9:16 ("So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy") is the most quoted text in his great work *The Cause of God Against the Pelagians*. Against the prevalent free-willism of his day, Wycliffe taught the absolute sovereignty of God in election and reprobation.


A Typical Fourteenth Century Layman

Perhaps we can best sum up the state of the church in Wycliffe's day by considering a typical English yeoman near the end of the fourteenth century. His life from cradle to grave was shaped by the sacramental system of the Roman Church. He was told that his original sin was washed away in baptism and that he received the Holy

Spirit at confirmation to enable him to merit by his good works. Pilgrimages, prayers to the saints, giving to the church—surely these would help him to salvation. He worshiped and consumed the literal body and blood of Christ at the mass. By saying the required "Ave Marias" (Hail Marys) and "Paternosters" (Our Fathers), he did penance for his sins. At death, he received the last rites. Grace, he thought, came automatically (*ex opere operato*) through the sacraments. Through his proper exercise of free will and the prayers and sacrifices of the priests, he hoped to avoid Hell and spend as short a time as possible in purgatory.

He had heard that there were some heretics called Lollards, followers of some crazy theologian named Wycliffe, who said that people needed to hear and read the Bible in English, but he thought that the holy Roman Church would keep him safe. Sure, many priests and friars lived loosely, drank too much, and kept concubines. It was true that too much English money was being siphoned off to the continent; (it was said) that there were two rival popes; and that the popes, nowadays, were merely French pawns—and us at war with

them!⁵ But these were the old ways, and he reckoned it was best to stick with them.

Thankfully not all closed their eyes to the light of the Scriptures. There were some who heard the Word of God in English from Wycliffe and the Lollards, understood it, and believed it by God's grace. They were the true church in Wycliffe's day. 

1. Quoted in Will Durant, *The Reformation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 7.

2. Quoted in David Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (USA: Hendrickson, repr. 1996), vol. 6, p. 307.

3. The papal law that priests cannot marry leads to the fornication, paedophilia, and sodomy of the priests in our own day.

4. In an article entitled, "Experts say Catholics still don't read Bible regularly" (8 Sept., 2005), Carol Glatz writes, "Recent research conducted in Italy, Spain and France found that many Catholics consider the sacred Scriptures as something 'reserved for the clergy' rather than as an accessible resource for them to draw upon for truth and inspiration in their own lives" (<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0505102.htm>).

5. The English fought against the French in the Hundred Years' War on and off from 1337-1453.

Excerpts

John Wycliffe on Evils in the Church

John Wycliffe wrote much on the evils in the church. One treatise consists of 43 chapters critiquing the clergy.* Wycliffe focused particularly on the fact that the clergy were not caring for souls by preaching, but were guilty in other ways of doing great harm to the souls of men. His criticisms reveal that the situation seemed to be almost as desperate in Wycliffe's day

as in Luther's times, some 150 years later. A few excerpts are given below.

Importance of Preaching

In the first chapter Wycliffe shows that our Lord and His apostles were devoted to the work of preaching, and were studious that their lives might be commendatory of their doctrine. "Christ or-

dained all his apostles and disciples, both before his death and after his rising from the dead, to preach the Gospel to all men; and since prelates and priests, ordained of God, come in the stead of

* "De Conversatione Ecclesiasticum," in *Tracts and Treatises of John De Wycliffe*, D.D. (London: The Wycliffe Society, 1845), pp. 13-22.

apostles and disciples, they are all bound by Jesus Christ, both God and Man, thus to preach the Gospel." Three things are said to be included in feeding the church after the manner intended by Christ in His injunction to Peter: the examples of a good life, the true preaching of the gospel, and a willingness to suffer death, if need be, to render men stable in the truth, and in the hope of glory.

"Prelates are more bound to preach truly the Gospel, than their subjects are bound to pay them dymes (tithes); for God chargeth that more, and that is more profitable to both parties. Therefore prelates are more accursed if they cease from their preaching, than the people are if they cease to pay tithes, even while prelates do their office well." Matins, masses, and chantings, are all described as "man's ordinances," but the preaching of the gospel is of divine obligation, as having been enjoined by Christ, both before and after His passion.

Wycliffe censures the gay equipage, the profanity, the gluttony, and drunkenness of many among the prelates, and speaks of their establishments, and their general manners, as proclaiming them members of the "devil's church" rather than of "holy church." Prelates, he writes, "rob the poor liege men of the king by false excommunications, put forth under colour of holy correction, but giving men leave to dwell in sin from year to year, and from one seven years to another seven years, and commonly all their life long, if they pay by year twenty shillings, or something more or less."

Excommunications by a Bishop

These prelates charge more their own cursing, that is many times false, than the most rightful curse of God Almighty. And hereby they mean, and show indeed, but falsely, that they are more than Almighty God in Trinity. For if a man be accursed of

prelates, though wrongfully, anon all men are taught by them to flee him as a Jew or a Saracen. And if he dwell forty days under their curse, he shall be taken to prison. But they who are cursed of God for breaking his commandments, as proud men, envious, covetous, gluttons, the unchaste, are not punished thus, but holden virtuous and manly. So God's curse is set at nought, while the wrongful curse of man is charged above the clouds. And yet, though a man be accursed of God, and of a prelate also, if he will give gold he shall be assoiled, though he dwell in his sin, and so under God's curse."

Indulgences

The thirteenth chapter exposes the frauds practiced in the matter of indulgences. Prelates are said to "destroy foully Christian men by these feigned indulgences or pardons." Such men are described as holding out this promise of indulgence as procured "by virtue of Christ's passion and martyrdom, and holy merits of saints, which they did more than was needful for their own bliss." But this doctrine, it is replied, "Christ taught never in all the Gospel, and never used it, neither Peter nor Paul."

The whole system of indulgences and pardon is denounced as "a subtle merchandise of Antichrist's clerks, to magnify their counterfeit power, and to get worldly goods, and to cause men not to dread sin.... Marvellous it is that any sinful fool dare grant anything on the merit of saints, for all that ever any saint did may not bring a soul to heaven without the grace and might of Christ's passion." In that passion, it is maintained, "all merits that are needful" will be found, and the judgment of God hereafter will not be found to have been influenced by the caprice or the biddings of man. Wycliffe concludes this instructive chapter by praying that God would of his endless mercy "destroy the pride, covetousness, hypocrisy, and

heresy of this feigned pardoning, and make men busy to keep his commandments, and to set fully their trust in Jesus Christ."

On the Pope


From prelates at home, Wycliffe proceeds to touch on the pretensions of the great prelate abroad. "Also prelates make many new points of belief, and say it is not enough to believe in Jesus Christ, and to be christened, as Christ saith in the Gospel of Mark, unless a man also believe that the bishop of Rome is head of holy church. And certainly the apostles of Jesus Christ never constrained any man to believe thus concerning himself. And yet they were certain of their salvation in heaven. How then should any sinful wretch, who knows not whether he shall be damned or saved, constrain men to believe that he is head of holy church. Certainly, in such case, they must sometimes constrain men to believe that a devil of hell is head of holy church, when the bishop of Rome shall be a man damned for his sins."

