

Endorsements



In writing this sequel to his powerful book, *God's Generals*, Roberts has done a remarkable job of stimulating our faith to believe God to do the seeming impossible by compiling explicit and authentic information about some of God's choice leaders. These men have laid a foundation on which we are able to build.

The Roaring Reformers is a well-named book about men who truly fit the title. They were average men who answered the call of God to make a difference in the lives of those in their generation. In reading this, we are faced with the question, Does God expect less of us than He did of them?

Is it really important to read about revivals of the past and those whom God used to birth them? You will think so as you read of the successes and failures—the strengths and weaknesses—of the ministers and of the acceptance and denial of the people in witnessing the supernatural demonstration of God in the meetings. Your faith will grow with your awareness that God uses whom He wills. You will discover new flames of passion for the lost and find fresh desire to be a powerful witness of Christ.

—Pastor Iverna Tompkins

Roberts Liardon, a pioneering young preacher, who has fought his own demons, sometimes slipping but always fighting back, has known all his life that someday he would capture the spirit and faith of the men of God—Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Knox, Calvin, and Fox—who broke the back of the religious system of the dark ages, bringing us the Gospel of Jesus Christ of Nazareth in its purest form: Man is saved by grace, not of works, lest any man should boast.

A monumental work to stir men's souls.

—Dr. Oral Roberts

Roberts Liardon is an excellent student and author on church history. His book on Reformers will shed much light on the people God used and the price they paid for the liberty we freely enjoy.

—Pastor Rick Godwin

The Roaring Reformers



GOD'S GENERALS

The Roaring Reformers



GOD'S GENERALS

ROBERTS LIARDON



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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**GOD'S GENERALS II:
THE ROARING REFORMERS**

hardcover edition



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Dedication



I want to dedicate this book to four groups of people who have shown me unconditional love and support and who have given of themselves to fulfill the heavenly vision.

To the Operation 500 missionaries and the Spirit Life Bible College students and graduates: Thank you for leaving what the world could offer you to follow God's heart. Remember, the men in this book were severely persecuted and sometimes murdered for discovering the simple truths you will carry to the nations.

To the Embassy Christian Center family: Not only have you loved and held to the local territory, but also you have become a hub of international ministry activity. Thank you for being such an overwhelming support to the thousands of people who, over the years, have come to be blessed by God in this place.

To the Embassy Ministerial Association churches and ministers: Thank you for loving the truth and for not bowing to the territorial spirits that have tried to keep people and communities bound. May the stories of the lives in this book reaffirm that you are on track in your work for the kingdom.

To my partners and friends worldwide: I believe I have the most faithful, tried-and-true partners and friends in the world of international ministry. Thank you for your incredible faithfulness to my family and me. For every word of encouragement, prayer, e-mail, card, letter, and donation I am eternally grateful.

Friends, I am grateful for each of you.

Acknowledgments



I want to personally acknowledge the Roberts Liardon Ministries staff and volunteers who have kept the vision alive and have seen this project through a winding road into completion.

Especially, I want to acknowledge my mother, Carol, for her incredible strength of character and love. Where would we be without you? Priscilla, my sister and a woman of God, I acknowledge you for your strong faith and ability to stand when others wouldn't. And Grandma, "Grams," Gladolyene Moore, all of this, even this book, came from your prayers. You three are the grittiest women alive.

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INTRODUCTION



When I was almost twelve years old, the Lord appeared to me in a vision and told me to study the lives of great preachers so I could learn the reasons for their successes and failures. In that quest, I learned the importance of history. History is a blueprint of our past. With all of its mistakes and triumphs, it tells a story that is always repeated somewhere else in time, some place in every generation, but many times under a different disguise or a different method.

I've appropriately entitled my second book in the God's Generals series, *The Roaring Reformers*. I believe it is vital that we understand the past history of the Reformation and the character of those who brought it to pass. Every generation needs a reformation, because when we forget our history or our reason for living, then our reliance upon the Holy Spirit can grow dormant, and the heavens close and become brazen.

This second book is more detailed than the first because the volume of study was more expansive. It includes methods of thinking and doctrines that might seem foreign to us. That's mainly because we are living in and enjoying what these great men had to pioneer. We live in the benefits of what these men gave their lives for. Today, we can hear in one service what took them years and years to understand!

