

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator

## John Wycliffe: From the Publisher

The year 1983 was designated the "Year of the Bible." John Wycliffe died on New Year's Eve in 1384. So 1984 was set for the 600th anniversary observance of his translation of the Bible into English.

Wycliffe has been heralded as "the Morningstar of the Reformation", yet much of his life and works remain virtually unknown. Indeed, many of his 200 books have never been translated into English, inasmuch as he wrote his main works in Latin. He remains one of those many still largely undiscovered treasures of our Christian heritage.

Over 100 years ago, in 1881, Professor Montagu Burrows gave a series of lectures at Oxford, published under the title *Wyclif's Place in History*, in which he pleaded for a proper recognition of Wycliffe's place in British and Western history. He commented:

"To Wyclif we owe more than to any one person who can be mentioned, our English language, our English Bible, and our reformed religion. How easily the words slip from the tongue! But, is not this almost the very atmosphere we breathe? Expand that three-fold claim a little further. It means nothing less than this: that in Wyclif we have the acknowledged father of English prose, the first translator of the whole Bible into the language of the English people, the first disseminator of that Bible amongst all classes, the foremost intellect of his times brought to bear upon the religious questions of the day, the patient and courageous writer of innumerable tracts and books, not for one, but for all the different classes of society, the sagacious originator of that whole system of ecclesiastical reformation, which in its separate parts had been faintly shadowed forth by a genius here and there, but which had acquired consistency in the hands of the master... Wyclif founded no colleges, for he had no means; no human fabric enshrines his ideas; no great institution bears his name. The country for which he lived and died is only beginning to wake up to a sense of the debt it owes his memory. And yet so vast is that debt, so overpowering the claim, even when thus briefly summarized, that it might be thought no very extravagant recognition if every town in England had a monument to his memory."

We urge that this issue of our magazine be used in connection with the viewing of the film JOHN WYCLIFFE: THE MORNINGSTAR and we hope that both will help to arouse new interest in a Christian leader from whom we can learn so much.

This is the third issue of Christian History Magazine. We have been encouraged by the hearty response which we have received from readers.

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### John Wycliffe: Did You Know?

John Wycliffe trained “poor preachers” who lived a simple life and traveled around the countryside teaching the Word of God to the common folk of England in their own tongue.

John Wycliffe was responsible for the very first translation of the entire Bible into the English language. John Wycliffe is called “the father of English prose” because the clarity and the popularity of his writings and his sermons in the Middle English dialect did much to shape our language today.

One of Shakespeare’s greatest comic characters, Sir John Falstaff, was based on an English knight who was a follower of Wycliffe and who died a martyr’s death.

One Pope issued five bulls against John Wycliffe for heresy, the Catholic Church in England tried him three times, and two Popes summoned him to Rome, but Wycliffe was never imprisoned nor ever went to Rome.

Although his English followers, called Lollards or Wycliffites, were persecuted and practically disappeared from England, John Wycliffe’s influence on the Bohemians influenced the great Protestant Reformation of the early 16th Century.

In the 14th Century world, Oxford was Europe’s most outstanding university and John Wycliffe was its leading theologian and philosopher.

John Wycliffe’s patron and protector, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, was also the patron of Geoffrey Chaucer and both the preacher and the poet worked in the duke’s services at one time in their lives.

The writings of John Hus, the Bohemian reformer, which got him condemned and burned at the stake, depended heavily on translations and adaptations of tracts, treatises, and sermons by John Wycliffe.

The Wycliffe translation of the Bible was made from a Latin language, hand-written manuscript of a translation a thousand years old and before any verse numbers had been assigned.

With all of his questioning of the doctrines of the church and his criticism of the corruption of the clergy, John Wycliffe was never excommunicated nor did he ever leave the church, but, in fact, he suffered his fatal stroke while at Mass.

Even though John Wycliffe died peacefully at home in bed on New Year’s Eve, the Church exhumed his body 44 years later, burned his bones, and scattered the ashes in a nearby river.

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Martin Luther was accused of renewing the errors of Wycliffe and Hus by making the Scriptures his final authority.

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## Wycliffe's England: A Time of Turmoil

*The medieval map gives a hint of 14th Century England as it was. The countryside was more deeply wooded than now. The rivers show prominently, probably because boats were more reliable transportation. Roads, more like wide tracks or paths, are marked on the map as the crow flies. Already London was the hub of communications with the main roads fanning out in all directions. Figuring 20 to 25 miles a day by small cart or horseback, the mileage shown between towns helped the pilgrim calculate how many days journey from London to Canterbury. Not seen on the map were the four million who populated England. Ninety percent were villagers and most were illiterate.*

*The language of the people was in transition during Wycliffe's time. The wealthy generally spoke French from past Norman influence. They used the local English dialect only when they spoke with inferiors. But in 1362, English replaced French as the language of the courts. By 1385, English schoolboys were interpreting their Latin into English instead of French. Latin remained the language of the church, of the university, and of universal communication. Of the many English dialects, the Midland English eventually prevailed since it was spoken in London and Oxford. Also, Midland English was popularized by Chaucer and Wycliffe, both of whom wrote in this dialect.*

Everyday life was so time-consuming and tiring that there was no time left for general education. Most lay people were small farmers, rural laborers, personal servants, staff members of great households, soldiers, and small craftsmen. Some might have gone to a small local ABC school as children but nothing after that. There is little evidence that girls went to school at all. By Wycliffe's time, the people were slowly growing out of this illiteracy.

Grammar schools were run by parish churches, religious orders, and some private benefactors. Most students were there to learn Latin well enough to study at the University where it was the language of instruction. Children of upper classes often had private tutoring in their manors until seven when they would become a page in another great household to continue their education, especially in the manner of the court. At 14 many were ready for the university.

Because most medieval schools were run by the church, each university student became a "clerk in holy orders" because he had to take minor orders to become eligible to enroll. Usually his destination as a "clerk" was the teaching profession, not the priesthood.

A student would be assigned a college. For example, when William of Wykeham founded New College, Oxford in 1379 we are told he provided room "for a warden, three lay clerks, ten priests, sixteen choristers, and seventy scholars, who were to be 16 years of age at admission to the university."

The student's first years of university education included Grammar (including language), Rhetoric, and Logic or Dialectic, climaxing in a Bachelor's degree. For his Master's degree, he studied Music, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy. If he chose to study for a Doctorate, he could get it in law, medicine, music, or theology. Throughout was the study of philosophy—natural, moral and metaphysical.

## The Church

Nothing dominated medieval life in Europe as much as the church. In behavior, there was one ethical code. In belief, there was one body of doctrines. In ritual, there was a common core of liturgical worship. In education, the church ran the schools, shaped the curriculum, taught the classes, and its graduates were the only educated persons available. In money and property, the church made its demands on all individuals and on all governments of Christian countries. In political power, the church tried to be the ruler of all Europe. In personal thought and behavior, the church tried to be ruler of all life. And to contradict the church was heresy.

The clergy of the medieval church were divided into two parts—regular and secular. The regular clergy were those living under a rule or order, such as monks and friars. The secular clergy consisted of the higher and lower grades of priests and prelates charged with “cure of souls” and in addition an army of “clerks” engaged in every type of employment.

The original intent of monks and friars were beneficial—to pray, practice poverty and chastity, do welfare, live simply, beg alms to aid the poor, and teach. But by Wycliffe’s time, their good intentions were blemished. He joined others in chastising them for their wealth, their gluttony, their fancy estates, their hiring others to do their work, and their misusing alms. Of course, there were exceptions, such as teaching the young to read and copying manuscripts.

As for bishops, they had become “men of the world.” Appointed by the king, a bishopric was often a reward. Of the 25 bishops in England and Wales between 1376 and 1386, thirteen held high secular offices under the Crown and others played a key role in politics. English prelates were among the best lawyers and most prominent statesmen in a time when educated laymen were rare. But the church suffered from their lack of diocesan responsibility and the country suffered from their not practicing their faith in their secular office. Wycliffe called them “Caesarean clergy.”

As England developed its nationalism and as the French kings supported Popes at Avignon, the papacy found influence in England being challenge by king and Parliament. And the Great Schism shattered further the credibility of the papacy.

### **Local Parish**

Even the smallest village had church. Everyone was expected to attend mass at 9 a.m. on Sundays. Outside the door of the church, couples were married before entering for the nuptial mass. Inside babies were baptized by immersion in a large font. If the local priest were so moved, he would preach a sermon on the Sunday gospel at the parish Mass. If he did not know the Bible stories or if he felt a lack interest from his listeners, he might tell stories to amuse his congregation. His stated job was to instruct his people the creed, commandments, sacraments, seven works of mercy, seven virtues and seven deadly sins. He was to care for the poor out of his own stipend or else exhort his parishioners—those living or about to die—to give alms for the poor. He also collected tithes. Since he was not normally a university graduate and often could not read Latin, he would receive instruction in the language of the people from an arch-deacon, which instruction would then be repeated to his parishioners. But not all parish priests were so conscientious. Many parsons, without a vicar in charge, deserted their dull duties in the villages to live in the more fascinating cities or in the more prosperous mansions of the nobility.

### **The Black Death**

The people then called it “The Great Dying”. We know it today as the Black Death. Medieval Europe feared this mysterious evil coming out of the East following the trade routes. We know it as bubonic plague whose bacillus is carried by fleas and rats, of which there were plenty in the 14th Century. With no known medical diagnosis then, the people panicked. They felt helpless. No way to escape. Death struck fast—in a day or two. It hit all ages and all classes, but more of the poor than the rich. Estimates vary as to the number of deaths—from one-third to one-half of Europe’s population, but, whatever the

number, the toll of life was greater than any epidemic or war in human history.

It reached Constantinople in 1347 and spread through Europe to England by late 1348. Congested and unsanitary areas were hardest hit. Often the dead so outnumbered the living, burial became difficult. Among parish priests who cared for their flock, mortality was high. Courts of justice were closed. People were afraid to buy meat and prices dropped. Laborers demanded high wages to harvest crops or they would rot. Animals wandered the fields and perished for lack of care. Houses collapsed in the absence of inhabitants. Illiterate peasants whose wives died in the plague often rushed into holy orders.

Many died without last rites. One bishop told his people that if at death no priest were present, "faith must take the place of the Sacrament." Although some people turned to superstition for security, most felt it was God's anger against the wickedness of the people of that day. Wycliffe seemed to have yielded to a popular apprehension that the final judgment was approaching. He describes the "covetousness, sensuality, and fraud" of the clergy as infecting all of humanity, thus causing the chastisement under which Europe mourned.

Although the nation was shaken by the loss of life and by the fear of the unknown evil, penitence was lacking. Shortage of labor hastened economic changes and social unrest. Substitution of wages for services accelerated. Distinction between classes became less rigid. The arts reflected the melancholy and morbid. Exaggerated forms of religious mysticism developed. Lack of educated clergy reduced the church's intellectual vigor.

In the years to follow, there were further outbreaks of bubonic plague, not stopping in England until the early 1600's when medical knowledge improved and brown rats began to drive out the black, plague-carrying rats.