False Forgiveness

Masses, pardons, and pilgrimages, all are described as "novelties," the effect of which is "to make people believe that if a priest say a certain mass for a soul, it shall anon be out of purgatory, though God in his righteousness ordain that soul to abide there forty years or more, and though the priest himself be accursed for simony and pride, for, as they falsely pretend, the mass may not be impaired by the priest's sin.... Prelates blaspheme against God, the Father of heaven, by taking to themselves the power of absolving sins, and the full remission of them. For they take on them principally to absolve, and make the people to believe so, when they have only absolved as vicars, or messengers, to witness for the people that God absolveth—unless the sinner is contrite, that is, fully have sorrow for his sin."

The treatise concludes thus—
“In these three and forty errors and
heresies, men may see how evil
prelates destroy Christendom—for

of them and no other is this
speech—and how they are the cause
of wars, and of evil life in the

people, and of their damnation.
God of his might and mercy amend
these errors, and others, if it be his
will!” 

Rev. James Laning

Wycliffe's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper

Errors in practice are rooted
in errors in doctrine. And,
by the providence of God,
John Wycliffe, who began his work
of reform by condemning the
papacy's secular and foreign control
over the English people, was
led to look deeper and to expose
the corrupt doctrines of this false
church. He was one who searched
the Scriptures, and the more he did
so the clearer he saw the corruption
of the Romish Church. Probing
deeper into the truth, he came
to recognize that one of the fundamental
false doctrines of the
Romish Church was her perversion
of the Lord's Supper into the popish
mass.

By condemning the popish
mass, with its teaching of transubstantiation,
Wycliffe was going after
one of the central lies used by
the false church to keep her grip
upon the people. But he was also
being used by God to bring to light
and to restore to the church the
comforting promise that is signified
and sealed unto God's people
through the sacrament of the
Lord's Supper.

The Mass: An Accursed Idolatry

It was in 1215, at the Fourth
Lateran Council, that the Romish

Church officially adopted the position
known as transubstantiation,
which teaches that the bread and
wine actually change into the body
and blood of Christ when the priest
says the magic words, “This is my
body.” Wycliffe, who lived a century
and a half after this, courageously
fought this error, and spoke of how
foolish and evil it was to teach that
the church actually creates Christ.

Wycliffe used a number of different
arguments to expose the error to
those in his day. He argued that
it would be impossible for the
church to create either the body
Christ had before He died or the
body that Christ now has in
heaven.

Then how say the hypocrites that
take on them to make our Lord's
body? Make they the glorified
body? Either make they again the
spiritual body which is risen from
death to life? or make they the
fleshly body as it was before He
suffered death? And if they say
also that they make the spiritual
body of Christ, it may not be so,
for what Christ said and did, He
did as He was at supper before
He suffered His passion.... And
if they say that they make Christ's
body as it was before He had
suffered His passion, then must
they needs grant that Christ is to
die yet.¹

In the same context, he argued that
the words “This is my body” could
not be the ones by which Christ's

body is created. The reason for this,
he said, is that Christ broke the
bread and distributed it *before* He
spoke those words.

Furthermore, if they say that
Christ made His body of bread, I
ask, With what words made He
it? Not with these words, “Hoc
est corpus meum;” that is to say
in English, “This is my body,” for
they are the words of giving, and
not of making, which He said
after that He brake the bread; then
parting it among His disciples and
apostles.²

To point out the seriousness of
this error, Wycliffe argued that if
the priests can make Christ, then
Christ really should worship the
priests, since it is proper for one
to worship his maker. He rebuked
the Romish Church for acting as
though they were God, and did not
hesitate to point out that to desire
to be worshiped as God is characteristic
of Antichrist.

Wycliffe said about the popish
mass what few will say today.
Many who call themselves Reformed
do not like Answer 80 of the
Heidelberg Catechism, which
calls the mass “an accursed idolatry.”
Yet Wycliffe, who lived one

1. “Wickliff's Wicket: A Very Brief
Definition of these Words, Hoc Est
Corpus Meum (This is My Body),” in
*Writings of the Reverend and Learned
John Wycliff* (London: The Religious
Tract Society), p. 159.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 160.

*Rev. Laning is pastor of Hope Protestant
Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan.*

and a half centuries before the Protestant Reformation, boldly taught this truth, even though he had reason to think that it might lead to his death at the hands of the pope's executioners.

The Bread: The Figure of Christ's Body

To explain the mass, the papists made use of an illustration involving candles. They said that just as one candle can light many candles without its own light being diminished, so the manhood of Christ can descend into each part of the host (i.e., the wafer) and yet not be diminished. To this argument Wycliffe responded that, just as when one candle lights many candles the result is that there are many lights, so if the priests were actually able to make God in the mass, the result would be that there would be many gods.³

The papists came up with another illustration to explain how Christ's body can be in many places at one time without being separated into many pieces. They gave as an illustration the fact that one can take a mirror, break it into many pieces, and see his complete face in every piece, without his face being separated into many pieces. To this argument Wycliffe responded that what one sees in a mirror is not his physical face, but an image or figure of his face. Then Wycliffe applied this to the Lord's Supper, and taught that what we see in the bread is not Christ's physical body but a figure of Christ's body.⁴

He rightly saw that the glorified body of the ascended Christ was no longer on earth, but was now in heaven. Therefore, God's people must eat Christ spiritually, not physically, while they partake of the bread and wine and believe God's gracious promise.

Drinking the Cup Partaking of Christ's Sufferings

Wycliffe sought to explain what it means not only to eat the

bread, but also to drink the wine. He compared Christ's reference to the cup in the Lord's Supper to His reference to the cup when He said, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt. 26:39). He argued that in both instances Christ was speaking not of a material cup, but of His suffering. To prove this he cited Christ's reference to the cup of which both He and His disciples would partake. James and John had requested to sit on Christ's right hand and on His left in His kingdom (Matt. 20:21). To this request Christ gave the following response:

22 ...Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able.

23 And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with....

This reference is said to show that the cup of which both Christ and His disciples partake is the cup of Christ's sufferings. This means, taught Wycliffe, that those who spiritually partake of the cup in the Lord's Supper are privileged to partake of the sufferings of Christ.


Wycliffe made a comparison between the Lord's Supper and other sacraments, whether of the Old Testament or of the New. He pointed out that Scripture distinguishes the sacrament of circumcision from the real, spiritual circumcision (Rom. 2:28, 29), and the sacrament of baptism from the real, spiritual baptism (I Pet. 3:21). So, he said, this same idea must be applied to the Lord's Supper, so that the physical partaking of the bread and wine is distinguished from the spiritual partaking of Christ's body and blood. By the grace of God, through the study of the Holy Scriptures, Wycliffe was led to distinguish

these two, and to restore to God's people this truth of fundamental importance.