I also wrote this book because I want you to understand the process of the Reformation and the spirit behind it. Reformation brings a



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complete upheaval to a dark situation and, through great physical and spiritual strength, creates an atmosphere of freedom and relationship between God and His people. As you read, you will see how each of these men built upon the work of his predecessor to accomplish reformation in his generation.

Although the actual period of the Reformation is historically recognized in the sixteenth century, the workings of it began generations before—and that's why I've included John Wycliffe and Jon Hus as primary figures. Each of the six men I've chosen was different in personality and method—but their goals were the same. They each had an assignment from heaven. They each gave their lives in hopes of seeing it come to pass, and some died as martyrs. And each of them (except Fox) had the hypocrisy and blasphemy of the medieval Catholic Church to conquer.

Chapters 1–5 have the same religious setting. Let me briefly summarize the situation. Before the fourteenth century, if one was deemed a Christian, then that person belonged to the Catholic Church. You were either Catholic or a pagan. As early as the fourteenth century, the Catholic Church had become delirious with power, and the abuses began to show up in extreme hypocrisy and blasphemy. It had set itself up as the absolute voice and judgment of God throughout the known world. It controlled secular governments and royalty, unseating whomever it wished at any time it wished, especially if there was a threat to its own prosperity and power. Even though some kings had an inherited throne, they were charged a “rent” by the pope to keep their crown—they had to pay or suffer the consequences.

To keep this dictatorship, the Catholic Church made sure that the Bible was translated into Latin only. The common people couldn't read or understand Latin, so they were victims of whatever the Church taught them. The common person was forbidden to own a Bible because it was believed that only the priests could have that honor. But the clergy seldom—if ever—read the Bible, and many priests had no idea what it said. They made up stories and fables, all clouded with a sense of mysticism. The unknown kept them in a position of prestige among the people. It was made clear that the common person could never know God—much less please Him—so the people were left to serve under whatever whimsical bondage the religious hierarchy



Introduction

created. They invented purgatory and the infallibility of the pope. They created indulgences and sold them as a means to pay off the excessive debt that one pope had incurred. The people were taught that if they spent enough money for an indulgence, then the clergy could grant them entrance into heaven. If a child died before its parents could pay for the baptism, legend said the child was doomed to roam the earth as a firefly or some other bug or beast.

Since religious politics was the dominant spirit behind it all, the Catholic clergy sought after riches and prominence more than the welfare of the people. The Catholic Church and clergy were draped in wealth while the common man suffered. Every doctrine they created, every system of worship they instituted, all had the lust for money behind it. They made whatever laws they felt necessary to insure more money, more land, and more power for themselves. In the fifteenth century, the papacy itself was shrouded with murder and the “sudden deaths” of those who tried to gain power. Immorality was rampant as priests had numerous mistresses as well as homosexual or adulterous affairs.

Since the priests didn’t know the Bible, they didn’t have any revelation of its contents. The blood of Jesus wasn’t enough for them, so they invented the reconciling power of dead saints like Anne (mother of Mary), Joseph, Mary, and countless others. By the sixteenth century, if anyone challenged this system, the person was put on trial amid a torrent of lies, and either excommunicated or killed.

In the midst of these dark times, men such as John Wycliffe, Jon Hus, Martin Luther, John Knox, and John Calvin arose. By the seventeenth century, the Reformation was in full swing. George Fox challenged the cold, religious lethargy and civil discrimination in another way; he stayed in the Catholic Church and sparked life back into the Church through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Each of these six men rose to meet the voice of God within them. Through unflinching spirit and determination, they stood for the truth and became reformers for God. Each of them slowly began to penetrate the darkness around them with the truth of Jesus Christ and the surety of His Word.

Now it’s our turn. History is still being made and the eyes of heaven are upon us. Take your place. Take the stand for your generation and for your nations as we continue to turn the world to the light and



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truth found in Jesus Christ. Refuse to allow any fear or any torment to cloud your vision for God. Refuse to cower or allow evil to silence His voice through you. May reformation come again in our generation—and may it come through you.

