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Question 67 - Who was John Wycliffe?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

67. Who was John Wycliffe?

Wycliff, John – (c. 1320-1384), “The Morning Star of the Reformation,” born of Saxon blood in England. Entered Oxford as a student, and later became master. Seems to have been connected with Oxford the rest of his life, and esteemed the ablest member of the faculty. Augustine’s writings had much influence upon him. In 1366 seems to have become one of the king’s chaplains; between 1366 and 1372 became a doctor of theology; and in 1374 was given appointment by the king to the rectory of Lutterworth. About this same time appointed by the king to serve on a commission to negotiate peace with France, and to treat with the pope’s agents in the matter of filing ecclesiastical appointments in England. On return to England began to speak as a religious reformer, preaching in Oxford and London against the pope’s secular sovereignty, and at the same time publicizing his ideas by tracts and leaflets. Soon became so outspoken against the Church of Rome that in 1377 he was summoned before the tribunal of the Bishop of London at St. Paul’s. The pope became alarmed and issued a document condemning many of Wycliff’s writings. Wycliffe, however, had strong support of the people, the scholars, and the nobles of England, and the pope was unable to quell the growing dissatisfaction over papal control and the growing reform sentiments in England. This he did both in preaching and in writing. Also began to provide England with a new proclamation of the pure Gospel, acknowledging the Bible as the only source of truth. Rejected the doctrine of infallibility of either pope or council, and held that papal decrees or pronouncements had authority only insofar as they were in harmony with the Scriptures. The clergy were not to rule, but to serve and help the people.

Transubstantiation, purgatory and other Roman dogmas were being examined and challenged. By 1380 enlisted from among Oxford graduates a body of “pore priests,” later to be known as Lollards, to go out as evangelical preachers, proclaiming his views. In spite of England’s sympathy with Wycliffe’s position and teachings, the Archbishop of London succeeded in prohibiting him from preaching. He then retired to his rectory and devoted himself to writing, especially to the translation of the Bible and to writing and sending forth polemic tracts. At this time wrote *Trialogues*, in which he expressed supreme importance of obedience to the Bible and to conscience. Died in 1384 while hearing mass in his church. Stricken with paralysis and passed away, “having lit a fire which shall never be put out.” Writings were rigidly repressed, and in 1415 at the Council of Constance his books were ordered burned and his remains to be exhumed and burned. This order was carried out in 1428.

(*Who Was Who In Church History*. Elgin Moyer. Keats Publishing. New Canaan, Conn. 1974. p. 447)

Other comments on his life are as follows:

- A. Wycliffe was an Oxford theologian who became deeply involved in the ecclesiastical issues of his day. The prestige of the papacy had fallen to a very low ebb, and the life of the clergy left much to be desired. Wycliffe became a severe critic of this corrupt church and sought to call people back to a more biblical kind of Christianity. He realized that this was impossible unless the people had the Bible in their language.

Wycliffe's views were propagated throughout the country by traveling preachers, many of them Oxford scholars like himself. This got him into trouble with the hierarchy. His followers were denounced as "Lollards" (derived from "Lowlanders," but used in the sense of "heretics"), and Wycliffe himself was pronounced heretical. Archbishop Arundel called him a "son of the old serpent, forerunner and disciple of Antichrist." He found it hard to see why people got so upset about his teachings, which were simply the teachings of the Bible, he thought, but to use his words "every sparrow twittereth about it." He was forced to retire to his rectory at Lutterworth, where he died a year and a half later.

A synod of clergy at Oxford, in 1408, forbade the reading of Wycliffe's Bible, but the version made such an appeal to the hearts and minds of Englishmen that it could not be suppressed, in spite of the severe penalties attached to its circulation. But people paid a good price if only they could obtain a few sheets of Wycliffe's Bible. It is said that the price for an hour's loan of it every day for a course of reading was a load of hay. And now that England had a Bible – albeit a forbidden one – people were eager to learn how to read, and so Wycliffe's Bible not only gave people the Word of God, but it also helped greatly in combating illiteracy.

In 1415, the Council of Constance, which condemned John Huss to burn at the stake, also condemned the writings of Wycliffe and ordered Wycliffe's bones to be dug out of the ground and to be burned. The ashes were cast in the River Swift and, as has often been said, they were carried out to sea, and Wycliffe's teachings spread to other lands.

(A General Introduction to the Bible. David Ewert. Zondervan Publishing House. Grand Rapids, MI. 1483. pp. 184-186)

- B. Wycliffe cast aside his dry scholastic Latin to appeal to the English people at large in their common language. That appeal was primarily through the Lollards, an order of itinerant preachers, "poor priests," who went throughout the countryside preaching, reading, and teaching the English Bible.

Toward the close of the fourteenth century the great Wycliffe translations of the Bible were made. The New Testament (1380) and Old Testament (1388) translations associated with him formed a new epoch in the history of the Bible in England. They were translated from contemporary manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate.

(*A General Introduction to the Bible*. Geisler and Nix. Moody Press. Chicago. 1991. p. 547)

- C. He was a great Oxford University teacher, preacher, reformer, and translator. Wycliffe was the first man to completely translate the entire Bible into the English language. By placing God's Word in common language he thus did for England what Martin Luther would later do for Germany. His was the only English Bible for 145 years. As a sample of his English, note the following translation of the Lord's prayer:

"Our Fadir that art in hevenes, halewide be thi name; Thi kingdom comme to, Be thi wille done in heven so in erthe; Gyve to us this dai oure breed over other substance, and forgive to us oure dettis as we forgyven to oure detouris; and leede us not into tempacioun, but delyvere us fro yvel."