## **The Hundred Years War**

A military tactic, devised by King Edward III of England, went a long way toward changing medieval warfare, raising England as a power among nations, and shaking the feudal system. The French feudal knights had been the best among the Crusaders in the Holy Land and French military power in the early 14th Century was dominant in Western Europe. Edward's strategy was simple. He noted the superiority of the long bow to the crossbow. He supported the archers with "knife-men" with long daggers and protected them all with divisions of the feudal heavy cavalry. When the English Bowman's arrows threw the enemy into confusion, the knights charged into the struggling mass and completed the rout. The French were slow in learning to counteract the superior effectiveness of the English long bow over the French knights in armor. Repeatedly against greater odds at Crecy (1346), Poitiers (1356). and Agincourt (1415), the English victories were startling.

The English soldier-citizen was in the forefront of breaking down class and cultural divisions and strengthening nationalism. While at home the yeoman farmer enjoyed his sport of archery. When he buckled on his armor for battle, he felt his responsibility both as a defender alongside the noble knight and as an Englishman alongside others from his island.

The Hundred Years War was not one long battle, but a series of invasions and treaties, challenged succession to the French throne, disputes over trade and ports, territorial claims and counterclaims, years of peace interrupted by war.

Although the wars drained England economically, caused much suffering, and contributed in part to uprisings, and to political corruption, English trade and commerce increased and towns untouched by war's destruction flourished.

The Norman-Anglo-Saxon mix began to meld itself into "English." Aided by its unique Common Law, by a feudal system less dominant than on the Continent, growing representative government, insular protection from invasion, England became a national power demanding respect for itself and for its people.

## **The Peasants Revolt**

It was the first major popular rebellion in English history. It lasted less than a month. It failed completely as a social revolution. The passage of a poll tax, which hit hardest at the poorest, was the final spark igniting growing general unrest among the peasants, both in the city and in the countryside. Workers were still seething against the fixing of maximum wages following the Black Death. The wealth and worldly attitude of the higher clergy incensed the people. Dreams of a better way of life following the French wars urged others on. John Ball preached the freedom of the individual. And disgust with the weakness and poor management of the government angered others.

Rebels under Wat Tyler reached London on June 13, 1381. They killed Flemish merchants and razed the palace of the unpopular John of Gaunt. On the 14th, King Richard II met with the rebels outside London at Mile End and promised cheap land, free trade, the abolition of serfdom and forced labor. While the king was gone, rebels inside the city captured the Tower of London and beheaded the Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon of Sudbury. On the following day, the king met at Smithfield with Wat Tyler and unexpectedly the enraged mayor of London killed Tyler. But the king made further promises to the rebels if they would disperse. They left London. Once the rebellions ended in the provinces, all promises were forgotten. The only gain was the prevention of further poll taxes.

Although Wycliffe's enemies tried to blame him for stirring up such unrest and although he was sympathetic with some of the peasants' concerns, there is no evidence that he directly encouraged or supported them in their violent uprising.

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## John Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation

DR. DONALD L. ROBERTS Dr. Donald L Roberts is an ordained clergyman and this article is adapted from a graduate thesis on John Wycliffe which he submitted to the University of Cincinnati.

John Wycliffe was born around 1330 of a family which held property near Richmond and the village of Wycliffe-upon-Tees in the North Riding of Yorkshire in England. The tomb of his father may still be seen in the latter village. Almost no record of his early years exists. Actually, it is not until the last dozen years of his life when he entered into political and theological debate that we have a fuller record of him. The greater part of his life was spent in the University of Oxford.

Since little is known of his early life, we can only speculate concerning those events which influenced him. A Yorkshire man, living in a secluded area, he probably was educated by a village priest. Although anti-clerical feeling existed (the clergy, one fiftieth of the population, accounted for one-third of the nation's landed wealth), there was yet a flourishing piety at the popular level. This was sustained by the regular services of the church, plus the special dramas of nativity and miracle plays and other festivals associated with the life of Christ and His passion, and the services of vernacular carols at Christmas, Easter and Harvest.

There was also in Yorkshire in Wycliffe's childhood an unusual interest in the writing and study of English preaching manuals, and a spirituality among the people reflected in the career and influence of Richard Rolle.

In 1342 Wycliffe's family village and manor came under the lordship of John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster and second son of King Edward III. Because of the close ties seen later between Gaunt and Wycliffe, it is possible that the two knew one another well before Wycliffe came to national prominence. It is to be observed here that since there is disagreement as to the exact year of Wycliffe's birth, we have chosen to follow the consensus of authorities, and thus accept the year 1330.

Working from the year 1330, we find Wycliffe leaving for Oxford in 1346, being but a teenager, yet this is the common age for entry into university. The early years of his studies were marked by the general dislocation of university life caused by the epidemics of the Black Death between 1349 and 1353. As a northern man, he probably attended Balliol College first, which school had been founded by John Balliol of Yorkshire between 1263 and 1268.

Public records also place him at Merton College in 1356 and again at Balliol as a Master prior to 1360. Not only because of the threat of epidemic, but also because of the scholastic disciplines and physical hardship, life as a student was extremely arduous experience in Wycliffe's day. Most of the undergraduate clerks lived in residence outside the colleges and halls, there being 1500 of them in Wycliffe's time.

In 1361 while Master of Balliol, Wycliffe received the rich college living of Fillingham in Lincolnshire, which provided income for his continued studies at Oxford.

He received his Bachelor of Divinity in 1369 and his doctorate in 1372. For a brief time he was Warden of the New Canterbury Hall but was involved in disputes there, which prompted him to leave and to go to Queen's College where he spent the majority of his Oxford years. It was in 1370, while still engaged in his doctoral studies, that Wycliffe first put forward a debatable doctrine of the Eucharist. This was not a fully

developed position, nor was it necessarily controversial, since such debate was a part of the disciplines of theological study. The receipt of the Doctorate of Divinity in 1372 marked sixteen years of incessant preparation, and to this point no open conflict with Rome had arisen.

In 1374 he was appointed rector of Lutterworth, which living he retained until his death in 1384. By 1371 he was recognized as the leading theologian and philosopher of the age at Oxford, thus second to none in Europe, for Oxford had, for a brief time, eclipsed Paris in academic leadership.

We might presume that Wycliffe had some share in the rising fortunes of Oxford as an intellectual center. Of Wycliffe it was said by one of his contemporaries, "he was second to none in the training of the schools without a rival." Others have looked upon him as the last of the Schoolmen. He was a part of that declining system which had attempted to reconcile the dogmas of faith with the dictates of reason. Wycliffe took his stand with the Realists, as opposed to the Nominalists.

As a scholar he began, in scholastic garb, to attack what he considered to be the abuses in the Church. His attacks, when reviewed, reveal traces of ideas from several great thinkers before him. From Marsiglio of Padua came the concept that the Church should limit herself to her own province. From Occam came the idea that there was the need and the justice of an autonomous secular power, while from the Spiritual Franciscans came the exemplification of the evangelical poverty which the Gospels taught. From Grosseteste came the emphatic denunciation of pluralism. Although Bradwardine left his mark on Wycliffe (Bradwardine died in 1349), Wycliffe rejected his ultra-predestinarian views, and sought to retain some of man's freedom. Wycliffe rejected the view that if any man sins, God Himself determines man to the act. Another man who impressed Wycliffe was Fitzralph, who had been Chancellor of Oxford before his death in 1360. He had insisted that dominion was founded in grace. This became a central idea for Wycliffe.

Out of these diverse philosophies, added to the undergirding principles of Scripture and some of the concepts of Augustine, came Wycliffe's ***On Divine Dominion*** and ***On Civil Dominion***. Basic to his thinking, which was to be used in the English stand against papal encroachments, were such statements as these by Wycliffe: "If through transgression a man forfeited his divine privileges, then of necessity his temporal possessions were also lost." and "Men held whatever they had received from God as stewards, and if found faithless could justly be deprived of it."

With the renewal of war with France in 1369, it was apparent that new monies would be needed to prosecute the conflict. Taxation led to growing anticlerical feeling in 1370, as jealous eyes surveyed the financial exemptions of the clergy. In 1371 John of Gaunt, with a secular, noble council, took power. At this point Wycliffe appeared in Parliament, and though not openly active, he encouraged the thinking that in times of necessity "all ecclesiastical lands and properties" could be taken back by the government. Such thinking was eagerly grasped at by Gaunt. In 1372, when Pope Gregory XI tried to impose a tax on the English clergy, their protest brought quick support from the royal government, and Edward III's council forbade compliance.

There had already been an English response to the impact of foreign influence in English ecclesiastical affairs as reflected in the Statute of Provisors (1351) which forbade papal interference elections to ecclesiastical posts and the Statutes of Praemunire (1353, 1365) which prohibited appeals to courts outside the kingdom.

An embassy was sent to Avignon to Gregory XI in 1373 asking that certain impositions against the English be set aside. In 1374 Gregory agreed to discuss the grievances, and thus a conference was arranged for at Bruges. Wycliffe was appointed as a delegate of the Crown.

In 1374, probably because of his service to the government, he received the living at Lutterworth; however, he sustained personal disappointment in 1375 in not receiving either the prebend at Lincoln or the bishopric of Worcester, which setbacks have been seized upon by many as the reason for his



subsequent attacks upon the papacy.

Wycliffe's alliance with John of Gaunt eventually brought him into direct conflict with William Courtenay, the popular Bishop of London. This was occasioned by Wycliffe's written support of certain dubious politics on the part of Gaunt. Thus, in 1377 Wycliffe was summoned to London to answer charges of heresy. He appeared at St. Paul's accompanied by four friars from Oxford, under escort of Gaunt, the real target of these proceedings.

The following description of Wycliffe's physical appearance there is drawn from several portraits of unquestioned originality still in existence: "... a tall thin figure, covered with a long light gown of black colour, with a girdle about his body; the head, adorned with a full, flowing beard, exhibiting features keen and sharply cut; the eye clear and penetrating; the lips firmly closed in token of resolution—the whole man wearing an aspect of lofty earnestness and replete with dignity and character."

The convocation had scarcely arranged itself (There was an immediate argument as to whether Wycliffe should stand or be seated), when recriminations and personal villification filled the air. Gaunt's very manner in entering St. Paul's had already irked the Londoners, who despised him anyway, and soon an open brawl developed. Gaunt was forced to flee for his life. This episode began to cast a new light on Wycliffe's usefulness to the government. Still the popularity of Wycliffe temporarily kept him from further censure.

Three months after the altercation at St. Paul's, Gregory XI issued five scathing bulls against Wycliffe. They were sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury, to the king, and to Oxford. In these bulls some eighteen errors were cited from Wycliffe's ***On Civil Dominion***. The church officials were rebuked for allowing such errors to be taught by the "master of errors". The authorities were ordered to hand Wycliffe over to Courtenay, who in turn was instructed to examine Wycliffe concerning his errors. The points of error, significantly, concerned ecclesiastical authority and organization rather than basic creedal beliefs.