God used the false teaching of the Romish Church to prod Wycliffe to search the Scriptures, not only to refute this evil doctrine but also to set forth clearly some of the fundamental truths concerning the gracious gift that God has given to us in the Lord's Supper. He saw and confessed that Christ's glorified body is now in heaven and not on earth, and that believers eat Christ not physically but spiritually. A couple of centuries later, our Reformed fathers would take this truth and expand on it, to set forth in more detail the truth concerning this sacrament as it is explained for us in our Reformed confessions.

What a blessing it is to understand this truth, and receive the comfort of having our faith strengthened when we eat and drink Christ by faith while partaking of the Lord's Supper. Let us remember the great darkness out of which God has delivered His people, and let us continue to heed those important words spoken to us in the reading of the Lord's Supper Form right before we partake of the bread and wine:

That we may now be fed with the true heavenly bread, Christ Jesus, let us not cleave with our hearts unto the external bread and wine, but lift them up on high in heaven, where Christ Jesus is our Advocate at the right hand of His heavenly Father, whither all the articles of our faith lead us; not doubting but we shall as certainly be fed and refreshed in our souls through the working of the Holy Ghost, with His body and blood, as we receive the holy bread and wine in remembrance of Him. 

3. Ibid., p. 163.

4. Ibid., p. 163.

John Wycliffe: Father of the English Bible

Background to the Wycliffe Bible

English-speaking Christians living in the twenty-first century take for granted having a Bible, and having a Bible in their own language. We all have Bibles, many Bibles, Bibles that are readily accessible. We have Bibles in our homes, at school, at the workplace, in our car or pickup truck. Bibles are available to us in our church pews for worship on the Lord's Day. Even the children can follow along as the minister reads the Scripture portion from which the text of his sermon is taken. We carry our Bibles with us to the Bible study societies that we attend during the week. We read the Bible around our tables for family devotions. And we make reading the Bible a part of our daily personal devotions. If we want another Bible or want to replace a worn-out Bible, we go to the local Christian bookstore and buy a new Bible at a modest cost.

But it has not always been so in the history of the church. There was a time when the Bible was not readily available. There was a time when the Bible that was available was not written in the language of the common people but in a language that only scholars and clerics could understand. There was a day when the ordinary believer could not afford to purchase a Bible. That was the way it was in

the days prior to the Reformation. That was the way it was in fourteenth century England. That was the way it was, at least, until the introduction of the Wycliffe Bible, the very first complete translation of the Scriptures into the English language.

The first complete English translation of the Bible is credited to John Wycliffe (c. 1330-1384). Wycliffe is often referred to as the "morning star of the Reformation." This is due to his precursory work that paved the way for the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. Many of the doctrines set forth and defended by the Reformers, including the *solas*, were articulated by Wycliffe nearly 150 years before the Reformation. Especially did Wycliffe anticipate the Reformation by his insistence on the supreme authority of the Holy Scriptures.

Wycliffe did most of his life's work in association with Oxford University. For almost all of his adult life, for some thirty-five years, he was a part of the university, first as an outstanding student and then as a distinguished member of its faculty.

In 1378, while a professor at Oxford, Wycliffe published a treatise entitled "Concerning the Authority of the Pope." In this treatise he maintained the sole authority of the Scriptures. The judgment of true doctrine, according to Wycliffe, was to be made on the basis of the testimony of Scripture alone. Even the authority of the pope, he insisted, did not supersede, nor might it be raised up alongside of, the authority of the Bible.

This treatise was followed by another published in 1380 entitled "On the Truth of Holy Scripture." Once again, Wycliffe defended the supreme authority as well as the sufficiency of the Scriptures. In addition, he expressed the need for the translation of the Scriptures into the English language, the language of the people he served. This was something novel! Other opponents of the papacy and the evils that were rife in the Roman Catholic Church of that day had appealed to the Bible as the ultimate authority. But Wycliffe went further. He insisted on the right of every Christian to have, to know, to read, and to study the Scriptures for himself. It was unsatisfactory that only the educated who knew the Latin language could have access to the Scriptures. The church as a whole must have the Scriptures, if the Scriptures were going to function as the supreme authority in the church—such was Wycliffe's conviction.

It is without doubt that Wycliffe's views were the impetus for the translation of the Bible into the English language. Not only did his views justify such a translation, but they were the immediate stimulus that brought the translation into existence.

The Appearance of the Wycliffe Bible

Scholars debate whether Wycliffe himself had any direct role in the work of translating the Bible into English. Most are of the opinion that Wycliffe did not actually do any of the translating, although a number of scholars take

Prof. Cammenga is professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

the position that Wycliffe translated at least part of the New Testament. No one debates the fact that he inspired the translation and to some extent superintended its production. Wycliffe's contemporaries, both friend and foe, attribute the new version to the Oxford scholar. There were, in fact, two complete versions of what has come to be known as the Wycliffe Bible. The lion's share of the work of translation is credited to two of his pupils and colleagues, John Purvey and Nicholas of Hereford. Both of these men were made to suffer because of their involvement with the Wycliffe Bible.

The first version of the new Bible appeared in 1382. It was an extremely literal, and therefore wooden, translation. Natural English word order and idiom were sacrificed for the sake of a literal translation of the text. The second version appeared around 1388. It was, for the most part, a complete revision of the earlier version. The translation was much smoother, more idiomatic, and therefore much more readable.¹

There are several features of the Wycliffe Bible that are worth noting. To begin with, it was the first complete Bible in the English language. This is its abiding distinction. Prior to this, portions of Scripture had been translated into English, usually as a part of the liturgy or as a part of some other literary production. But never before had the entire Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, been set into English. For the first time, English-speaking Christians were able to read the Bible in their native tongue.

A second feature of the Wycliffe Bible was that every copy had to be handwritten. The task of translation was monumental in itself. But the task of publishing was even greater. These were the days before the invention of the printing press. Each new Bible had to be painstakingly written out in longhand. This made the work of translation all the more daunting.

The popularity of the Wycliffe Bible, attested by the numerous copies that have survived to the present, indicates the eagerness with which hundreds of hands must have undertaken a very demanding work.

The third main feature of the Wycliffe Bible was that it was a translation of the Latin Vulgate. This was the version produced by Jerome in the fourth century. It was the version approved by the papacy and used in the churches and schools of the day. Thus, the Wycliffe Bible was a translation of a translation. It was not a translation of the original Hebrew and Greek. This would have to wait until the work of Tyndale and Coverdale.

Opposition to the Wycliffe Bible

From the very beginning there was opposition, heated opposition, to the Wycliffe Bible. A number of factors explain this opposition. For one thing, there was the thinking that the Scriptures were only for the learned (the doctors in the universities) and the clergy. The uneducated laity, it was thought, were ill equipped to understand the Scriptures. Putting the Scriptures into their hands would undoubtedly lead to a host of misunderstandings and false teachings. Many equated the translation of the Scriptures into the common language with casting the pearls of the gospel to the swine.

