

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

The Morning Star Rises

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

2 Peter 3:8

Crisis Looms for The Catholic Church

After the death of Innocent III the papacy went into decline and the Church lost a lot of its power and influence. So great was this decline that in 1301, after a long dispute about taxes and ownership of church property Philip, king of France, was able to have a papal legate arrested and charged with high treason and, when the dispute escalated, kidnapped and imprisoned the pope himself.

In 1305 the French cardinals forced the election of a French pope; Clement V. He established his court in Avignon — indeed he never set foot in Rome — and the papacy remained there for 70 years, captive to the French monarchy and its policies.

The Great Schism

In 1378 the cardinals elected an Italian pope, Urban VI, but a few months later 12 of the 16 cardinals declared that election void because it had taken place under threat of violence by an Italian mob. They chose another Frenchman; Clement VII. Urban, of course, was not willing to step aside. There were now two rival popes: one in Rome and one in Avignon, both elected by the same cardinals and with no higher power to choose between them they proceeded to excommunicate each other. So began what has come to be known as the Great Schism, which lasted until 1417. The visible unity of the Catholic Church was broken and the reputation of the papacy sank even lower.

The first attempt to end the Schism came in 1409 when an ecumenical Council at Pisa deposed the two rival popes and elected a new pope; Alexander V. Unfortunately the Roman and Avignonese popes did not cooperate. Now there were three!

It took another church Council to resolve the matter, the Council of Constance which met in 1414. This time the preparation was more thorough. The Council ensured that the existing popes were removed either by discrediting them or by ensuring that all support was withdrawn from them. The Great Schism was ended but, perhaps of even greater significance, the Council of Constance established the principle that popes were subject to the authority of an ecumenical Council — an idea which many of the later popes resisted strongly.

John Wycliffe

At the same time as these things were happening a new challenge to the papacy arose in England.

John Wycliffe, absentee priest of several English parishes and theologian at Oxford University was renowned as the most able academic of his day. He was appointed as religious advisor to the court of Edward III and developed theological views which were extremely useful to the English monarchy and nobility.

You will recall that in the time of Innocent III king John surrendered England to the pope. Since that time popes had been demanding the payment of tribute and meddling in the affairs

of the country. Wycliffe taught that if bishops failed to live pure and blameless lives, the state was entitled to strip them of their property and possessions.

When he was summoned by the Bishop of London to account for his views Wycliffe was given protection by John of Gaunt, the king's younger son. The church did not give up in their pursuit. He was later summoned to Rome to appear before the pope but this time refused to go. Next, the archbishop of Canterbury tried to put him on trial but a mob of citizens who supported him broke up the gathering. By this time Wycliffe was a popular hero riding on the back of England's hostility to the higher clergy. Even ordinary priests and friars denounced the hierarchy as corrupt, greedy and immoral. These were the days Geoffrey Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales which paint a rather unedifying picture of English Church life.

When the Great Schism broke out Wycliffe's theology became more radical. He published a book called "The Truth of Holy Scripture", in which he argued that the Bible is the only source of Christian doctrine and that all other teaching must be tested by it. He argued too that all Christians should read the Bible and that it should be translated into the languages of the various nations — a revolutionary idea, bearing in mind that the Council of Toulouse had, in 1229, forbidden the laity to read the Bible either in Latin or in their native tongue.

Wycliffe went on to publish other books. "On the Church," showed him to be a follower of Augustine of Hippo and defined the church as the whole body of the elect whose head was not the pope but Christ Himself.

In "The Power of the Pope" Wycliffe argued that the papacy was of human not divine origin and denied that the pope had any authority over secular government. Later he declared that all popes were Antichrist. "On The Eucharist" attacked the Catholic doctrine of Holy Communion, rejecting transubstantiation. This, in the context of his day, was perhaps his boldest stroke and, in the eyes of the English nobility, went a step too far. He lost the support of the English court over it, Oxford University turned against him and he was forced to retire to Lutterworth where he was parish priest.

Wycliffe died in 1384 and was buried in Lutterworth. He spent the last three years of his life in Lutterworth writing and organising a team of his followers to translate the Bible from Latin into English, a task not finished until after his death. The first translation appeared in 1384 and was followed by a second more popular translation in 1396. This second edition was known as the Purvey Bible after John Purvey who had been Wycliffe's secretary and who oversaw the completion of the work. It had a wide circulation right up to the time of the Reformation in the 16th Century.¹

In his later years Wycliffe also organised and sent out bands of preachers to proclaim the gospel at a time when priests seldom preached and the people were left uninstructed. These men lived simple lives and travelled throughout the land.

Although he remained a Catholic priest until his death, Protestants have hailed John Wycliffe as "the morning star of the Reformation." His followers, who came to be known as Lollards, grew in numbers and influence in the closing years of the 14th Century.

In 1399 a new dynasty came to power in England and, in an attempt to win the favour of the Church the Lancastrian king, Henry IV, passed a law which for the first time made the burning of heretics legal in England. This law was aimed against the Lollards. In the persecution which followed, Lollardy became a movement of the ordinary people, an underground sect divorced from the English establishment. Never the less it survived until the Reformation and in many ways helped to prepare England for it.

34 years after his death, by order of the Council of Constance — the same Council that brought the Great Schism to an end — John Wycliffe's body was dug up and burned and his ashes thrown into the river Swift.

¹ More than 235 copies of the Purvey Bible have survived to the present day. All were handwritten. The printing press was not invented until 1450.

John Huss

In the days of Wycliffe a number of Bohemian students attended Oxford and took his views back with them to the University of Prague. From there those ideas spread rapidly in the Holy Roman Empire, perhaps with even greater success than they had seen in England.

John Huss was rector of Prague University from 1409. He studied and greatly admired Wycliffe's writings.

Huss led a campaign for reform which had the support of both the Bohemian king Wenceslas and the ordinary people. In 1411 he incurred the wrath of the pope when he launched an attack on indulgences. In 1414 he was summoned to appear before the Council of Constance and agreed to attend having been given a promise of safe conduct by the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund, brother of Wenceslas. The Council ignored the promise and threw him in prison almost immediately on his arrival.

After being held in horrific conditions for six months, and with his health destroyed, Huss was brought before the Council which bullied him for three days, refusing to allow him to defend himself. Then, in a humiliating ceremony, six bishops stripped him of his priestly vestments and committed his soul to the devil before handing him over to Sigismund who burned him at the stake on 6th July 1415. He died with serene faith and courage.

Huss's martyrdom created uproar in Bohemia and civil war erupted. The pope came to the aid of Sigismund who had inherited the throne of Bohemia following the death of Wenceslas, and declared a crusade against the Bohemians. All the armed might of Catholic Europe was unable to defeat the Hussites and for the first time in history the Catholic Church was forced to negotiate with dissenters. The result was that although the Bohemians stayed within the Catholic Church they remained a distinct body with their own traditions and practices. In the 16th Century most Bohemians welcomed the Reformation and the Hussite movement merged with mainstream Protestantism.

Some Questions for Discussion

1. How do you think things would have looked to John Wycliffe toward the end of his life when he looked at the state of the Church in England?
2. How do you think he would have assessed the outcome of his life's work?
3. In what ways was Wycliffe's work effective after his death?
4. It was more than one hundred years after the death of John Wycliffe that Martin Luther led the Protestant Reformation in Germany yet the ideas he championed were already present in the teaching of men like Wycliffe and Huss. Why do you think it took so long?
5. Is there anything we can learn from these things about the way God works in the world today?