Oxford refused to condemn her outstanding scholar. Instead, Wycliffe consented to a form of "house-arrest" in Black Hall in order to spare the university further punitive action by the Pope. Wycliffe refused to appear again at St. Paul's in the prescribed thirty-day period. He did agree to appear at Lambeth, and in 1378 faced the bishops there. The government still stood by Wycliffe, whose prestige yet ranked high in the land because of the patriotic services he had rendered to the Crown. A message from the Queen Mother and the presence of friendly London citizenry were some of the factors which convinced the Commissioners of the futility of continuing the trial. They contented themselves with prohibiting Wycliffe from further exposition of his ideas.

Actually, Gregory's bulls against Wycliffe came at an unpropitious time, for Richard II's government was anti-papal and the national climate was not conducive to the carrying out of the intent of the bulls. Only a few days after the trial at Lambeth, Gregory XI died, and this temporarily diverted the papacy from the activities of John Wycliffe.

Wycliffe was also cited to appear at Rome, but in the hectic year of 1378, events precluded such an appearance, even had Wycliffe been so inclined to heed the summons.

Wycliffe had another major public encounter over the "Right of Sanctuary" conflict that erupted between the church and civil authorities in 1378. Wycliffe took a strong position before Parliament defending the royal position and attacking the material and worldly privileges of the church, but legislation that ensued took little notice of his arguments as the real causes of the "Right of Sanctuary" abuses.

By now it was becoming obvious to the politically-astute John of Gaunt, that Wycliffe's value in the political realm had been gradually diminishing. Wycliffe's role had been played out, and his ideas went far beyond the policies of expediency which promoted Gaunt's patronage of the great Oxford schoolman.

With 1378 we come to a milestone in Wycliffe's career. As his political influence waned, he turned to those accomplishments for which he is best remembered. The double election in 1378 of two popes—Urban VI and Clement VII—served two purposes. It deflected papal attention from Wycliffe, while it also attracted Wycliffe into deeper areas of controversy and, ultimately, into what was judged as heresy. This "Great Schism" in the church in 1378 provided a critical turning point for Wycliffe.

In the last seven years of his life, Wycliffe was increasingly withdrawn from public affairs in England. He continued to teach at Oxford until 1381 when he was banished from the university. He took up residence at his parish church in Lutterworth. Here he developed further his views dealing with three basic areas of doctrine: the Church, the Eucharist, and the Scriptures.

Wycliffe argued in Biblical terms that the true Church was composed of the "congregation of the predestined" as the Body of Christ, which Wycliffe contrasted with the visible or Church Militant.

The only Head of the Church, therefore, was Christ. From these premises he moved verbally against such practices in the Church as the selling of indulgences, and stressed the need for renewed spiritual life through the teachings of Christ in the Bible. His emphasis was on the individual's direct relationship to God through Christ.

Wycliffe's published views on the Eucharist, clearly delineated in 1379 and 1380 in his tracts *On Apostasy* and *On the Eucharist*, made it plain to ecclesiastical authorities that he had moved into what they considered heresy. He protested against the superstition and idolatry he saw associated with the Mass and the inordinate importance given to the priest in "making" Christ's body.

Transubstantiation had been declared a dogma of the Church in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council. In pointing out the relative newness of this doctrine, Wycliffe referred to the statement of Berengarius of Tours in 1059 given to establish his orthodoxy. This statement: "The same bread and wine ... placed before the Mass upon the altar remain after consecration both as sacrament and as the Lord's Body." Wycliffe interpreted this to mean that the bread remained bread even after the consecration. This view he held himself.

Wycliffe thus held to the "receptionist" view of the Eucharist, that is that the determining factor governing the presence and reception of Christ was the faith of the individual participant. He believed also the idea of remanence—that the bread and wine remain unchanged.

From 1379 on he came under heavy attack at Oxford for these views. Yet, there still existed at the university a faction loyal to Wycliffe. His position on the Eucharist was becoming that issue which would sort out his true disciples from mere respectful adherents. In 1381 the Peasant's Revolt, though totally divorced from Wycliffe's activity or teaching, had tended to bring more disrepute upon him. He even defended the peasants and was active in pleading their cause after the bloodshed had ceased. Again, in 1381, Wycliffe's *Confessio* further amplified his views on the Mass.

Such views could no longer be countenanced, powerful as Wycliffe may have been. In 1382 the now Archbishop Courtenay summoned a special committee to Blackfriars to examine Wycliffe's teachings. This council is also called "The Earthquake Council" because of the unusual coincidence of an earthquake at the time of its meeting, which event both Wycliffe's followers and Courtenay's each interpreted as a visible sign of God's judgment upon the other.

Although some of his friends and John of Gaunt sought to dissuade Wycliffe from this clear challenge to the Church, their attempts were unsuccessful, and the Council met and took decisive action. Courtenay asked for the judgment of the Blackfriars Synod on twenty-four of Wycliffe's conclusions. Ten of them

were condemned as heretical, four of these relating to the Mass; and the rest were condemned as erroneous. Wycliffe himself was not summoned to the Synod, though some of his followers were.

The Council concluded in the apocalyptic atmosphere of the earthquake. Courtenay was quick now to seize this initiative obtained at Blackfriars. His appeal was successful in receiving temporal power to aid the bishops in restraining the power of Lollardy at Oxford. Many of the outstanding followers of Wycliffe recanted, while Wycliffe's writings were put under ban.

For all of these external events which, both in the political and theological arenas, seemed to be spelling out an ignominious downfall for John Wycliffe, circumstances so bleak still worked in favor of his most important contribution, the translation of the Bible into the vernacular English.

This constituted the third area of doctrine in which Wycliffe clashed with the traditional teaching of the Church. It is to be observed that, influenced as he was earlier in his career by the import of Scripture, it was not until the twilight of his career that he came to a fully developed position on the authority of the Scriptures. He declared the right of every Christian to know the Bible, and that the Bible emphasized the need of every Christian to see the importance of Christ alone as the sufficient way of salvation, without the aid of pilgrimages, works and the Mass.

Wycliffe's concentration upon the Scriptures moved him inexorably to a logical outcome—their translation into English. The clergy of his day, even had they desired to use them, had the Scriptures only in the Latin Vulgate, or occasionally the Norman French. Only fragments of the Bible could be found in English, and these scarcely accessible to the masses of people. Serving as the inspiration of the activity, Wycliffe lived to see the first complete English translation of the Bible.

This first effort immediately prompted work on a revision, which was completed after Wycliffe's death, yet came to be identified as the "Wycliffe Bible." Of interest it is that when John Purvey made this revision there were three main dialects extant in Middle English, Purvey chose Midland English, the dialect of London, which came to dominate the entire country, and was also used by Chaucer.

The very factors which had cut him off from an active public life were also those factors which served to bring John Wycliffe to his greatest accomplishment, the translation of the English Bible from the Vulgate.

Wycliffe spent the last two years of his life unhindered in the parish at Lutterworth. A veritable torrent of writings flowed from his pen. In 1382 he suffered the first of two strokes which left him partially paralyzed, and for this reason he was unable to answer a citation to appear in Rome. On Holy Innocents' Day 1384, while present at the Mass, he suffered a second and severe stroke, which caused his death on December 31 of that year. Between these two strokes he had written and published his *Triialogus*, a systematic statement of his views, which was reprinted in 1525.

After Wycliffe's death, his followers continued his work and carried the Scriptures to the people. But, the opposition and persecution grew more and more intense. Particularly through the efforts of Bishop Courtenay the Wycliffe movement was effectively suppressed in England. But, his writings were carried to Bohemia by students from there who had studied under Wycliffe at Oxford. His cause and teachings were taken up by John Hus and his followers, and thus were carried on more effectively on the continent than in his native land.

As a postscript to his life, it must be noted that Wycliffe died officially orthodox. In 1415 the Council of Constance burned John Hus at the stake, and also condemned John Wycliffe on 260 different counts. The Council ordered that his writings be burned and directed that his bones be exhumed and cast out of consecrated ground. Finally, in 1428, at papal command, the remains of Wycliffe were dug up, burned, and scattered into the little river Swift. Bishop Fleming, in the reign of Henry VI, founded Lincoln College for the express purpose of counteracting the doctrines which Wycliffe and his followers had promulgated.

As history has revealed, Wycliffe's bones were much more easily dispersed than his teachings, for out of a sea of controversy and angry disputation rose his greatest contribution-the English Bible.

The chronicler Fuller later observed: "They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into the Swift, a neighboring brook running hard by. Thus the brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon; Avon into Severn; Severn into the narrow seas; and they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine which now is dispersed the world over."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator

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## John Wycliffe: A Gallery of Wycliffe's Defenders, Friends and Foes

John Wycliffe

### John Purvey

(c.1353–c.1428) A close companion to Wycliffe, Purvey was his personal secretary, fellow lodger in the rectory, curate at Lutterworth, assistant in his literary labors, and Wycliffe's constant attendant till the end. Wycliffe, a prolific writer, undoubtedly dictated much of his work to Purvey. He knew the mind of the master. Thus, after Wycliffe's death, Purvey did much to interpret and popularize Wycliffe's writings and doctrines. Purvey is considered a major contributor to the translation of the Bible into English, especially the revision which generally bears his name, a revision of the Wycliffe Bible completed in 1388. Purvey was also a preacher, whose sermons disturbed church leaders. In 1390, he was imprisoned. While there, he wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse based on lectures primarily delivered by Wycliffe. In 1401, three days after the first Wycliffe martyr was burned at the stake, Purvey recanted. He was released and given a vicarage. But his conscience soon forced him to resign from receiving such revenue from the church and he disappeared. In 1421 he was again imprisoned for preaching. Nothing more was heard of him.

### John of Gaunt

(1340–1399) This English prince was Wycliffe's patron and protector, and England's most powerful political figure in the late 14th Century. Gaunt, better known in his day as the Duke of Lancaster, was virtually the ruler of England during the last years of the 50-year reign of his then senile father, King Edward III, and during the first years of the reign of his adolescent nephew, Richard II. Gaunt was very wealthy, a wise diplomat, a bold but not always able soldier, the epitome of chivalry, hard on his enemies, always faithful to what he thought was best for England, and ambitious. He attracted the ablest men of his day within his circle. In such a situation, he inspired both admiration and distrust, loyalty and opposition. His death in 1399 led to the overthrow of King Richard II by Gaunt's son, who ascended the throne as King Henry IV, the first of three 15th Century Lancastrian monarchs directly descended from John of Gaunt.

### William Courtenay

(c. 1342– 1396) As Archbishop of Canterbury (1381–1396), he was the most formidable opponent of Wycliffe. Although Courtenay failed to convict Wycliffe in several trials, Courtenay was eventually effective in having Wycliffe banished from Oxford to Lutterworth. Because of Courtenay's royal blood, his effective administrative ability, and his strong support of papal authority, he was a powerful influence in the politics and the church life of England. His rise was fast. At 25 he was Chancellor of Oxford. At 33 he was the influential Bishop of London, where his opposition to John of Gaunt brought him power and popularity. He was not a great scholar, but a practical thinker. In each public encounter with Wycliffe Courtenay must have recognized the superiority of his opponent's ability to reason, to persuade, and to remain true to his faith. But Courtenay was determined to attack the heresy of Wycliffe, so he struck at the leaders of Lollardy in Oxford and left the master unmolested at Lutterworth. Courtenay's unrelenting persecution of Lollardy continued after Wycliffe's death.