Opposition to the translation of the Scriptures also arose out of a reverence for the Latin language. In scholarly circles the Latin language was regarded with utmost dignity, whereas vernacular English was viewed as vulgar, even profane. To reduce the Latin of the Vulgate Bible to common English was considered a travesty.

Finally, there was opposition to the new English Bible because it was not a church Bible. The Vulgate had been sanctioned by the church. The church had supervised its production. And the church had finally approved the finished prod-

uct and recommended it for use. No such supervision and recommendation attended the first English translation of the Bible.

It did not take long for those who opposed the Wycliffe Bible to vent their anger over its appearance. Leading the opposition against the new translation was the English Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel. In 1411, in a letter written to Pope John XXIII, he wrote:

This pestilent and wretched John Wyclif, of cursed memory, that son of the old serpent ... endeavoured by every means to attack the very faith and sacred doctrine of Holy Church, devising—to fill up the measure of his malice—the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue.²

In 1415 the Wycliffe Bible was officially condemned and publicly burned. It was forbidden anyone to buy or possess it. Those who nevertheless did and were caught, suffered fines, imprisonment, torture, and excommunication.

Notwithstanding ecclesiastical and civil prohibitions, the Wycliffe Bible was popularly received. Thousands risked the consequences of discovery and sacrificed large sums in order to possess a copy of the new English translation. Its widespread reception can, to a great extent, be credited to the energetic efforts of the Lollards, the "poor priests," who went forth, with Wycliffe's Bible under their arms, bringing the Word of God to the common people. Over 250 manuscripts of the Wycliffe Bible survive, a greater number of copies by far than any other surviving medieval English text. This is a clear indication of the total number of copies that must have been made and the widespread use to which they were put. And all this in spite of the threats of the papacy and regular burning of banned books. Such was the hunger for the Word of God among believers in England. No risk was too great to take, no

amount of money too much to spend, in order to have a copy of the Wycliffe Bible.

The Influence of the Wycliffe Bible


For some 150 years the Wycliffe Bible was *the* Bible of English-speaking people. It was the Bible in use throughout England at the time of the introduction of the Reformation. Only after the Reformation and the invention of the printing press was the Wycliffe Bible gradually replaced, first by Tyndale's New Testament in 1526, and then by Coverdale's first complete printed Bible in 1535. Even after these Bibles were introduced, many English believers continued to prefer the more familiar Wycliffe Bible.

Without doubt, the Wycliffe Bible exerted an influence on the King James (Authorized) Version of 1611. This is our Bible, the Bible we use for public worship, as well as in our homes and schools and for personal devotions. We know that the translators of the KJV had the Wycliffe Bible at their elbows as they worked on their new translation. A good deal of the language of the KJV is borrowed from the language of the Wycliffe Bible. Familiar expressions like "compass sea and land," "firstfruits," "strait

gate," "son of perdition," "enter thou into the joy of thy Lord," are expressions that first appeared in the Wycliffe Bible. Whole sections in the KJV, like the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 and Jesus' well-known words in John 14, are similar in language to the translation found in the Wycliffe Bible.³ The last part of Romans 8, with modernized spelling, illustrates how closely the KJV was patterned after the Wycliffe Bible.

What then shall we say to these things? If God for us, who is against us? The which also spared not his own son, but for us all be-took him, how also gave he not to us all things with him? Who shall accuse against the chosen men of God? It is God that justifieth, who is it that condemneth? It is Jesus Christ that was dead, yea, the which rose again, the which is on the right half of God, and the which prayeth for us. Who then shall depart us from the charity of Christ? Tribulation, or anguish, or hunger, or nakedness, or persecution, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For we be slain all the day for thee; we be guessed [reckoned] as sheep for the slaughter. But in all these things we overcome, for him that loved us. But I am certain, that neither death, neither life, neither angels, neither principalities, neither virtues, neither present things, nei-

ther things to coming, neither strength, neither height, neither deepness, neither none other creature may depart us from the charity of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The influence of the Wycliffe Bible on the English church of that day, as well as the enduring influence on the history of the English-speaking church, can hardly be overstated. Having the Bible in their own language not only prepared the English people for the Reformation, but assured under the grace of God the reception of Reformation doctrines. Still today we owe a debt of gratitude to Wycliffe and the men inspired by Wycliffe's teaching. Perhaps it is too much to say that we would not have the Bible in English if it had not been for John Wycliffe. It is not, however, saying too much to say that we would not have the Bible that we do have apart from Wycliffe's influence. 

1. Anyone interested in reading this translation can access it on the world wide web. The entire Wycliffe translation can be found at: www.sbible.boom.ru/wyc/wycle.htm.

2. Quoted by Henry Hargreaves in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2, 388.

3. David Fountain, *John Wycliffe: The Dawn of the Reformation*, p. 48ff.

Rev. William Langerak

The Lollards: Brief Legacy of John Wycliffe

The year 1400 was a bad time to be a Lollard. For many English people, the dawning of the new century renewed hope. But for the Lollards the situation looked ominous.

Rev. Langerak is pastor of the Southeast Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Lollards were disciples of John Wycliffe. Using itinerant preachers armed with newly translated Bibles and teaching in the mother-tongue, they spread Wycliffe's views throughout England, from fish-mongers and farmers in remote hamlets to noblemen and aristocrats in castles. For almost 20 years after his death, they were

relatively unmolested by the Catholic Church and civil authorities. But in 1400, that was all about to change. Soon they would be driven into hiding, be stripped of property, arrested, tortured, and even killed.

The Lollards were one legacy of John Wycliffe. His views were another. Along with his condemna-

tion of certain Roman Catholic dogmas and practices, the lasting legacy of Wycliffe would be his reclamation of certain doctrines from Scripture, especially that the church was the body of the elect, Scripture was the sole rule of life for the church, and preaching Scripture was the primary means by which God saves and sanctifies sinners. This legacy would continue through his writings, through assimilation into the sixteenth century Reformation, and, for almost 50 years after his death, through the Lollards. But the legacy of the Lollards themselves would be brief; as an influential means of church reformation and evangelizing, the Lollard movement would soon be dead.

Many Lollards would be martyred for their faith. The first to go was a former priest, Mr. W. Sawtree, who was executed in March, 1401. In January of that year, Parliament introduced the first English legislation authorizing the burning of heretics, *De Haeretico Comburendo*. Sawtree was burned eight days before the bill was even passed.¹ Following him in Lollard martyrdom would be the first common laborer, tailor John Badby, in 1409; the first mass martyrdom, when 38 Lollards worshiping together were killed; and increasingly gruesome executions, such as that of Lollard patron, Sir John Oldcastle, who in 1417 was suspended over flames on his back by chains fastened to iron hoops around his neck, waist, and thighs.²

As would happen repeatedly in English history, the whole gory business started with the coronation of a new king. In 1399, Henry IV seized the throne from Richard II while the latter was on a campaign in Ireland. Richard II had previously entertained notions of suppressing the Lollards, but had declined to interfere due to political factors, including growing anti-Catholic sentiments over papal claims upon English sovereignty, which after the Great Schism of 1378 were particularly egregious

because the new Avignon Papacy was located in France, England's perennial enemy. Without enforcement by the civil authorities, the church prior to 1399 could do little more than rant against the Lollards and Wycliffe.