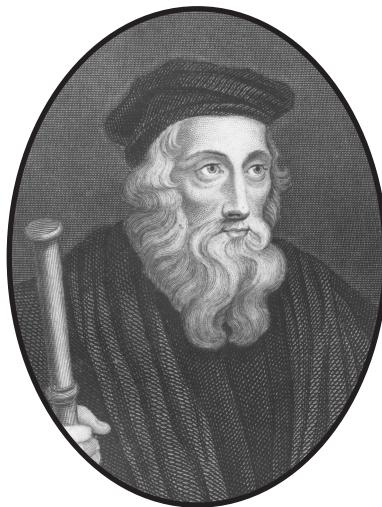


C H A P T E R O N E



John Wycliffe

c. 1330–1384



“The Bible Translator”

“THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR”

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.¹

I like to refer to John Wycliffe as a Reformer before the Reformation. Historically, his life doesn’t fall within the years of the actual Reformation period. But his life and his theology are almost identical to what the other Reformers stood and fought for.

Wycliffe was a forerunner of the great revolution that was about to hit the known religious world. Yet interestingly, none of the other Reformers, except John Hus, gave Wycliffe credit for the highly controversial road that he paved. I believe this was largely due to the fact that the printing press was not invented until after Wycliffe’s death, and many of his writings were burned by the Roman Catholic Church. Still, I see him as one who amply seeded the earth with the truths of Reformation; those after him watered and harvested the fruits Wycliffe had sown.

Wycliffe was a figure of stability—a man who strongly associated with the rich and powerful—yet he unflinchingly fought for the common people and identified with their right to know God in a personal and intimate way. During Wycliffe’s day, the concept of a common person knowing God intimately was unheard of and extremely controversial. It is no wonder that he is called “the Morning



John Wycliffe—“The Bible Translator”

Star of the Reformation”—he changed the barometer of spiritual ignorance and, from his efforts, a new horizon for the church dawned.

He was also called the “most learned man of his generation in England,”² yet little is known about him except that he led a very simple life marked by tireless study, lecturing, and writing. I believe his life embodies God’s principle that where one sows, another waters, and yet another reaps the harvest. (See John 4:37). As you read about Wycliffe’s life, don’t ever underestimate the role you might have in sowing a seed, or a good deed, into the lives of others. Your actions today, when done by the faith and inspiration of God, can powerfully affect the future. Many of us will never know the powerful results of the seeds we’ve planted in the lives of others until we get to heaven.

Wycliffe’s Early Years

John Wycliffe was born in Yorkshire, England, around 1330. Little is known of his childhood and young adult years until 1360 when he entered Balliol College in Oxford, England. The life of Wycliffe comes alive for us as he reaches the age of thirty and begins his life as a great Reformer before the actual Reformation.

***Wycliffe fought for the common people
and identified with their right to know
God in a personal and intimate way.***

Before those years I can only speculate that young Wycliffe was raised by a modest land-owning family in a secluded area and was taught in school by a village priest. In those days, the Catholic regime controlled the government as well as Church affairs. Priests were assigned to every village to oversee the affairs of life from the Church to the common market, from the schools to civil affairs.

It’s important to note that John of Gaunt (the second son of King Edward III) was the feudal overlord of Wycliffe’s boyhood home. This simply means that Gaunt owned the land, and those who lived there and worked the land were given protection and favors from Gaunt.



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The fact that Gaunt was the natural protector of this area's citizens became an important point later in Wycliffe's life.

Wycliffe entered the priesthood, but his ordination date is not recorded. He probably left for Oxford somewhere around 1346, at the age of sixteen, the common age for entering a university at the time.

Tragic Times Drive Him to the Word

The plague sunk its deadly claws into England in 1349. By the time the Black Death had finished with the nation in 1353, England had lost nearly half of its population. As a result of the chaos, Wycliffe's university education was somewhat sporadic for a while, and his desperation grew as he watched many of his friends and associates die.

*While some turned to the answers of men,
Wycliffe turned to the Bible, where he
discovered an unshakable foundation.*

While some in the ministry turned to the answers of men, Wycliffe turned to the Bible for comfort and answers to battle the despondency and fear that he felt. During this time of turmoil, Wycliffe's dependence on the written Word of God built a foundation inside him that proved unshakable—no man could overturn what Wycliffe knew to be true from the Scriptures. It didn't matter how high up on the political or religious ladder one was—to Wycliffe, God had the final say in every matter.