### Nicholas of Hereford

(died c.1420) Hereford was one of Wycliffe's most learned Oxford colleagues and followers. A Doctor of Divinity, Hereford stood by Wycliffe in his public trials. From 1380, he worked with Wycliffe and John Purvey in translating the Latin version of the Bible into English. His own translations were very literal and awkward reading. An inflammatory sermon preached by Hereford on Ascension Day at Oxford in 1382, inciting people to Wycliffe's defense, got him and other Lollard leaders excommunicated. He went to Rome to appeal personally to Pope Urban VI. He was imprisoned. In June 1385, a popular uprising in Rome freed many prisoners, including Hereford. He remained underground until 1387 when he resumed his Lollard life in England and was arrested. He was "grievously tormented." Finally, in 1391, he recanted. In return, he gained influential patronage. In 1394, he was promoted to chancellor of Hereford Cathedral. But in 1417, he renounced all benefices and doles to retire in old age to the Carthusian monastery of St. Anne in Coventry.

### **Pope Gregory XI**

(1329–1378) This was the Pope who issued five scathing bulls against Wycliffe in May 1377. This was the Pope who ended "The Babylonian Captivity" by moving the papal court back to Rome after 67 years of "exile" in Avignon, France. This was the Pope whose death brought on "The Great Schism" lasting 39 years. His career was amazing in itself. The young French churchman was a canon at eleven and a cardinal at nineteen. He was the nephew of Pope Clement VI. In 1370 he was unanimously elected Pope at the age of 41. Gregory tried to make peace between England and France. He fought against the warring Florence, allied with other rebellious papal cities. He hoped returning the papal court to Rome would bring peace. It did not. Upon his death in March 1378, the church split on his successor-Pope Urban VI in Rome and Pope Clement VII (the "anti-pope") in Avignon. Not until the Council of Constance in 1417 was the schism healed.

### **Geoffrey Chaucer**

(c. 1340–1400) The famous poet was a few years younger than Wycliffe. Both benefitted from the life-long patronage and protection of the powerful John of Gaunt. Both were critical of the excesses of the church of that day—Chaucer by poetic wit and Wycliffe by prose reasoning. Both wrote in the Midland English dialect and their writings later influenced the shaping of the modern English language. Neither specifically mentions the other in their respective writings. Yet it is hard to imagine that the two were not acquainted. In fact, tradition says that Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* based his characterization of "The Parson" on the rector of Lutterworth. For thirty years Chaucer served his country on diplomatic missions to Flanders, France and Italy and in various domestic positions as a civil servant. He was thoroughly knowledgeable about the life of his time, as he so vividly portrays in his writings. He was buried at Westminster Abbey, a high honor for a commoner.

### **Queen Mother, Joan of Kent**

The Queen Mother at the time of Wycliffe's Lambeth trial in 1378 was Joan of Kent, the widow of the legendary warrior-hero, Edward the Black Prince. She interceded on behalf of Wycliffe at that trial. As a staunch protectress of Wycliffe and the "New Learning", she was persistent and her court, emissary, Sir Lewis Clifford, spoke with authority. As a result, no judgment was made by the bishops against Wycliffe. The Queen Mother shared many of her husband's concerns, including his dislike for churchmen not willing to pay for the war. Her household was known to have entertained more than one knight who was friendly with "heretics." Four of the executors of her will were suspected of Lollardy, even Sir Lewis Clifford himself.

### **Anne of Bohemia**

(1366–1394) Queen Anne provided a noteworthy link to the spread of Wycliffe's teachings. She was praised for her reading of "godly books," her possession of the Scriptures in three languages, and her

"constant study of the four Gospels in English." Princess Anne was 16 when she married King Richard II in 1382. He was 15. She was probably one of the better influences on his life over their next twelve years together. Their marriage had been arranged by diplomats. Anne's father was Emperor Charles IV of the Holy Roman Empire and her brother was King Wenceslaus of Bohemia. The traditional alliance between Bohemia and France had been shattered by their joint defeat by the English at the Battle of Crecy and by the Schism in Christendom. The French supported Pope Clement VII in Avignon and the English, Pope Urban VI in Rome. Pope Urban VI persuaded Wenceslaus to ally with the faithful English. Thus, Anne became Richard's Queen. At the encouragement of Queen Anne, Bohemian students came to Oxford. Many carried back to Prague the writings and teachings of Wycliffe. Within years the seed ripened into the Hussite movement in Bohemia.

### **"Poor Preachers"**

Probably inspired by St. Francis and his street evangelists or by Luke 10:1–4, Wycliffe sent out from Oxford his order of "poor priests" or "itinerant preachers," who traveled the countryside, lived and dressed simply, and preached wherever people would listen. As early as 1377, they were denouncing the abuses of the church, proclaiming the rediscovered understanding of the doctrine of the Eucharist, and teaching biblical thinking from which would come right living. Many were graduates or undergraduates, probably faithful students or colleagues of Wycliffe. Most were ordained, but not tied to a parish, free to travel. Later Wycliffe employed committed laymen. He defended their right to preach as long as they had accepted the divine call. He called them "evangelical men" or "apostolic men." It was for these "poor preachers"—both lay and ordained—that Wycliffe prepared his tracts, his skeletons of sermons, and his paraphrases of the Bible—all in the English dialect of the people.

### **The Lollards**

"They were everywhere," claimed a contemporary chronicler of Wycliffe. "A man could scarcely meet two people on the road but one of them was a disciple of Wycliffe." The historian undoubtedly exaggerated, but he reflected the strong sympathies for Wycliffe prevalent at the time. There were two types of supporters. The first, and largest, group were the many Englishmen who resented papal authority exploiting their homeland but cared little about doctrinal issues. The second, and smaller, group were disciples attached to Wycliffe for Scriptural reasons. But all were known as Lollards, or Wycliffites. The first official facial use of "Lollard" was in 1382 when Archbishop Courtenay banned the teachings of Wycliffe and crippled the impact of the major Lollard leaders at Oxford. Their master was already in exile at Lutterworth. In 1401, after the first English statute was passed for burning heretics, William Sawtrey became the first Lollard martyr. Now the term Lollard began to be applied to anyone critical of the church. And this second generation of Lollards were primarily laborers, with few clerics and lords. Their approach became more political and public. With King Henry IV's repression against heresy, Sir John Oldcastle became the most famous Lollard martyr in 1414 when he led an unsuccessful rebellion and was burned while hanging. (Shakespeare based his character "Falstaff" on Oldcastle). The Lollard movement then went under-ground only to resurface in the 1500's to aid the spread of Protestantism and to support Henry VIII's anti-clerical legislation during the English Reformation. Not until 1599 was there a repeal of the legislation against Lollardy.

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## Christian History Timeline: Wycliffe's World

The 14th Century

John Wycliffe was born into a century when the medieval world was coming to an end while a new world was not yet born. The Church, which had brought civilization and order to Europe, had grown in wealth, property, power ... and corruption. The Crusades had ended, but France and England now turned on each other in extended combat. Knights in armor would fall to archer. Genghis Kahn was dead but his descendant, Tamerlane, would devastate the Asian continent. Even greater devastation would plague Europe when the Black Death would kill 75 million by the end of the century. Exotic gifts from the Orient and mysterious tales from African empires south of the Sahara were shared by traders and explorers. Still unknown to Wycliffe's Europe were the cultures already thriving on continents yet to be discovered in the century ahead.

### Wycliffe

**1330** John Wycliffe born in Wycliffe-on-Tees

**1345** Wycliffe goes to Oxford

**1353** With death of his father, Wycliffe becomes lord of manor

**1360** Master of Balliol College

**1361** Receives Master of Arts

**1361** Ordained for the See of Lincoln

**1361** Rector of Fillingham in Lincolnshire

**1363** Prebend of Aust

**1365** Warden of New Canterbury Hall

**1367** Deposed at Canterbury Hall by new Archbishop of Canterbury (Langham); appeal to Pope Urban V fails.

**1368** Rector of Ludgershall

**1369** Receives Bachelor of Divinity

**1370** First Presentation of his doctrine on the Eucharist

**1372** Receives Doctorate of Theology



**1372** Enters service of the crown

**1374** Appointed Rector of Lutterworth

**1374** Appointed to commission to Bruges to negotiate with papal delegation

**1374–1376** Develops "dominion" theory

**1377**(February) Rioting ends trial at St. Paul's  
(May) Pope Gregory XI issues five bulls against Wycliffe  
(December) Wycliffe agrees to "house arrest" at Oxford

**1378** Queen Mother ends Lambeth trial

**1379–1380** Publishes views on the Eucharist

**1381** Withdraws from public to Lutterworth

**1381–1384** Intense work with aides on English translation of Bible

**1382** Blackfriars Synod condemns Wycliffe's writings, followed by purge of Wycliffites at Oxford

**1382–1384** Prolific writing period in both Latin and English

**1382** Suffers first stroke

**1384** Suffers second stroke; dies on New Year's Eve

**1415** The Council of Constance condemns Wycliffe on 267 different heresies

**1428** At papal command, remains of Wycliffe dug up, burned, and scattered on river Swift

## **England**

**1295** England's Model Parliament—Edward I summons bishops, knights, and burgesses from all parishes for first representative parliament

**1306** England expels 100,000 Jews who remained after Edward expulsion order of 1290

**(1307-1327)** Edward II

**1310** England's barons force Edward II to appoint lords ordainers to help him rule

**1310** Parliament rules taxation shall be imposed only by Parliament

**1314** Battle of Bannockburn assures independence of Scotland—30,000 Scotsmen under Robert Bruce VIII rout 100,000 led by Edward II

**1318** At Battle of Dundalk, Ireland's Edward Bruce killed three years after being proclaimed king

**1326** Queen Isabella and her paramour, Roger Mortimer, invade England and capture her husband, Edward II

**1327** Edward II is killed in prison; Isabella's 14-year-old son becomes Edward III

**(1327-1377)** Edward III

**1330** Edward III seizes power, ends regency of Isabella and Mortimer

**1333** Battle of Halidon Hill gives Edward III revenge for his father's defeat at Bannockburn

**1337** Beginning of "Hundred Years War" between England and France—Edward III assumes title of King of France; French king Philip VI contests England's claims to Normandy