The rise of Henry IV to power signaled the end of the Lollard movement. Forced to consolidate political power, he allied himself with the church, which subsequently demanded he squash the growing movement—at the time estimated to be 10-50% of the population.³ He conceded to practically every demand for Lollard's extermination, as would his son, Henry V. The church also got busy. In an effort to stop the spread of Lollardism, it issued the Arundel Constitutions in 1408. This draconian measure prohibited the translation of the Bible into English, preaching in English, and the use of English Bibles.⁴ In 1414-18, the Council of Constance also ended the Great Papal Schism, which meant the church could devote more energy to the Lollards, and eliminated one reason for English political opposition.

In a few more decades it would all be over for the Lollards. After Oldcastle's execution in 1417, the movement was basically limited to the poor and lower classes. Few nobles or aristocrats would publicly support them. Fewer disciples were gained, because their preachers could no longer travel openly, and small house conventicles replaced mass street preaching. Many who had joined the cause for political or social reasons recanted.⁵ Others fled the country. By 1434 the Lollards had vanished from the public square. Except for a brief resurgence in the 1450s and the existence of small underground groups, the movement was dead. Whatever scattered life remained would simply be absorbed by the coming Reformation.

No one knows for sure how the Lollards got their name or even what it meant.⁶ It is likely that the

term was meant to be derisive. Some say it was from a Germanic word meaning "mumblers" and referred to their preaching. Others say it referred to the itinerate nature of their preachers, who would "loll" or wander about. The church claimed it came from the Latin, *lollium*, meaning tares, and in 1377 Pope Gregory XI impressed the name upon them officially. Regardless of its connotation, the Lollards seem to have adopted the name as a badge of honor, even as

1. Also spelled "Santree," "Sautre," "Sawtre" or "Chartris." Augustus Toplady calls him "the first who had the honour of being burnt for Protestantism in England," *The Works of Augustus Toplady* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications), p. 117. See chapter 14 of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* for further description of these deaths.

2. Shakespeare was later accused of lampooning the Lollard martyr when he gave the name Oldcastle to a bawdy character in his play *Henry IV* (king at the time of Oldcastle's death). After complaints at the first showing, Shakespeare changed the name to Falstaff and ended the play with these words, "Where, for anything I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat...for Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man."

3. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker), repr. 1977, vol. VII, p. 15.

4. They were named after the Archbishop. An English translation is found in *Foxe's Acts and Monuments*, Vol. 3.

5. How easily the nobility deserted the Lollards is plain from the history of King Henry IV. He was the son of Wycliffe's former patron, Duke John of Gaunt. Gaunt also would turn on the Lollards out of political necessity.

6. *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, McClintock and Strong, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker), repr. 1981, vol. V, p. 493; *The Catholic Encyclopedia: Lollards* (www.newadvent.org/cathen/09333a.htm); and Mike Ibeji, "Lollards," BBC (www.bbc.co.uk/history/state/church_reformation/loppard.html).

believers long ago had done with the name Christian.

It is equally difficult to know for certain exactly what the Lollards believed. There are several reasons for this. First, the church tended to call any anti-Catholic a Lollard, regardless of what particular views he held. Secondly, although most Lollards held to the core principles articulated by Wycliffe, a wide spectrum of doctrines and practices existed within the movement, some of which had no basis in his writings at all. Thirdly, whether it was due to the lack of educated adherents and institutional structure, the threat of persecution, or simply their emphasis upon preaching, no formal creed and few writings of the Lollards remain.

One representative document survived, but it is more a condemnation of church practices than doctrine, and not a positive statement of Lollards' beliefs.⁷ In 1395, the Lollards submitted to Parliament a twelve-point complaint against various ecclesiastical doctrines and practices. In it they exposed basic errors in the church, made astute arguments from Scripture, and vindicated the name of God. It also hints at some radical views later associated with the Anabaptists. Summarized, the twelve points were as follows: 1) Spiritual virtue fled the church due to pride and carnality; 2) the priesthood was not ordained by Christ; 3) clerical celibacy promoted homosexuality; 4) transubstantiation was a feigned miracle and induced idolatry; 5) prayers over water, salt, oil, incense, vestments, and crosses were necromancy; 6) uniting any ecclesiastical and civil offices in one person was to unite the temporal and spiritual contrary to Christ's command; 7) prayers for the dead were ineffectual, displeasing to God, and monies collected to perform them better spent on the poor; 8) pilgrimages and worship of images were a book of errors and idolatrous; 9) auricular confes-

sion only comforted the wicked and increased priestly pride; 10) all war and crusades were against the command of Christ, and especially wicked when financed by the selling of indulgences; 11) vows of continence by nuns promoted abortion, infanticide, and bestiality; 12) certain fine arts were unnecessary and promoted waste, curiosity, and deceit.⁸

Much that the Lollards lived and died for is commendable. Surely it was a wonder of God's grace that through them the legacy of Wycliffe's teachings somehow continued to exist and were appropriated by the sixteenth century Reformers. Undoubtedly, through Lollard preaching, God condemned many so that they were without excuse and saved His people who might otherwise have been lost. The perseverance of many Lollards in the face of severe persecution is a testimony to the character of God's grace, as is the zeal of poor men and women who traveled about preaching the gospel to whoever would hear them. Nevertheless, the Lollards must be criticized for one thing, the very thing that doomed them to a brief existence even before it began.

Ultimately, the brevity of their legacy was not due to persecution—martyrs' blood is usually the seed of the church. Nor was it because Lollards were mainly common folk—God delights in choosing the weak things of the world to confound the mighty (1 Cor. 1:27). The reason is that they failed to organize as an institute of churches with ordained ministers, elders, and deacons according to Scripture. This failure is understandable. The only instituted church at the time was corrupt, oppressive, and lacked every ecclesiastical office required by Scripture. Besides, it insisted that the church was to be identified strictly with its institution of priests, bishops, and popes by apostolic succession. And many Lollards died for maintaining instead that the church was

the body of the elect. So it is understandable if they were indifferent toward the institute. However, because of it, the Lollards were destined to a short existence, for without the institute, the ordinary means God uses to call, rule, defend, preserve, and give life to His church would be absent.

The Reformation would correct this mistake, which is one reason it succeeded when the Lollards failed. The Protestant church owes this to John Calvin, whose unique genius was the development of biblical ecclesiology. He not only saw that the church was the body of the elect, but also that this spiritual body must take form in a physical institution, i.e., a church of members by baptism and confession, ruled by elders, taught by a minister, and cared for by deacons. Subsequently, neither the spiritual organism nor the physical institute may take precedence at the expense of the other; the church in this world is both.