It's important to remember that, at the time, there were no English Bibles; all Bibles were written in Latin, and only the skilled and highly educated men of the Roman Catholic Church could read it. The common people were left to the often mystic and pagan views of the village priests—many of whom had never read the Bible themselves!

Riches and wealth ruled the thinking of the priests, and, as a result, their doctrine was also based upon how much money someone had. Money was charged for every service of the Church—from the baptism of babies to the forgiveness of sins.

“Indulgences” were created by the Church. These provided a way for a person to pay for the remission of his sins. The common thief or



John Wycliffe—“The Bible Translator”

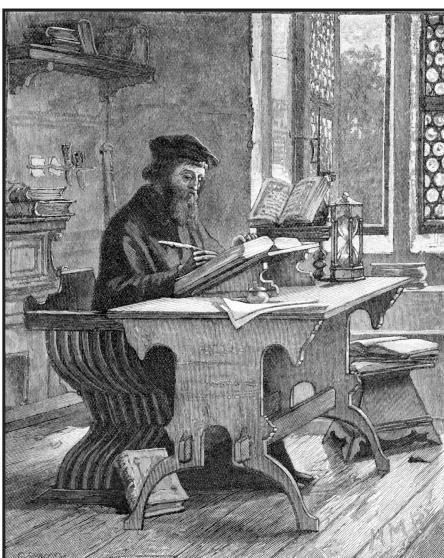
murderer believed he could do whatever he wanted and then redeem himself by buying his way into heaven. If parents were too poor to have their baby baptized before it died, then the family was told that their infant couldn't enter into heaven and would probably be doomed to live on the earth as an animal or an insect! As bizarre as it may sound, teachings like this abounded during Wycliffe's time—but God was grooming a man who dared to stand against the status quo and bring about a divine change!

Oxford's Brightest Scholar

Wycliffe loved the writings of Augustine (c. 354–c. 430), the patron of the early Catholic Church. He used Augustine's individualism as a platform for his own, pursuing further research and study, particularly the study of the Bible. Renowned for his intellectual capacity, Wycliffe was able to enter Balliol College and become the regent master, or the dean, during the years of 1360–1361.

Students in Wycliffe's day didn't have the option of campus housing, so they had to find residence elsewhere, making life very difficult for the majority of them. There were a number of houses where monks and friars were sent to live while receiving university training; but the clerics (ministers) were many, and the list was long—favor had to be strong on a minister for him to be placed in one of these houses.

Wycliffe, undoubtedly recognized as a prized scholar, was offered Oxford's finest living accommodations in the village of Fillingham, Lincolnshire, where he held the position of rector, head of the parish. His time there was taken up with the government of the Catholic Church, and Wycliffe developed into a fine diplomatic



Wycliffe writing.
North Wind Picture Archives



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spokesman. His administrative abilities surfaced, and when these coupled with his intellectual discipline, Wycliffe soon found himself on the threshold of receiving the highest honors in the Church. In this way, Wycliffe's entire life was soon wrapped up in the school.

Of the five-fold gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 (apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher, evangelist), Wycliffe was gifted as a teacher—so, besides his work in the priesthood, he was extremely fulfilled in his position as an instructor in the university. At this time, the Catholic Church was very pleased to have someone like Wycliffe growing into such a position of prominence.

By 1369, Wycliffe had obtained his bachelor of divinity. By 1371, Wycliffe was recognized as the age's leading theologian and philosopher at Oxford, a school that was second to none in all of Europe. By now, Oxford had surpassed the famed university in Paris and was the greatest educational facility in the entire known world. In 1372, Wycliffe received his cherished doctorate, celebrating sixteen years of intensive study and research.³

Opening His Eyes to the Corruption

In 1374, Wycliffe's notoriety and individualism began to surface. Until then, though renowned for his intellectual and theological skills, he had been an obscure priest serving over various parishes. But the winds of change had been blowing over Europe, and they were constantly heated by a debate between the Church and the government. The various governments throughout Europe wanted total control over the civil and social affairs of their countries, and they were fighting the papacy for that control. England was no different.

In this particular year, Wycliffe (agreeing with ancient theologians) began to speak out against the Church's possession of total political and social control. He believed that there was a legitimate need for a secular power to govern the affairs of each nation.