**1341** English Parliament divided into Upper House (Lords) and Lower House (Commons)

**1346** Battle of Crecy establishes England as military power; English longbowmen change face of warfare

**1349** Death of William of Ockham, English philosopher, who sowed seeds of independence of church and state

**1351** England removes Pope's power to give English benefits to foreigners

**1353** Parliament's Statute of Praemunrie forbids appeals to the Pope

**1356** Edward, the Black Prince of Wales, destroys French army at Battle of Poitiers

**1362** *Piers Plowman* written by English poet over next 30 years

**1362** English becomes the authorized language of the law courts; French still used for legal documents

**1366** Parliament refuses to pay feudal tribute to Pope

**1366** Statute of Kilkenny forbids marriage between Irish and English

**1370** John Ball in England preaches man's natural equality

**1374** John of Gaunt returns from French wars to become leader of the state

**1376** The Good Parliament

**1376** The Black Prince (son of Edward III) dies

**1377** Edward III dies; 10-year-old son of Black Prince crowned Richard II; Dukes of Lancaster and Gloucester rule

**(1377–1399)** Richard II

**1377** New Parliament reverses acts of "The Good Parliament"

**1377** Parliament levies loll tax that leads to rioting in 1381

**1381** The Peasant Revolt; 30,000 rioters converge on London; ends when Wat Tyler, their leader, is betrayed and killed

**1385** Parliament blocks Richard II from setting up a personal government

**1389** Richard II begins personal rule at age 22

**1389** Statute of Provisors makes papal appointments in England invalid

**1393** Second Statute of Praemunrie prohibits introduction of papal bulls

**1398** Richard II moves toward totalitarianism

**1399** John of Gaunt dies; Richard II confiscates his estates; Gaunt's son, Henry of Bolingbroke, returns from exile and is acclaimed by Parliament as King Henry IV; Richard II dies a year later in prison

**(1399–1413)** Henry IV

**(1413–1422)** Henry V

**1414** Sir Jon Oldcastle (Lord Cobham), disciple of Wycliffe, burned at stake

**1415** At Battle of Agincourt, Henry V leads English archers in victory over larger French cavalry

**1429** Joan of Arc leads small French army to liberate Orleans from English

## **The Church**

**1291** Sacreans (Muslims) capture Accre, last Christian stronghold in Palestine; end of Crusades after 200 years

**1302** "Unam Sanctam," papal bull of Pope Boniface VIII, asserts papal supremacy over every human being

**(1303–1304)** Pope Benedict XI

**(1305–1314)** Pope Clement V

**1309** Pope Clement, a Frenchman, move papal court to Avignon, France, beginning "The Babylonian Captivity," lasting until 1377

**1311** Ecumenical council at Vienna

**1316** Eight Dominicans sent to Ethiopia by Pope to find Prester John, legendary Christian king

**(1316–1334)** Pope John XXII

**1322** Pope forbids counterpoint in church music

**1324** *Defenso Pacis*, by Marsiglio of Padua suggest council, rather than Pope, as prime authority of church

**1328** Louis IV invades Italy and declares Pope John XXII deposed for heresy

**(1328–1330)** Pope Nicholas V

**(1334–1330)** Pope Benedict XII

**(1342–1352)** Pope Clement VI

**(1352–1362)** Pope Innocent VI

**1361** Palace of Popes at Avignon completed after 28 years of construction

**(1362–1370)** Pope Urban V

**(1370–1378)** Pope Gregory XI

**1376** Catherine of Siena, popular laywoman (later a saint), tries to persuade Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome

**1377** Leaving Avignon, Pope Gregory XI moves papal court to Rome; ending the "Babylonian Captivity"

**1378** The Great Schism divides the Catholic Church for 39 years when two opposing popes are elected—Pope Urban V in Rome and Pope Clement VII in Avignon

**1378–1389** Pope Urban VI (in Rome)

**1378–1394** Pope Clement VII (in Avignon)

**(1389–1404)** Pope Boniface IX (in Rome)

**(1394–1417)** Pope Benedict XIII (in Avignon)

**1415** Council of Constance condemns Wycliffe of 267 heresies and demands John Hus recant; he refuses and is burned at the stake

## **World Events**

**1294** Kublai Khan dies after 35-year reign establishing Ming dynasty

**1296** A Genoese prisoner, Marco Polo, writes about his travels to Orient

**1302** King Philip IV of France convenes first Estates-General (Parliament) with all estates represented

- 1307** Dante Alighieri, Italian poet, begins writing *The Divine Comedy*
- 1308** Duns Scotus, Scottish theologian, dies
- c. 1310** Perfection of the mechanical clock
- 1313** Jaques de Molay, grandmaster of the French Knights Templar, burned at stake for alleged heresy
- 1317** Salic law, excluding women from succession to throne, adopted in France
- 1325** Mexico City has its beginning in the city of Tenochtitlan founded by Aztecs in Lake Texcoco
- 1326** First mention of gunpowder (in Venice) for warfare
- 1327** Meister Eckhart, German mystic, dies
- 1338** Declaration of Rhense—Electors of Holy Roman Empire can select emperor without papal intervention
- 1341** Francesco Petrarca, first great humanist, crowned poet laureate in Rome
- 1345** Cathedral of Notre Dame completed in Paris after 182 years of construction
- 1347–1351** The Black Death devastates Europe, killing as many as two-thirds of the population in some parts
- 1350** Till Eulenspiegel, popular German prankster, dies
- 1350** Li Hsing Tao, *The Chalk Circle*, famous Chinese play
- 1353** Arab traveler, Ibn Battuta, visits Africa's Mandingo Empire
- 1353** Giovanni Boccaccio, founder of Italian prose, completes *Decameron*
- 1354** Cola da Rienzi is killed after seven years of trying to bring popular rule to Rome against nobles and the Pope
- 1356** "The Golden Bull" of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV transforms empire from monarchy into aristocratic federation to last 450 years
- 1358** Revolt of French peasants at Jacquerie against oppressive taxes results in wholesale slaughter of serfs
- 1359** First Swedish Riksdag (parliament); all classes represented
- 1360** First francs coined in France
- 1364** Guillaume de Machaut "greatest musician of his day," composes *Mass for Four Voices*
- 1369** Tamerlane (Timur the Lame), 33, makes himself master of Samarkand, in Turkestan and builds army

that will conquer much of Asia.

c. **1379** Brethren of the Common Life organized

**1381** Venice defeats Genoa, beginning greatness of Venetian republic

**1383** Japanese "No" drama pioneered by Motokiyo Zeami, 20, still performed 600 years later

**1384** Jadviga, daughter of King Louis I, crowned "king" of Poland

**1387** Chaucer begins work on ***The Canterbury Tales***

**1392** Yi dynasty, that will rule Korea until 1910, founded by warlord, I Songgye

**1398** John Hus lectures on theology at Prague University

**1405** Tamerlane dies, his empire quickly dissolves

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## From the Archives: Five Bulls of Pope Gregory XI Against Wycliffe

On May 22, 1377, Pope Gregory XI issued five bulls condemning the work of John Wycliffe. Three of the bulls were sent jointly to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury, who held the ecclesiastical power in England, and to the Bishop of London, William Courtenay, who was eager to carry out the Pope's wishes. Needing political support, the Pope issued a similar bull to King Edward III, who died before he received it. Wishing to put pressure on Oxford, Gregory sent the final bull to the university's chancellor. The following is the bull sent to the chancellor:

"Gregory the Bishop, the Servant of God's Servants, to his well-beloved Sons, the Chancellor and University of Oxford, in the Diocese of Lincoln, Greeting and Apostolical Benediction.

"We are constrained both to marvel and lament, that you, who—considering the favours and privileges granted to your university of Oxford by the apostolic see, and your knowledge of the Scriptures, the wide ocean whereof (through the favour of the Lord) you so successfully explore—ought to be champions and defenders of the orthodox faith (without which there is no salvation of souls), through negligence and sloth on your part allow cockle to spring among the pure wheat in the field of your glorious university aforesaid, and (what is worse) to grow up; and take no means (as we were lately informed) for rooting out of the same; to the great blemishing of your fair name, the peril of your souls, the contempt of the Roman church, and the decay of the orthodox faith. And (what grieveth us still more bitterly) the increase of the said cockle is perceived and felt in Rome before it is in England, where (however) the means of extirpating it ought to be applied. It hath, in truth, been intimated to us by many trustworthy persons (who are much grieved on the subject), that one John Wickcliff, rector of Lutterworth, in the diocese of Lincoln, professor of divinity (would that he were not rather a master of errors), hath gone to such a pitch of detestable folly, that he feareth not to teach, and publicly preach, or rather to vomit out of the filthy dungeon of his breast, certain erroneous and false propositions and conclusions, savoring even of heretical pravity, tending to weaken and overthrow the status of the whole church, and even the secular government. Some of these, with a change only in certain of the terms, seem to be identical with the perverse opinions and unlearned doctrine of Marsilius de Padua and John de Ghent of cursed memory, whose book was reprobated and condemned by our predecessor of happy memory, Pope John XXII. These opinions, I say, he is circulating in the realm of England, so glorious for power and abundance of wealth, but still more so for the shining purity of its faith, and wont to produce men illustrious for their clear and sound knowledge of the Scriptures, ripe in gravity of manners, conspicuous for devotion, and bold defenders of the Catholic faith; and some of Christ's flock he hath been defiling therewith, and misleading from the straight path of the sincere faith into the pit of perdition.

"Wherefore, being (as in duty bound) unwilling to connive at so deadly a pest, for which if not at once checked, yea, plucked up by the roots, it would be too late to apply a remedy when it had infected multitudes—we strictly charge and command your university by our apostolic letters, in virtue of your holy obedience, and on the pain of forfeiting all the graces, indulgences, and privileges, ever grant to you and your society by the said see, that you never again permit conclusions and propositions to be asserted or propounded which bear unfavorably on good works and faith, yea, though the proposers of them may strive to defend them under some curious disguise of words or terms; and that by our authority you seize or cause to be seized the said John, and send him under trusty keeping to our venerable

brethren the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London, or either of them: and moreover that any recusants\* [\* ***Those who refuse to obey established authority***] in the said university, subject to your jurisdiction (if such there be, which God forbid!) who may be infected with these errors, if they obstinately persist in them, that you do (as in duty bound) firmly and anxiously proceed to a like or other seizure and transmission of them, so that you may supply your lack of diligence, which hath been hitherto remiss as touching the premises, and may obtain beside the reward of the divine recompense, the favour and goodwill also of us and the see aforesaid. Given at St. Mary's the Greater, Rome, eleventh calendar of June, and the seventh year of our pontificate. (May 22, A.D. 1377.)"

To respond to the Pope's bulls, Wycliffe appeared before the Archbishop at Lambeth Palace. He began his ***Protestatio*** with:

"I profess and claim to be by the grace of God a sound (that is, a true and orthodox) Christian and while there is breath in my body I will speak forth and defend the law of it. I am ready to defend my convictions even unto death. In these my conclusions I have followed the Sacred Scriptures and the holy doctors, and if my conclusions can be proved to be opposed to the faith, willingly will I retract them."

He then continued:

"I deny that the Pope has any right to political dominion: that he has any perpetual civil dominion: that he can qualify or disqualify simply by his bulls."

Later Wycliffe wrote:

"As they ought to be, the papal bulls will be superseded by the Holy Scriptures. The veneration of men for the laws of the papacy, as well as for the opinions of modern doctors ... will be restrained within due limits. What concern have the faithful with writings of this sort, unless they are honestly deduced from the fountain of Scripture? By pursuing such a course, it is not only in our power to reduce the mandates of prelates and Popes to their just place, but the errors of these new religious orders also might be corrected and the worship of Christ well purified and elevated."