There is a warning here for us. In spite of history, churches and individuals continue to make this mistake. Sometimes, as did Rome, the church as elect body is all but ignored. This happens today when assemblies lord it over churches, elders are heavy-handed, or apathy exists over public wickedness

7. This seems to reflect an overall weakness of the Lollards. It may have come from Wycliffe, whom Martin Luther censures on this account, probably a little unfairly, when he writes: "Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account. Wycliffe...didn't know this and attacked the papacy for its life.... I fight over the Word and whether our adversaries teach it in its purity." *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1967, Vol. 54, p. 110.

8. "The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards," Harvard University: (www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/varia/lollards/lollconc.htm).

in the church. This is the problem when, regardless of false doctrines or practices in a church, members refuse to reform it, and, failing that, leave for membership elsewhere. But since Calvin's day, the opposite problem, the Lollard error of indifference toward the institute, seems to be a greater danger. This was a tendency of the Anabaptists. It is found today when churches ignore the offices or do away with them, either deliberately or practically through neglect. It occurs when churches refuse to federate,

or federate so loosely that no mutual oversight, cooperation, or unity is possible; or when churches split over non-essentials. It is found when elders care little whether members come to church or are spiritually fed. And this is the root problem when individuals, on the basis that "they are elect anyway," live aloof from the church, have little concern for their fellow members, or pull their church membership for trivial reasons.

All this is a grave mistake. If uncorrected, the legacy of that church or individual will be brief. The church as institute is necessary for the life of the church as the body of Christ. We as members of that body need the institute. Christ feeds, protects, and rules His body through the institute. Christ gathers His body together using the institute. When Christ gathers new members, He places them in the institute. As Christ does, we are to love the church, both as an institute and as His body. 

Rev. Mark Shand

John Wycliffe: A Fruitful Tree

Though John Wycliffe (c.1329-84) died some 130 years prior to Martin Luther's nailing of his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg, he is rightly described as "The Morning Star of the Reformation." The sixteenth century Reformation did not arise in Europe as something entirely new and unconnected with the past, but it had a lengthy gestation period, arguably beginning with Wycliffe. Luther is often credited with igniting the Reformation, but many of the views that he espoused had previously been articulated by Wycliffe and John Hus of Bohemia (c.1372-1415). A sixteenth century Bohemian Psalter insightfully portrays the connection between the three, depicting Wycliffe striking the spark, Hus kindling it into a coal, and Luther blowing it into a great flame.

Perhaps the most telling witness of the enduring and powerful influence of Wycliffe upon those

who followed him comes unwittingly from the Council of Constance (1415). It was that Council that condemned Hus to a martyr's death. Having first identified Wycliffe as a pseudo-Christian and a notorious and obstinate heretic some thirty-one years after his death, the Council proceeded to anathematize him, ordering his bones to be exhumed and scattered "far from a burial place of the church." The connection between Wycliffe and Hus, who was appearing before the Council, was unmistakable, nor was it denied by Hus, leading the Council to these conclusions:

The most holy general council of Constance, divinely assembled and representing the catholic church, for an everlasting record. Since a bad tree is wont to bear bad fruit, as truth itself testifies, so it is that John Wyclif, of cursed memory, by his deadly teaching, like a poisonous root, has brought forth many noxious sons, not in Christ Jesus through the gospel, as once the holy fathers brought forth faithful sons, but rather contrary to the saving faith of Christ, and he has left these sons as successors to his perverse teaching.

This holy synod of Constance is compelled to act against these men as against spurious and illegitimate sons, and to cut away their errors from the Lord's field as if they were harmful briars, by means of vigilant care and the knife of ecclesiastical authority, lest they spread as a cancer to destroy others.

Hus, being one of the noxious sons of Wycliffe, the Council continued:

Although, therefore, it was decreed at the sacred general council recently held at Rome that the teaching of John Wyclif, of cursed memory, should be condemned and the books of his containing this teaching should be burnt as heretical; although his teaching was in fact condemned and his books burnt as containing false and dangerous doctrine; and although a decree of this kind was approved by the authority of this present sacred council; nevertheless a certain John Hus, here present in person at this sacred council, who is a disciple not of Christ but rather of the heresiarch John Wyclif, boldly and rashly contravening the condemnation and the decree after their enactment, has taught, asserted and preached many errors and her-

Rev. Shand is pastor of the Winnaleah congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia.

esies of John Wyclif which have been condemned both by God's church and by other reverend fathers in Christ, lord archbishops and bishops of various kingdoms, and masters in theology at many places of study. He has done this especially by publicly resisting in the schools and in sermons, together with his accomplices, the condemnation in scholastic form of the said articles of John Wyclif which has been made many times at the university of Prague, and he has declared the said John Wyclif to be a catholic man and an evangelical doctor, thus supporting his teaching, before a multitude of clergy and people.

Without doubt, the teachings of Wycliffe were radical — radical in that they touched the stronghold upon which the power and authority of the Church of Rome were based. He challenged the accepted doctrine of the nature of the church. In so doing, he questioned the role of the papacy and the priesthood. In close association with his views on the priestly office, Wycliffe also condemned the doctrine of transubstantiation, the doctrine that in the Lord's Supper the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The tyranny and corruption of the papacy led Wycliffe, as they had Augustine before him, to make a distinction between the true church and the mixed church. He defined the true church as the congregation of the predestinated, the body of all the elect, a body that included the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. Membership in that body was determined by God Himself. Of that body, Christ alone was the head; for a church with two heads would be a monster.

Spelling out the implications of his doctrine, Wycliffe observed that some persons, in speaking of the "holy church, understand thereby prelates and priests, monks and canons and friars and all that have the tonsure, ... though they live ever so accursedly in defiance of

God's law." But this was far from being true, popes, cardinals, and priests finding a place among those who were not saved.

Unlike his contemporaries, Wycliffe denied that men needed an earthly priest to intercede on their behalf in order that they might approach unto God. He proclaimed the priesthood of every believer and encouraged each man to approach directly unto God through faith in Jesus Christ. He emphasized the need for every believer to see the importance of Christ alone as the only sufficient way of salvation, without the aid of pilgrimages, works, and the Mass.

Wycliffe's doctrinal views arose out of his fundamental acceptance of the Scriptures as the Word of God and therefore the supreme authority in faith and life. As he wrote in *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (The Truth of Sacred Scripture), the Scriptures proceed "from the mouth of God." For Wycliffe, the Scriptures were the everlasting truth in written form, the source of all that needed to be known of law, ethics, and philosophy. They were superior in authority to the Pope, the church, and the teaching of the church fathers. They were the final authority to which men's consciences must account. He refused to mingle the Scriptures with the traditions and pronouncements of the church, nor would he countenance the suggestion that the Scriptures were irrational or subject to error. The Scriptures, being the Word of God, were unassailable.