Through vast research, including the study of concepts of Augustine and the principles of Scripture, Wycliffe came to the conclusion that the Church should limit itself to its own jurisdiction. He believed that the Church's primary responsibility was for spiritual affairs, not political ones. It was here that Wycliffe developed his controversial concept called "dominion by grace."



John Wycliffe—“The Bible Translator”

Wycliffe's disgust at the quest for riches that ruled the Catholic Church was steadily growing. In his “dominion by grace” concept, Wycliffe said that all things belonged to God, and men only had a right to them if they were living free from sin and transgression. He believed the Catholic Church was deeply in transgression, so Wycliffe opposed the ownership of English land by the papacy. He felt the true responsibility of the Church was to meet the spiritual needs of humanity and to care for the flock, turning them to Jesus Christ. Wycliffe began to proclaim that, in owning land and living in excessive wealth at the expense of the people, the Church had become secular and of no use to anyone.

***The true responsibility of the Church was
to meet the spiritual needs of humanity and
to care for the flock, turning them to Jesus.***

The papacy was outraged at Wycliffe's stand, realizing that such a change would affect the Church's wealth, control, and land ownership. At this time, the papacy was declaring taxes upon kings and nations to be paid to the Church—and Wycliffe, one of their star theologians, stood against them in their pursuits!

Wycliffe Stands against Papal Government

England had a long history of unrest with the papacy. It's important to see some of the basic conflicts in order to fully understand Wycliffe's position.

For example, King John (c. 1215) had been excommunicated and then forced to submit unconditionally to the pope. He was also required to pay a vast sum of money for the right to continue in his legitimate inheritance as the king of England. Even after this king died, the papacy continued to demand payment from the king—taxes for his right to rule in England.

The English were opposed to the pope's taxations for many reasons—but especially because some of the monies were going to enemy armies. The English government was also outraged because the Church ruled the economic growth of their country. For example,



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if an Englishman died and didn't leave something to the Church in his will, then the Church took over his affairs!

For over a hundred years, this humiliation had continued, and now England was searching for ways to break from papal control. The ideal moment came when the papacy petitioned to collect its annual "rent" for the king's throne, and Wycliffe stepped to the forefront to intervene for the English government.

"There cannot be two temporal sovereigns in one country; either Edward is king or...[the pope] is king. We make our choice. We accept Edward of England and refuse...Rome," Wycliffe wrote.⁴

Wycliffe's political stand for the throne of England gained the favor of King Edward III, and the king appointed Wycliffe as rector of Lutterworth—a position that brought a comfortable living—then chose him to represent the crown in negotiations between the king and the papacy.

The negotiations never came to a satisfactory conclusion, but the incident marked Wycliffe as a potential troublemaker in the Church. He was now aligned with the anticlerical party—those who sided with the government's right for control over the nation—which, among others, won Wycliffe the favor of John of Gaunt, the king's second son.

The anticlerical party clung to Wycliffe, seeing in him the intellectual ability to attack the Catholic Church and win the cause of the English government. Wycliffe proved to be a useful ally to the government during this time of unrest, and the king's protection succeeded in keeping Wycliffe from any bodily harm that disgruntled Catholics might inflict upon him.

Exposing Deception Little by Little

By now, Wycliffe was the clerical advisor for the wealthy John of Gaunt, who, in the late fourteenth century, had become England's most powerful—and most hated—political figure. Wycliffe admired and respected him because Gaunt was a wise diplomat, always faithful to what he thought best for England. Gaunt had the ability to attract the ablest of men, and Wycliffe served as Gaunt's personal cleric for the next two years.

Wycliffe's greatest strength was his adherence to the Scriptures. From reading and studying his Bible, Wycliffe gained greater



John Wycliffe—“The Bible Translator”

knowledge and understanding of what the Word of God was saying, and it became a personal revelation to him.

Allow me to make a simple point here. *The devil doesn't care if you own a Bible.* He's not afraid of how big it is, how often you carry it around, or where you might display it in your home. He doesn't care if you sleep with it, or chase others with it. The devil is afraid only of the Scriptures that you plant in your heart and apply, through divine revelation, to your life. He is terrorized by the life produced from the revelation of those Scriptures. The power in the Word of God alone terrorizes the devil.