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## From the Archives: A Short Rule of Life for Priests, Lords, and Laborers

The three “estates of the realm” in medieval England were the priest, the knight, and the laborer. In a tract, written in English, John Wycliffe addressed all three. He showed how the lessons of the faith apply to the highest and the lowest. His tract is entitled “A Short Rule of Life, for each man in general, and for Priests, and Lords, and Laborers in special, how each shall be saved in his degree.” The following condensation is adapted from Wycliffe’s original tract.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“At the end of the day, think about how you have offended God... and amend it while you may. And think... how graciously God has saved you; not for your desert, but for his own mercy and goodness ... And pray for grace that you may dwell and end in his true and holy service, and real love, and according to your skill, to teach others to do the same.

“If you are a PRIEST, and especially a curate, live a holy life, surpassing other men in holy prayer, desire and thinking, in holy speaking, counseling, and true teaching. And that God’s commands, his Gospel, and virtues be ever in your mouth; ... and that your deeds be so rightful, that no man shall blame them with reason, but that your open deeds be a true book to all subjects and unlearned men, to serve God and to do his commands thereby. Living a good life stirs rude men more than true preaching by word only. And waste not your goods in great feasts of rich men, but live a humble life, of poor men’s alms and goods, both in meat,

drink, and clothes: and the remainder give truly to poor men that have not of their own, and may not labor for feebleness or sickness, and thus you shall be a true priest both to God and man.

“If you are a LORD, look that you live a rightful life in your own person, both in respect to God and to man, keeping the commands of God, doing the works of mercy, ruling well your five senses, and doing reason and equity, and good conscience to all men. In the second place, govern well your wife, your children, and your household attendants in God’s law ... that they may be examples of holiness and righteousness to all others; for you shall be condemned for their evil life and their evil example, unless you amend it according to your might. In the third place, govern well your tenants, and maintain them in right and reason, and be merciful to them in their rents and worldly mersements, and do not let your officers do them wrong, nor be extortionate to them. And chastise in good manner, those who rebel against God’s commands and virtuous life... And love, reward, praise, and cherish the true and virtuous of life, more than if you sought only your own profit. And reverence and maintain truly, according to your skill and might, God’s law and true preachers thereof, and God’s servants, in rest and peace ... And warn the people of false prophets and hypocrites that deceive Christians in faith, virtuous life, and worldly goods.

“If you are a LABORER, live in meekness, and truly and willingly do your labor, that if your lord or your master be a heathen man, he, by your willing and true service, may not have to grudge against you, nor slander your God, nor Christendom (Christianity), but rather be constrained to come to Christendom. And serve not to a Christian lord with grudging, and serve him not only in his presence, but truly and willingly in his absence. Not only for worldly dread or worldly reward, but for the fear of God, conscience, and a reward in heaven. For that God who put you in each service, knows what state is best for you, and will reward you more than all other lords may, if you do this truly and willingly for his ordinance... And beware of wrath, of cursing, and of speaking in passion against man or beast; and ever keep patience, and meekness, and charity, both to God and to man.

“Thus each in the three estates ought to live, to save himself, and to help other men: and thus should good life, rest, peace, and love, be among Christian men, and they be saved, and heathen men soon converted, and God magnified greatly in all nations and religions that now despise him and his law, for the false living of wicked Christian men.”

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator

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## From the Archives: Wycliffe Causes Controversy Over Eucharist

Although Wycliffe questioned many practices of the church of his day, his most controversial position was on transubstantiation. This was the belief that, upon the words of the priestly consecration in the Mass, the eucharistic elements of the bread and wine became the substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ while keeping the appearance of bread and wine. Typical of Wycliffe's comments on the Eucharist were the following:

"The nature of the bread is not destroyed by what is done by the priest, it is only elevated so as to become a substance more honored. The bread while becoming by virtue of Christ's words the body of Christ does not cease to be bread. When it has become sacramentally the body of Christ, it remains bread substantially."

"Nobody on earth is able to see Christ in the consecrated Host with the bodily eye, but by faith."

"This same opinion is confirmed by blessed Augustine's statement (in *Decretum*): 'What is seen is the bread and the cup which the eyes renounce; but what faith demands is that the bread is the body of Christ and the cup is his blood. These are called sacramental elements for this reason that in them one thing is seen and another is understood. What is seen has bodily appearance, what is understood has a spiritual fruit.'"

"The consecrated Host we priests make and bless is not the body of the Lord but an effectual sign of it. It is not to be understood that the body of Christ comes down from heaven to the Host consecrated in every church."

"Some expressions in Scripture must be understood plainly and without figure, but there are others that must be understood in a figurative sense. Just as Christ calls John the Baptist Elias, and St. Paul says that Christ was a rock, and Moses in Genesis 41 that the seven good kine are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years. You will meet with such modes of expression constantly in Scripture and in these expressions, without a doubt, the production is made figuratively."

"Therefore, let every man wisely, with much prayer and great study, and also with charity read the words of God in the Holy Scriptures ... Christ saith, 'I am the true vine.' Wherefore do you not worship the vine for God, as you do the bread? Wherein was Christ a true vine? Or, wherein was the bread Christ's body? It was in figurative speech, which is hidden to the understanding of the sinners. And thus, as Christ became not a material nor an earthly vine, nor a material vine the body of Christ, so neither is material bread changed from its substance to the flesh and blood of Christ."

"If bread consecrated and unconsecrated be mixed together, the heretic cannot tell the difference between the natural bread and his supposed quality without a substance, any more than any of us can distinguish in such case between the bread that has been consecrated and that which has not. Mice, however, have an innate knowledge of the fact. They know that the substance of the bread is retained as at first. But our unbelievers have not even such knowledge. They never know what bread or what wine has been consecrated, except as they

see it consecrated. But what, I ask, can be supposed to have moved the Lord Jesus Christ thus to confound and destroy all natural discernment in the senses and minds of the worshipers?"

"In the Mass creed, it is said, 'I believe in one God only, Jesus Christ, by whom all things be made' ... And you then, who are an earthly man, by what reason may you say that you make your Maker? You say every day that you make of bread the body of the Lord, flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, God and man; ... If you make the body of the Lord in these words, 'Hoc est corpus meum,' you yourself must be the person of Christ or else there is a false God ... If you cannot make the work that God made in Genesis, how shall you make Him that made the works? And you have no words of authority."

"Just as when the cup is seen we break forth into profound worship, so also when the consecrated Host is seen we do the same, not on account of the fact that that very cup has been consecrated by the priest, but because of the excellent sacrament hidden in the vessel. Thus when we see the Host we ought to believe not that it is itself the body of Christ, but that the body of Christ is sacramentally concealed in it."

### **On Preaching**

Preaching, according to Wycliffe, was the best way to spread "God's law"—the Scriptures—among more people. He himself was a noted preacher. And he commissioned a trusted cadre of educated "poor preachers" to read the Scriptures and to speak the truth in the language of the people.

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

"Prayer is good, but not so good as preaching; and accordingly, in preaching and also in praying, in the administering of the Sacraments, and the learning of God's law, and the rendering of a good example by purity of life, in these should stand the life of a good priest."

"Some men who preach tell the tales that they find in the saints' lives without teaching Holy Writ. And such things often please more the people. But we believe there is a better way—to avoid such that please and, instead, to trust in God and to tell surely His law and specially His Gospel. And, since these words are God's words, they should be taken as believed, and God's words will give men new life more than the other words that are for pleasure."

"O marvelous power of the Divine Seed which overpowers strong men in arms, softens hard hearts, and renews and changes into divine men, those men who had been brutalized by sins, and departed infinitely far from God. Obviously such miraculous power could never be worked by the word of a priest, if the Spirit of Life and the Eternal Word did not, above all things else, work with it."

### **On Absolution**

"There is no greater heresy for a man than to believe that he is absolved from sin if he gives money, or because a priest lays his hand on his head and says: 'I absolve you;' for you must

be sorrowful in your heart, else God does not absolve you.”

### **On Indulgences**

“It is plain to me that our prelates in granting indulgences do commonly blaspheme the wisdom of God, pretending in their avarice and folly that they understand what they really know not. They chatter on the subject of grace as if it were a thing to be bought and sold like an ass or an ox; by so doing they learn to make a merchandise of selling pardons, the devil having availed himself of an error in the schools to introduce after this manner heresies in morals.”

“I confess that the indulgences of the Pope, if they are what they are pretended to be, are a manifest blasphemy, inasmuch as he claims a power to save men almost without limit, and not only to mitigate the penalties of those who have sinned by granting them the aid of absolutions and indulgences, that they should never come to purgatory, but to give command to the holy angels that, when the soul is separated from the body, they may carry it without delay to its everlasting rest.”

“Covet not your neighbor’s goods, despise him not, slander him not, scorn him not, belie him not, backbite him not, ... But many think if they give a penny to a pardoner, they shall be forgiven the breaking of all the commandments of God, and therefore they take no heed how they keep them. But I say to you for certain, though you have priests and friars to sing for you, and though you each day hear many Masses, and found chantries and colleges, and go on pilgrimages all your life, and give all your goods to pardoners; all this shall not bring your soul to heaven.”

“Will, then, a man shrink from acts of licentiousness and fraud, if he believes that soon after, by the aid of a little money bestowed on friars, an active absolution from the crime he has committed may be obtained?”

### **On Confessionals**

“It is not confession to man but to God, who is the true Priest of souls, that is the great need of sinful man. Private confession and the whole system of medieval confession was not ordered by Christ and was not used by the Apostles, for of the three thousand who were turned to Christ’s Law on the Day of Pentecost, not one of them was confessed to a priest ... It is God who is the forgiver.”

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

### **On Faith**

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

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator

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## From the Archives: In the Year of Death, Wycliffe Wrote to Pope Urban VI

This translation from the Latin appears in *The Prosecution of John Wyclif* by Joseph H. Dalmus, published by Yale University Press. 1952. Used by permission.

Wycliffe had been summoned to Rome by Pope Urban VI. Using Wycliffe's poor health as an excuse, the king blocked the summons and Wycliffe wrote the following letter to the Pope. It was written just months before Wycliffe's death on New Year's Eve, 1384.

"I am happy to reveal fully to anyone and especially to the Roman pontiff the faith I hold, for I suppose if it is orthodox, he will graciously confirm this faith and if it be erroneous he will correct it. But I submit that the gospel of Christ is the body of the law of God, that Christ, indeed, who directly gave this gospel, I believe to be true God and true man, and in this the law of the gospel excels all other parts of Scripture. Again I submit that the Roman pontiff, inasmuch as he is Christ's highest vicar on earth, is among pilgrims most bound to this law of the gospel. For the majority of Christ's disciples are not judged according to worldly greatness, but according to the imitation of Christ in their moral life. Again, from out this heart of the Lord's law I plainly conclude that Christ was the poorest of men during the time of his pilgrimage and that he eschewed all worldly dominion. This is clear from the faith of the gospel, Matthew 8 and 2 Corinthians 8. From all this I deduce that never should any of the faithful imitate the pope himself nor any of the saints except insofar as he may have imitated the Lord Jesus Christ. For Peter, Paul, and the sons of Zebedee, by seeking worldly dignity, brought that sort of imitation into disrepute, so that they are not to be imitated in those errors. From this I infer, as a counsel, that the pope should leave temporal dominion to the secular arm, and to this he should effectually exhort his clergy. For in such wise did Christ have signified through his apostles.