Consequently, Wycliffe declared the right of every Christian, clergy and layman alike, to know the Scriptures and to have the Scriptures in his own language. For hundreds of years no eminent teacher had advocated the right of the common man to the Word of God. The Bible had been a book for the clergy, and the interpretation of its meaning, a matter for the church. Indeed, the Council of

Taloulose (1229) had forbidden the use of the Bible by the laity.

Despite his death in 1384, the spiritual legacy of Wycliffe lived on through the teachings of Hus. There was a close alliance between England and Bohemia due to the marriage of Richard II of England to Anne of Bohemia. Consequently, Bohemian students, such as Jerome of Prague, studied under Wycliffe at Oxford. Jerome propagated Wycliffe's teachings in Prague. Through his contact with Jerome, Hus became thoroughly familiar with the teachings of Wycliffe. Convinced of much of what Wycliffe taught, he began to teach and preach the same things, particularly as regards the nature of the church and the authority of the Scriptures. It was those doctrines that led him to be summoned before the Council of Constance in 1415.

Hus literally adopted Wycliffe's view of the church. The close affinity between the two is evident from a comparison of Wycliffe's and Hus' treatises on the church, both titled *De Ecclesia*. The arrangement, the ideas, and the arguments in the two works are very similar.

Like Wycliffe before him, Hus defined the church as the body of elect.

...it appears that the holy universal church is one, the church which is the totality of the predestinate, including all, from the first righteous man to the last one to be saved in the future. And it includes all who are to be saved who make up the number, in respect to the filling up of which number all the saints slain under the altar had the divine assurance that they should wait for a time until the number should be filled up of their fellow servants and brethren, Rev. 6:9-11. For the omniscient God, who has given to all things their weight, measure and number, has foredetermined how many shall ultimately be saved.

Like Wycliffe, not only did Hus define the church as the body of the predestined, but he also de-

clared that Christ was the head of the church.

These quotations from the saints show that the holy catholic church is the number of all the predestinate and Christ's mystical body — Christ being himself the head — and the bride of Christ, whom he of his great love redeemed with his blood that he might at last possess her as glorious, not having wrinkle of mortal sin or spot of venial sin, or anything else defiling her, but that she might be holy and without spot, perpetually embracing Christ, the bridegroom.

Hus, like Wycliffe, maintained that not everyone who formed part of the church institute was part of the mystical body of Christ.

Further, it is to be noted that, as there is in the human body an element which is not of the body itself, as spittle, phlegm, ordure, and fluid or urine, and this element is not of the body because it is not part of the body — and it is another thing to be a part of the human body, as is every one of its members — so also there is something in the mystical body of Christ, which is the church, that is nevertheless not of the church, since it is not part of it; and in this way every reprobate Christian is of the body just as ordure is of the body and to be finally separated from it.

Contrary to then prevailing thought, Hus denied that the pope together with the cardinals constituted the church. Hus rejected the

notion that the church consisted of the pope together with the cardinals, instead asserting that the pope was not the head of the church — an honor that belonged to Christ alone. Nor was the church confined to the body over which the Apostolic See exercised jurisdiction. The church was truly universal.

Hus attacked the whole of the sacerdotal system. He drew a clear distinction between apostolic commands and papal mandates. According to Hus, no command was binding on the believer that was not clearly based on the Scriptures. The Scriptures were the supreme rule of faith and life.


The threat that Hus' views posed to papal authority and to the whole sacerdotal system was plain. The pope was not supreme, nor infallible; the church did not consist of the pope and the cardinals, it consisted of those chosen by God from eternity; Christ was the head of the church, and access to the Father was through Him.

From Hus, the teachings of Wycliffe, as regards the nature of the church and the authority of the Scriptures, passed to Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, and into the teachings of the Reformation. Luther's affinity with Hus became evident during his disputation with John Eck at Leipzig in 1519. That disputation centered on the authority of the Pope and the infallibility of the church. Eck maintained that the Pope was the successor of Pe-

ter and the vicar of Christ by divine right; Luther asserted that such a claim was contrary to Scripture and a concoction of the Roman pontiffs.

During the debate, Eck charged Luther with being a follower of Hus because of Luther's appeal to the supreme authority of the Scriptures. Luther initially declined to associate himself with Hus due to his condemnation by the Council of Constance, but on mature reflection Luther declared that Hus had been unjustly condemned by that Council. Responding to the charge that he was a Hussite, Luther declared, *Ich bin ein Hussite* (I am a Hussite). He concluded his response:

I am sorry that the learned doctor only dips into the Scripture as the water spider into the water — nay, that he seems to flee from it as the Devil from the Cross. I prefer, with all deference to the Fathers, the authority of the Scripture, which I herewith recommend to the arbiters of our cause.

Wycliffe was the "Morning Star of the Reformation." He was the first light that began to dispel the gloom of a long night. Contrary to the determination of the Council of Constance, Wycliffe was a very fruitful tree. He contributed substantially to the Reformation. Through his teachings, many sons were brought to a knowledge of the truth of the gospel. He continues to bear fruit to this present day. 

News From Our Churches

Mr. Benjamin Wigger

Minister Activities

Since our last "News" three of our vacant congregations have formed new trios from which they soon will call a pastor.

The Edgerton, MN PRC will

Mr. Wigger is a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan.

46/Standard Bearer/October 15, 2005

call from a trio of Rev. Bruinsma, Rev. S. Houck, and Candidate John Marcus.

Covenant PRC in Wyckoff, NJ has a trio of Rev. M. Dick, Rev. S. Houck, and Rev. A. Spriensma.

The Loveland, CO PRC has a trio of Rev. A. Brummel, Rev. S. Key, and Rev. J. Laning.

Congregation Activities

The evening of September 14 the congregation of First PRC in Grand Rapids, MI was invited to their annual Fall Fellowship Dinner. For closing devotions, their pastor, Rev. J. Slopsema, gave a ten-minute talk meant to encourage the members of First in their Bible studies this year.

We are happy to report that beginning September 1 you can find information regarding our Southeast PRC on the web. Interested? Check it out at www.southeastprc.org.

With catechism classes well under way in all our churches, we couldn't help but notice how our Byron Center, MI PRC solved a problem facing parents bringing their children to catechism. The problem: what do fathers do while waiting for their children during the hour of catechism instruction? The solution: start a Men's Bible Study, which meets weekly during the catechism season.

The men and boys of First PRC in Holland, MI were able to enjoy a camp-out September 16 & 17 at P.J. Hoffmaster State Park on the shore of Lake Michigan.

Members of Bethel PRC in Roselle, IL were invited to an open house/house-warming September 17 at their parsonage. All were encouraged to come and to bring a friend. There was food, games, prizes, and even a ping-pong tournament. Members were also told not to worry if they were not used to Asian food, the Mahtanis promised to have American too.

Several of our churches were made aware of the need of financial help of the Presbyterian Churches in America due to hurricane Katrina. Some of their churches were damaged in areas devastated by the hurricane. The Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI and the Kalamazoo, MI PRC made information available for their congregations and provided donation boxes for this cause, while Bethel PRC in Roselle, IL sent money from their Benevolent Fund, as well as scheduling two collections in September for those fellow saints in their hour of need.