Please quit displaying your Bible and start reading it! Make it a vital revelation in your life. You'll find every answer you need within its pages. Why? Because it is the only book on the earth that is alive! You can't read the Bible without life arising within you!

The revelations of the Scriptures separated the true from the false and enabled Wycliffe to see that the Church was in opposition to the Bible.

That's exactly what Wycliffe did. He didn't think that the Bible was so holy that it couldn't be touched. No—he opened it, read it, and applied the Scriptures to his life and circumstances. The revelation of those Scriptures separated the true from the false and enabled Wycliffe to see that the entire system of the Catholic Church was in opposition to the overall message of the Bible. He began to realize that many of the sacraments and doctrines of the Church were hypocritical and heretical. The religious system of the day had been formulated entirely for the quest of money, power, and control.

Wycliffe understood that he was in a position to expose and attack this system. I'm sure he pondered his approach and strategy with great deliberation. Wycliffe knew his words would carry great authority. How would he begin? How could he effectively communicate the falsehoods of the Church and bring truth to the people? The deception was so vast that to reveal it all at once would be overwhelming. So he decided to expose the heretical fallacies little by little.

In 1376, Wycliffe began writing tracts proclaiming his stand against the excessive wealth of the Church. He wrote *On Divine*



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Dominion, On Civil Dominion, On the Duty of the King, and On the Church.

In these tracts Wycliffe stated that civil and temporal church matters should be under the king and *not* the clergy, that the church clergy had a greater calling. Because the clergy were called to serve in spiritual teaching and guidance, they should be stripped of all temporal possessions except the necessary food, lodging, and clothing. Wycliffe also wrote that no clergyman should desire to hold any civil office and that the king had the right to remove any unworthy clergyman from his position.

Revealing the political motives of the Church was the first step. Wycliffe was right on target with his plan, and the ripples could be felt miles and miles away—even to the very seat of the Vatican.

I'll Drag You Out by the Hair

William Courtenay was the popular and prestigious bishop of London—a man who, from his youth, had his eyes on the coveted office of the archbishop of Canterbury, the position that held all the ecclesiastical power in England.

The pope had been in contact with Courtenay, ordering him to intervene in the situation between the Church and the government. Eager to climb the political ladder and gain favor with the pope, Courtenay worked feverishly to undermine the current archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury, by getting the results that Rome wanted and Sudbury couldn't provide.

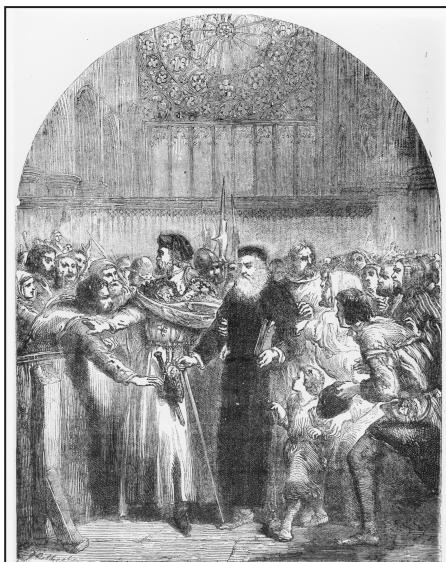
Because of Wycliffe's relationship with the anticlerical John of Gaunt, Courtenay's vengeance became focused upon Wycliffe. In February of 1377, Courtenay summoned Wycliffe to appear in London to answer to charges of heresy.

Wycliffe appeared at St. Paul's in London, under the escort of John of Gaunt and four friars from Oxford. Those who served Gaunt could expect his protection. To Gaunt, it was a point of honor as well as a mark of character to make their quarrels his own.

The bishops waited for Wycliffe in a chapel outside of St. Paul's. They saw his striking appearance as he approached the chapel. Wycliffe was described as “a tall thin figure, covered with a long light gown of black colour, with a girdle about his body; the head, adorned with



John Wycliffe—“The Bible Translator”



Wycliffe appearing before the Prelates at St. Paul's to answer the charge of heresy.

The Bridgeman Art Library, N.Y.

to pass into the court, tempers were so riled that threats were being belied between the parties.