"If in the above I have erred, I am willing humbly to be corrected, even through death if necessary. And if I were able to travel at will in person, I should like humbly to visit the Roman pontiff. But God has obliged me to the contrary, and he has always taught me to obey God rather than men. But since God has given our pope true and evangelical instincts, we should pray that those instincts are not extinguished through deceitful counsel, nor that the pope or cardinals be moved to do anything contrary to the law of the Lord. Therefore, let us ask God, the lord of everything created, that he so inspire our pope, Urban VI, as he began, so that he and his clergy may imitate the Lord Jesus Christ in their moral lives, so that they may effectually teach the people to faithfully imitate them in this. And let us pray spiritually that our pope be preserved from malicious counsel, for we also know that a man's enemies are of his household, and God does not suffer us to be tempted above that which we are able, much less does he require of any creature that he do that which he can not, for such is the manifest condition of Antichrist."

## From Milton's "Areopagitica"

In defense of liberty of unlicensed printing, John Milton made a famous speech to the English Parliament in 1644, entitled *Aeropagitica*. In its published form, it has become a classic for freedom of speech and for individual rights. The following excerpt refers to John Wycliffe:

“Why else was this Nation chosen before any other, that out of her, as out of Sion, should be proclaimed and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all Europe? And had it not been the obstinate perverseness of our prelates against the divine and admirable spirit of Wickliff, to suppress him as a schismatic and innovator, perhaps neither the Bohemian Huss and Jerome, no nor the name of Luther or Calvin, had been ever known: the glory of reforming all our neighbors had been completely ours.”

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator

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## From the Archives: Why Wycliffe Translated the Bible Into English

For John Wycliffe, the Bible became the sole authority for all of life. He wrote:

“Holy Scripture is the preeminent authority for every Christian, and the rule of faith and of all human perfection.”

Again, he wrote:

“Forasmuch as the Bible contains Christ, that is all that is necessary for salvation, it is necessary for all men, nor for priests alone. It alone is the supreme law that is to rule Church, State, and Christian life, without human traditions and statutes.”

Wycliffe developed five rules for studying the Bible:

“Obtain a reliable text, understand the logic of Scripture, compare the parts of Scripture with one another, maintain an attitude of humble seeking, and receive the instruction of the Spirit.”

Wycliffe felt that the laity could not know the basics of the faith unless they knew the Bible. And they could best know the Bible when it was in their own language:

“Christ and His Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them. It is certain that the truth of the Christian faith becomes more evident the more faith itself is known. Therefore, the doctrine should not only be in Latin but in the vulgar tongue and, as the faith of the church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in a true sense the better. The laity ought to understand the faith and, as doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand.”

## From the Midland English Translation of Wycliffe’s Bible

And so Wycliffe and his fellow scholars translated the entire Bible from the Latin Vulgate into the Midland English dialect.

As you interpret for yourself the following biblical texts from Wycliffe’s own early English, you may wish to compare the passages with the King James version.

Start with a familiar text (John 3:16):

“Forsothe God so louede the world, that he gaf his oon bigetun sone, that ech man that bileueth in to him perische not, but haue euerlastynge lyf.”

And the message to the shepherds on the first Christmas morning (Luke 2:9–11):

“And loo! the aungel of the Lord stood by sydis hem, and the clerenesse of God schynede aboute hem; and thei dredden with greet drede. And the aungel seide to hem, Nyle ye drede;



lo! sothli I euangelise to you a grete ioye, that schal be to al peple. For a sauour is borun to day to vs. that is Crist the Lord, in the cite of Dauith."

Or the "love" passage (1 Corinthians 13:1–13):

"If I speke with tungis of men and aungels, sothli I haue not charite, I am maad as bras sownnyng, or a symbal tynkyng. And if I schal haue prophesye, and haue knowun alle mysteries, and al kunnyng, or science, and if I schal haue al feith, so that I bere ouere hillis fro o place to another, forsoth if I schal not haue charite, I am nogt. And if I schal departe alle my goodis into metis of pore men, and if I schal bytake my body, so that I brenne, forsothe if I schal not haue charite, it profitith to me no thing. Charite is pacient, it is benygne or of good will, charite enuyeth not, it doth not gyle, it is not inblowyn with pride, it is not ambitious, or coueitous of worschipis, it sekith not the thingis that ben her owne, it is not stirid to wraththe, it thenkith no yuel, it ioyeth not in wickidnesse, forsoth it ioyeth tog idere to treuthe; it suffrieth alle thingis, it bileueth alle thingis, it hopith alle thingis, it susteyneth alle thingis. Charite fallith not down, where prophesyen schulen be voydid, either langagis schulen ceesse, ether science schal be destroyed. Forsoth of party we han knowen, and of party we prophesier, forsothe whanne that schal come that is perfyte, that thing that is a party, schal be avoydid. Whanne I was a litil child, I spak as a litil child, I vnderstood as a litil child, I thouyte as a litil child; forsoth whanne I was maad man, I auoydide tho thingis that weren of a litil child. Forsoth we seen now by a myrour in a derknesse, thanne forsothe face to face; now I knowe of party, thanne forsoth I schal knowe, as and I am knowyn. Now forsothe dweller feith, hope, and charite, the thre; forsoth the mooste of the is charite."

### **What Medieval Critics Said of Wycliffe's Bible**

Translating the Bible into the "vulgar" tongue of the people was heresy, because the Church felt that only the sacred tongue of Latin was acceptable. And so, Henry Knighton, a Catholic chronicler of Wycliffe's times, wrote:

"Christ gave His Gospel to the clergy and the learned doctors of the Church so that they might give it to the laity and to weaker persons, according to the message of the season and personal need. But this Master John Wyclif translated the Gospel from Latin into the English—the Angle not the angel language. And Wyclif, by thus translating the Bible, made it the property of the masses and common to all and more open to the laity, and even to women who were able to read ... And so the pearl of the Gospel is thrown before swine and trodden underfoot and what is meant to be the treasure both of clergy and laity is now become a joke of both. The jewel of the clergy has been turned into the sport of the laity, so that what used to be the highest gift of the clergy and the learned members of the Church has become common to the laity."

Some years later, the Archbishop of Canterbury Arundel was even more bitter in his criticism:

"That pestilent and most wretched John Wycliffe, of damnable memory, a child of the old devil, and himself a child or pupil of Antichrist, who, while he lived, walking in the vanity of his mind—with a few other adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, which I shall not give—crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue."

This same Archbishop Arundel summoned a synod of clergy which in 1408 gave this finding:

"Since it is dangerous, as St. Jerome witnesses, to translate the text of Holy Scripture from one language into another, because in such translations the same meaning is not easily retained in all particulars... we decree and ordain that no one shall in future translate on his

authority any text of Scripture into the English tongue or into any other tongue, by way of book, booklet, or treatise. Nor shall any man read, in public or in private, this kind of book, booklet, or treatise, now recently composed in the time of the said John Wycliffe ... under penalty of the greater excommunication.”

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator

### Bible Translation Since John Wycliffe

Dr. George M. Cowan is a long-time student of translation and a translator of the Bible himself. He is past president of Wycliffe Bible Translators.

The 14th Century English translation of the Bible which John Wycliffe inspired and organized was limited in its outreach. And although his translation did not achieve a reformation in England unaided, it did prepare many for the movement when it came a century later.

With the invention of printing around 1450 A.D., limited and costly handwritten manuscript copies of the Bible, as in Wycliffe's day, were replaced with large editions of relatively inexpensive Scriptures. The Church could no longer contain the "heresies" of the Reformers. By 1500 A.D., printed texts of the Latin Vulgate Bible appeared, followed by printed translations of the Bible in German, Italian, Catalan and Czech. The Word in the people's tongue was spreading.

Following the Renaissance, the publication of the entire Old Testament in Hebrew in 1487 and Erasmus' edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, the Reformation translations of Luther in German in 1522 and Tyndale in English in 1526 were based on the original languages rather than the Latin Vulgate version of the Church.

Luther's translation became the model for translations by his followers into Danish, Swedish, Icelandic and Finnish. Tyndale's translation began an era of intense translation and Bible publication that changed the course of English history. One version, the Geneva Bible, went through 200 editions, with one or more editions every year for 56 consecutive years.

The King James version in 1611 denominated the field for two and a half centuries and was the basis for the English Revised, the American Standard, and the Revised Standard Versions. Between 1611 and 1946 over 500 different translations of at least one book of the Bible have been published in English.

The enthusiasm for Bible translation started by the Reformation was confined largely to the languages of Europe. Of the 34 languages receiving translations in the next 275 years, threequarters of them were European. This, in spite of continued opposition from the Church. Luther was excommunicated, Tyndale forced to flee to the continent. The French, Spanish, and Portuguese Bibles had to be produced outside their home countries.

The Reformation failed to provide the missionary vision for translation into non-European languages. The Protestant churches were looking inward and settled down to enjoy the Word in their own languages. The majority believed that the Great Commission was for the First Century apostles only.

The era of exploration and colonialism during the 15th to 17th centuries was primarily an expansion of Roman Europe. The Catholic monastic orders, especially the Jesuits, were the missionizing force of the Church. Scripture use was limited to the clergy and in Latin. Translations of liturgical selections, such as the Lord's Prayer, were made in some languages, but no translation of portions of Scripture is listed for Catholics before 1800 A.D.

Beginning in the 17th Century, Protestant European countries became involved in overseas expansion. The first translation of Scripture in a non-European language for the purpose of evangelism was

Matthew's Gospel in Malay, done by a director of the Dutch East Indies Company in 1629. The first entire Bible in a new language for missionary use was the work of John Eliot of England in the Massachusetts language of America in 1663. Ziegenbalg, a Danish missionary, translated the first Testament in a language of India in 1717.

## **Mission and Translation**

But the Protestant emphasis in Scripture for the laity in their own language did not develop into aggressive pioneer translation into other languages until the believers of Europe awakened to their worldwide missionary responsibility.

William Carey, deeply moved by reading reports of Count Zinzendorf and the Moravian missionaries, followed their example and went to India. Carey believed the translation of the Bible was the most effective way to advance Christianity and demonstrated it from 1793 to 1834 in India. He personally translated or helped translate Scripture in over 20 languages of India, and with his colleagues translated and printed Scripture in 45 languages and dialects in Asia, in 35 of these for the first time.

Carey's "Enquiry Into the Obligation of Christians To Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen" resulted in the formation by 1824 of twelve missionary societies in Europe and America. Beginning in 1804, Bible societies were formed in sending countries, for the translation, publication and distribution of the Scriptures.