On Sunday, September 18, a tour group of approximately 40 seniors from our Grand Rapids, MI PRCs were able to worship with our Wingham, Ontario congregation. After the second service there

was a short break for refreshments and then a short singspiration followed in the sanctuary.

Young People's Activities

The young people of the Doon and Hull, IA PRCs were invited to attend a combined young people's meeting on August 28 for the purpose of choosing a convention theme and speakers. There was also a convention year kickoff singspiration for the Doon and Hull congregations on September 4 in the Hull PRC. Everyone was invited to come and enjoy an evening of singing Jehovah's praises and to show support for their young people as they work toward the 2006 convention.

Denomination Activities

The Hope Heralds, a male singing chorus consisting of men from the PR churches in Grand Rapids, MI, brought their latest concert year to a close with a flurry of activity. September 11 they presented a concert of sacred music at the Grandville, MI PRC. This was followed two days later, September 13, with a trip to the Kalamazoo, MI PRC and a program there. Finally, the following Lord's Day, September 18, the group presented their concert one last time at Cornerstone PRC in Dyer, IN.


A radio debate on amillennialism vs. preterism between Prof. D. Engelsma and Rev. Don Preston took place Sunday evening, September 18. Readers of the *Standard Bearer* will no doubt remember that Prof. Engelsma, past editor of this magazine, wrote articles criti-

cal of preterism, deeming the full preterist view as heretical. On the other hand, Rev. Preston, a former amillennialist, is the minister at Ardmore Church of Christ and is the author of numerous books and articles on preterist eschatology. The topic for discussion was "Amillennialist vs. Preterist." You could listen live that evening via radio or the Internet, but for those of us who could not, we can still listen, since the debate was archived at www.voiceofreason.com.

While on the web, you may also go to the website www.rfpa.org to view progress on the construction project of the new RFPA building.

For future consideration we also include here information on the next family conference sponsored by the British Reformed Fellowship. This conference is planned, the Lord willing, for August 5-12, 2006, at Cloverley Hall Conference Centre, Whitchurch, Shropshire, England (near Wales). The speakers will be Prof. H. Hanko and Prof. D. Engelsma. The subject will be: "The Five Points of Calvinism." For information on the Conference Centre check www.cloverleyhall.com.

School Activities

Supporters of Faith Christian School in Randolph, WI were invited to a dedication/open house on the school grounds Saturday, September 17, to mark the completion of Faith's latest addition. The dedication began at 3 P.M., with the open house to follow. 

Announcements

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council of the Loveland Protestant Reformed Church expresses Christian sympathy to Madeline Bertsch and family in the death of their husband and father,

LORENZ BERTSCH.

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:15).

Victor Solanyk, Clerk

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The consistory and congregation of Edgerton PRC express their sympathy to Mr. Allen Hendriks in the death of his brother,

MR. ARTHUR HENDRIKS.

May he be comforted by the words of Psalm 145:18, "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him."

Rev. Daniel Kleyn, President

Mr. Allen Brummel, Clerk

October 15, 2005/*Standard Bearer*/47

P.O. Box 603
Grandville, MI 49468-0603

THE STANDARD BEARER

LECTURE Reformation Day Lecture

Hope Protestant Reformed Church
Walker, Michigan

Thursday, November 3

8:00 P.M.

Prof. H. Hanko

"The Reformation
and Reforming
in the Reformed Tradition"

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

On October 29, 2005, our parents,
JAMES and BEVERLY LANGERAK,
will celebrate, D.V., their 40th anniversary. We give thanks to our heavenly
Father who has blessed us with God-
fearing parents who have guided and
instructed us in love through these
years. We pray that the Lord will con-
tinue to bless them in their life to-
gether.

"I will sing of the mercies of the
Lord forever: with my mouth will I
make known thy faithfulness to all gen-
erations" (Psalm 89:1).

- ❖ Steve and Brenda Langerak
- ❖ Mark and Liz Langerak
- ❖ Scott and Sharla Moelker
- ❖ Jamie and Mary Langerak
- ❖ Brad and Esther Langerak
- ❖ Kelly Langerak
18 grandchildren
(and one in glory)
Grand Rapids, Michigan

REFORMATION LECTURE

Friday, October 21, 2005
8:00 P.M.

Prof. Ronald L. Cammenga
will speak on:
"The Heart of the Reformation:
Justification by Faith Alone"

Wingham PRC
181 Augusta St.
Wingham, Ontario

Call (519) 357-1082
for more information.

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

On September 12, 2005, our par-
ents,

BERN and LINDA ZANDSTRA,
celebrated their 25th wedding anniver-
sary. We are grateful to God for bless-
ing us with covenant parents. We pray
that God will continue to bless their
marriage in the years to come.

"But the mercy of the LORD is from
everlasting to everlasting upon them
that fear him, and his righteousness
unto children's children; to such as
keep his covenant, and to those that
remember his commandments to do
them" (Psalm 103:17, 18).

- ❖ Ben and Teresa
- ❖ Patricia Lynn (in glory)
- ❖ Meri Beth
- ❖ Rebekah Joy (in glory)

Grandville, Michigan

NOTICE

With thanks to God, we rejoice
with our husband, father, and grand-
father,

PROF. ROBERT D. DECKER,
who on October 1, 2005 has, by God's
grace, completed 40 years in the min-
istry in the Protestant Reformed
Churches. "How beautiful are the feet
of them that preach the gospel of
peace and bring glad tidings of good
things" (Romans 10:15).

- ❖ Marilyn Decker
- ❖ Douglas and Deborah Altena
Jared, Amanda, Rachel, Michael
- ❖ Daniel and Denise Decker
Blair, Paige, Danae
- ❖ Timothy and Kathy Decker
Tyler
- ❖ Jonathan and Sarah Decker
Jordan

Jenison, Michigan

Have you checked out the RFPA website lately
to see the latest developments in the new facilities for the publication of
RFPA books?

www.rfpa.org

PRC YEARBOOK CHANGES:

Please make a change in your 2005 Acts of Synod and Yearbook:

for the **parsonage of our Edgerton
church:**

P.O. Box 212 (not 403),
and the **bulletin clerk of Edgerton:**
Marsha Boverhof:
1488 21st St.
(507) 442-4874
e-mail at
farmergary@frontiernet.net

for the **Foreign Mission Committee
Secretary:**

Mr. Allen Brummel
P.O. Box 46
Edgerton, MN 56128
phone: (507) 442-5931

Under Correspondence Addresses:
for **Classical Committee of Classis
West Secretary:**

Rev. David Overway
P.O. Box 163
Doon, IA 51235
phone: (712) 726-3382

for the **Stated Clerk of Classis West:**

Rev. Richard Smit
5940 60th Ave. Cl.
Lacombe, AB T4L 1X8, Canada
phone: (403) 782-5444.