Wycliffe was asked by Gaunt to take a seat and make himself comfortable. Courtenay spoke up that the accused should stand before the court. Immediately, there was an argument between Gaunt and Courtenay as to whether Wycliffe should stand or be seated. The crowd of onlookers became even angrier listening to Gaunt and Courtenay's repetitive insults. Finally, Gaunt "muttered a threat to drag the bishop from his cathedral by the hair of his head."⁶

The Londoners were proud supporters of Courtenay; and the mere presence of Gaunt had already infuriated them. When the unruly crowd heard Gaunt's threats against Courtenay, they revolted. Abusive language and angry shouts filled the air as the crowd rushed forward—Gaunt was forced to flee for his life. The entire scene was so chaotic that there was no way Courtenay could conduct a trial. Wycliffe, who remained silent the entire time, was allowed to leave untouched!

a full, flowing beard, exhibiting features keen and sharply cut; the eye clear and penetrating; the lips firmly closed in a token of resolution—the whole man wearing an aspect of lofty earnestness and replete with dignity and character.”⁵

The air was tense and filled with energy. In order for the bishops and Wycliffe's entourage to reach St. Paul's, they had to push their way through a great crowd that had come to watch the show. The attempts to push through caused an immediate scuffle, which was so loud that Courtenay left St. Paul's and ran to the spot where Wycliffe was.

By the time Wycliffe was able



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After the court scene, the citizens were still so outraged that mobbing and rioting continued in the streets as they searched for allies of Gaunt. Courtenay finally had to intervene so that the citizens would settle down.

In the meantime, Wycliffe was far away from the riot, quietly making his way back to Oxford. The incident never marred him. Wycliffe remained popular with the Oxford scholars, the government, his students, and the people of his parish, despite censure from the Catholic hierarchy.

The Truth Hurts

Upon hearing from Benedictine monks that the heresy trial had failed, and believing that it was unwise to attack Wycliffe in England, Pope Gregory XI took the situation in his own hands. From Rome, Gregory XI issued five scathing bulls (official documents from the pope) against Wycliffe. In May of 1377, copies of these bulls were sent to the archbishop of Canterbury, to Oxford, and to the king.

These bulls cited eighteen errors from Wycliffe's tract, *On Civil Dominion*. To the Oxford scholars, the pope rebuked their leadership, stating that, "...through negligence and sloth on your part [you have allowed] cockle to spring among the pure wheat in the field of your glorious university...and (what is worse) to grow up."⁷ The pope went on to say that if they could not silence Wycliffe, the result would be the peril of their souls, the blemish of the Oxford name, and the decay of the entire orthodox faith. The pope arrogantly declared that if Oxford did not get rid of Wycliffe, the university would no longer receive the graces and support of the Catholic Church.

Despite the threats, Oxford took Wycliffe's side. A council of doctors declared that the "propositions attributed to him [Wycliffe], though ill-sounding, were not erroneous."⁸ In other words, if we used today's vernacular, Oxford might have said something like, "the truth hurts."

Oxford realized the pope was embarrassed and extremely threatened by Wycliffe's accusations. I believe the Oxford scholars were proud of Wycliffe's insight and secretly wished they had the personal boldness to address the Catholic Church's hypocrisy. Although they supported him and gave him the liberty to continue teaching, Wycliffe



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decided to place himself under house arrest to spare the university from further action by the pope.

The bulls also ordered the government to turn Wycliffe over to Courtenay, who, in turn, was to examine Wycliffe regarding his errors. But the government never paid any attention to the bulls—King Edward III died before he received them.

I Deny the Pope Any Right

Of course, Courtenay’s political and religious ambition prompted him to scurry to summon Wycliffe before a court in Lambeth to address the pope’s charges. Wycliffe accepted the challenge and answered the summons.

Standing before a very large crowd of priests, bishops, and supporters, the archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop Courtenay began to address Wycliffe’s “errors.” Unruffled, Wycliffe answered them, and stated his position:

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.⁹



Wycliffe arraigned before the Archbishop of Canterbury.
North Wind Picture Archives



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Wycliffe's stand was incredible—and it left the court almost speechless! We must understand that, up to this point, *no one* had ever openly challenged the authority of the pope! As you read on through this book, you'll see that this sort of challenge became a common occurrence among the Reformers.