Bible translation soon was worldwide. Luke's Gospel in Tahitian, 1818, was the first Scripture in a language of Oceania. Copies sold for three gallons of coconut oil in Tahiti. Two translations of the whole Bible in Chinese appeared in consecutive years, 1822 and 1823, by Marshman in India and Morrison and Milnes in China respectively. An Aymara professor, encouraged by the British and Foreign Bible Society agent, James Thomson, translated the first published Gospel of Luke in an indigenous language of Latin America in 1829.

The Malagasy Bible was completed in 1835 by the London Missionary Society before they fled for their lives. In the following 25 years without missionaries present in Malagasy, that translation resulted in a growth from handfuls to thousands of believers in thriving churches. The Yoruba Bible, 1884, was the first Bible in an African language, done by local Christians aided by missionaries, under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Crowther, the first African bishop of the Church of England.

In summary: Before 1800 A.D. only 67 languages had any published translation of Scripture, and only 40 languages had the whole Bible. Between 1800 and 1830, 86 more languages received Scripture for the first time, more than during all 18 centuries preceding. Sixty-six of these were languages outside Europe.

What had begun continued to accelerate: Some 456 languages received Scripture for the first time in the 100 years of the 19th Century; 520 more in the first 50 years of the 20th, and almost 600 more in the 25 years ending 1975. By 1982, the entire Bible had been published in 279 languages, the New Testament in 551 more, and at least one book of the Bible in 933, all since the invention of printing.

Certain contrasts may highlight historical trends.

Beginning with Wycliffe's translation into English and until about the year 1800, the majority of translations were made for long-established churches of Europe, by educated believers translating from foreign language into their own mother-tongue, in order to combat error and corruption in existing churches, and as part of a movement to gain independence from foreign ecclesiastical control.

After 1800 the majority of translations were made for newly-formed churches outside of Europe, by

missionaries translating into a language they had learned, for evangelism and training of both leaders and laity, and with a view to the churches handling their own affairs and carrying on their own ministries.

## **Current Translation and Trends**

First-time translation continues with one or more books of the Bible appearing in a new language every two weeks. Some are for pioneer evangelism, others for missionary churches still without the Bible in the language of the people. Bible translation often brings renewal to such churches and a new sense of independence.

Navajo Christians, for example, found they could run their own churches without the missionary, once they had the Word in Navajo. The indigenous church movement, strongly reinforced by political independence of former colonies, has resulted in increased demand for Scriptures in the indigenous language.

Who are the people involved in the modern Bible translation movement? There is a growing number of experienced consultants, trained people who can explain the Biblical text and evaluate the quality of a translation in another language, available to help the translators.

The bulk of those translating are committed Christians, from all walks of life, who believe supremely in the importance of giving the Scriptures to people in their own language, and have taken training in the Bible, in language learning and analysis, and in principles of translation. The 574 translation projects listed by the United Bible Societies in 1982 involved members of around 200 different denominations and missions. Living Bibles International is currently producing popular-language translations in 110 languages.

Mother-tongue speakers of the language into which translation is being made are indispensable to all aspects of translation. In fact, in recent years, a high percentage of translations are being done by national believers.

Bible translation as a career became an option in 1942 with the formation of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, an organization with Bible translation as its primary commitment and means for fulfilling the Great Commission. A sister organization, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, was organized to give the necessary training and field supervision. Translators, literacy specialists and support workers of many different skills, from 34 countries, have teamed together to produce New Testaments and parts of the Old Testament in 200 languages. They are currently working in 761 more languages spoken in 40 different countries. The training is offered in four American universities, in England, Germany, France, Brazil, Japan and Australia.

Thousands of missionaries, translators and consultants, serving under scores of other organizations have had this specialized training for pioneer translation and literacy work in previously unwritten languages. Where traditional missions have not always been structured to give translation a proper emphasis, special Bible translation organizations have now begun within four different denominational constituencies in America. Christians in Nigeria, Ghana, Brazil, Philippines, Cameroun, Kenya, Korea and Papua New Guinea have started national Bible translating organizations.

The Roman Catholic Church has changed in its attitude toward the use of vernacular languages, reading of Scripture by the laity, and the translation of the Bible, especially since Vatican II. Of the 574 projects listed by the United Bible Societies in 1982, Roman Catholics were actively involved in 133 either as translators or as reviewers.

Books summarizing insights from linguistic research and information theory, special exegetical helps,

commentary compilations, a quarterly journal for translators, and computerized Greek lexicons and grammatical analyses are available. Computer and word processing equipment for manuscript preparation, typesetting and proofreading are becoming routine.

Publication and distribution channels are multiplying, including translations on cassettes. Increasing demand for Scriptures in major languages limits the percentage of the United Bible Society budget available for pioneer translations in minority languages. Other publishers now underwrite a major part of first-time publication costs. The World Home Bible League and the New York International Bible Society, for example, have now financed pioneer translations in 364 languages. The 20th Century is seeing unprecedented translation, publication, and distribution of the Bible.

## The Task Remaining

The ultimate goal of the Bible translation movement is that every person, however humble, should have access if not to read, at least to hear read, the Word of God given by the Holy Spirit to the Church in the Old and New Testament texts. Optimally this should be in the language each individual understands best.

But what are the dimensions of the task? Of the 5,103 languages spoken in the world in 1978, 212 had a good Bible, 422 had a good New Testament, 35 had Scripture which needed revision, in 830 languages translation was in progress, 168 were spoken by bilinguals who could use Scripture available in some other language, 157 were spoken only by people so old that they would probably be gone before a translation could be made, and the remaining 3,279 languages had nothing yet. Of these 3,279 languages, 634 had been investigated and their need definitely determined. The remaining 2,645 are without Scripture and presumed to need a translation unless linguistic and sociocultural studies indicate otherwise.

Methods to speed up adaptation or translation for related languages are being developed. Computers, for example. From a good translation in one language an intelligible rough draft in another related language produced by computer can help a trained speaker of the second language produce a faithful yet readable translation sooner. Recently speakers of three different but related languages in Nigeria, working with an expatriate translation-consultant team, produced simultaneously New Testaments in the Izi, Eza, and Ikwo languages. A similar procedure is now being tried out in a family of languages in Guatemala.

Languages without the Scriptures should not be overlooked in areas closed to missionaries. History, Eric Fenn notes, shows us that in countries like India, China, Burma, Korea, Japan and Tibet translation of Scriptures "preceded the opening of the country to organized missionary work." The scriptures have their own independent witness. People have come to faith through reading Scripture.

Churches have been started without missionaries, but with Scripture. The authors of *Church Growth in Latin America* tell of churches and congregations being established solely through the testimony of a Bible reader who had shared with others the reality of his discovery. "The pattern was clear: First a Bible, then a convert, then a church." But if the Bible is never translated, it will never be distributed.

Mission strategists are emphasizing the need to plant churches in each people group, working with the church until it has adequate members and resources to evangelize the non-Christians within its own group without outside assistance. The one and only, all-purpose resource provided by God to make this possible is the Bible. Bible translation needs should be a consideration in every cross-cultural church planting program. There is no substitute for Scripture in the language of the people.

"There are a great many reasons why the world should have the Bible," William Nevins wrote over 100 years ago in *Practical Thoughts*. "I wonder that we who have the Bible, and think so much of it, and have such means of multiplying and circulating copies of it, do not resolve at once to attempt, within a

reasonable period, to give it to the world, since the world can only have it by the gift of those in whose possession it now is.”

Surely John Wycliffe would applaud such a resolve!

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## Recommended Resources: John Wycliffe

Joseph H. Dalmus, *The Prosecution of John Wyclif* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1952) The author's original research gives a fresh perspective on key events, personalities, and controversies in the life of John Wycliffe. Very little on Wycliffe's translating the Bible.

Anne Hudson, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983) This is the first of four volumes presenting sermons attributed to John Wycliffe and appearing in the original Midland English dialect in which Wycliffe wrote. Recommended for scholarly study.

K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (English Universities Press Ltd. at St. Paul's House, London, 1952) This brief but respectable biography discusses the early Protestant awakenings in England through the biography of John Wycliffe.

George M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe* (AMS Press, 1975, reprint of 1900 London edition) Author describes many aspects of life in 14th Century England and how Wycliffe influenced, and was influenced by, his times.

Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible* (And Other Medieval Biblical Versions) (Cambridge University Press, 1920, 1966) This classic work in the historical background of the English Bible sets the religious, academic and social scene.

G. H. W. Parker, *The Morning Star* (Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation) (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1965) A study of the mid-14th Century church, including Wycliffe, John Hus, and other leaders in the pre-Reformation era.

John Stacey, *John Wyclif* (AMS Press, 1979, reprint of 1964 edition by Westminster Press) A fairly recent, readable and recommendable biography of Wycliffe.

Matthew Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform* (Westminster Press, 1953) The part of this book devoted to Wycliffe includes a brief biography, plus two of Wycliffe's significant works, "On the Pastoral Office" and "The Eucharist," translated into modern English.

Gotthard Lechler, *John Wycliffe and His English Precursors* (AMS Press reprint of 1884 English edition). A definitive work on the life and thought of Wycliffe. Dated, scholarly, but good.

Herbert Workman, *John Wyclif, A Study of the English Medieval Church* (2 vols.) (Shoe String, 1966, reprint of Clarendon Press edition, Oxford, 1926) A classic work, often quoted, as well as challenged, with emphasis on Wycliffe's attitude toward the Scripture.

Douglas Wood, *The Evangelical Doctor* (Evangelical Press, England) Publication date not announced yet. Our editors found manuscript progress most readable and thoughtful.



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## The Parson

Reprinted from *Adventures in English Literature* by R.B. Inglis and Dr. J. Spear; Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., Copyright 1958.

Since Chaucer and Wycliffe were contemporaries, scholars debate whether Chaucer's "Parson's Tale" in the *Canterbury Tales* is a disguised Wycliffite sermon. The Parson is introduced in the epic with the words, "I smelle a Lollere in the wynd." Some feel The Parson is Chaucer's tribute to Wycliffe. The following is from the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* and is adapted from the original Midland English by Ruth M. Stauffer.

A kindly Parson took the journey too.  
He was a scholar, learned, wise, and true.  
And rich in holiness though poor in gold.  
A gentle priest: whenever he was told  
That poor folks could not meet their tithes that year,  
He paid them up himself; for priests, it's clear  
Could be content with little, in God's way.  
He lived Christ's Gospel truly every day,  
And taught his flock, and preached what Christ had said.  
And even though his parish was widespread,  
With farms remote, and houses far asunder,  
He never stopped for rain or even for thunder;  
But visited each home where trouble came:  
The rich or poor to him were all the same.  
He always went on foot, with staff in hand;  
For as their minister, he took this stand:  
No wonder that iron rots if gold should rust!  
That is, a priest in whom the people trust  
Must not be base, or what could you expect  
Of weaker folk? The Shepherd must perfect  
His life in holiness that all his sheep  
May follow him, although the way is steep,  
And win at last to heaven. Indeed, I'm sure  
You could not find a minister more pure.  
He was a Christian both in deed and thought;  
He lived himself the Golden Rule he taught.