Can you imagine the ripples of shock that penetrated through them all? Can you feel the nervousness and tightness? How would they answer Wycliffe? This was a first! How would they justify themselves? How could they defend the hypocrisy that Wycliffe revealed? The only thing they could do was shout at Wycliffe in outrage—and so they did.

But the shouts and outrage never indicted Wycliffe—Joan of Kent, the Queen Mother, sent a message to the court at Lambeth, forbidding them to pass sentence upon Wycliffe. The Queen Mother's intervention on Wycliffe's behalf caused great fear and concern among the bishops and their supporters. Miraculously, no one sought to defrock or excommunicate Wycliffe, and again he was allowed to leave without penalty.

The Catholic Church had no idea what to do with him. Powerlessly, they ordered Wycliffe to stop preaching. Wycliffe obeyed, but his pen was not silent, nor were the groups of men that he personally mentored.

The Apostolic Men

By now, it seemed that Wycliffe's religious enemies couldn't touch him. It was clear to the Catholic Church that Wycliffe, still an ordained priest, was establishing himself as “the leader of a party.”¹⁰

Presiding over several parishes, Wycliffe had already formed his own group of street evangelists that he called the “poor priests.” This group of clergy had all been personally mentored by Wycliffe, and they were instructed to travel throughout the countryside and preach wherever people would listen. These “poor priests” lived simple lives, shunned wealth, and dressed in a humble manner. Some were ordained; some were laymen; but none were tied to a parish, allowing them the freedom to be wherever the need was greatest.

Up to this time, the ignorant village priests had simply told stories to entertain the people or, when asked a theological question,



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answered it with whatever sounded good at the moment. Wycliffe’s preachers did just the opposite—they preached from the Bible, bringing understanding and comfort to the villagers.

Wycliffe defended their right to preach as long as these men felt they were called to do so. He called them “evangelical men” or “apostolic men.”¹¹ These “apostolic men” went throughout England, denouncing the abuses of the Catholic Church and teaching sound biblical doctrine—not in Latin, but in the common language of the people so that they could understand.

The “poor priests” lived simple lives, shunning wealth. They preached from the Bible, bringing understanding and comfort.

Wycliffe wrote tracts for these men to distribute, and, although he didn’t preach himself, Wycliffe wrote hundreds of sermons for these “apostolic men” to meditate on and preach. Unfortunately, the majority do not exist for us to enjoy today.

His Most Startling Revelation

I want to point out some historical facts concerning confusion in the Catholic Church that Wycliffe found himself blamed for. While the Church was busy sorting through the turmoil, Wycliffe was left alone to discover more truths. The Holy Spirit was indeed in charge of the situation.

In the 1370s, there was great confusion in the Catholic ranks concerning the pope and where he would reside. I’m not going to elaborate on all of the details. In short, there was a dispute over where the Vatican headquarters should be. In 1309, the headquarters were moved from Rome to France, basically because of the political influence of the king of France. He was tired of paying papal taxes and felt he could control the situation better if the papal headquarters were located in his nation. The Catholics called it “The Babylonian Captivity.”

Finally, in 1376, Pope Gregory XI moved back to Rome. But two years later, the people were still divided, and they elected two



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popes—one for Avignon, France, and one for Rome. Both popes claimed to be infallible, and each excommunicated the other. It was called “The Great Schism,” and Wycliffe was named as a primary cause.¹²

The Catholic Church believed that Wycliffe’s “heresies” led to the unrest of the people because he poisoned them with his doctrines and confused their minds. For the next thirty-nine years, the papal headquarters remained divided.

Because of the attention focused on this schism, Wycliffe himself was almost ignored, despite the fact that the blame fell on his doctrines. While he was out of the spotlight, Wycliffe used his time to reveal, step-by-step, the other heresies he found in the Church. From 1378 through 1379, Wycliffe began to formulate his most startling revelation, a statement unheard of to the known world at that time. What was it? It was that *Scripture (the Bible) was the sole foundation of all doctrine.*¹³

***Wycliffe's most startling revelation was
that the Bible was the sole foundation
of all doctrine.***

In March of 1378, Wycliffe released a booklet entitled *On the Truth of Holy Scripture* that sent the Catholic hierarchy skyrocketing with anger. From this one foundation—that the Scriptures alone contain the truth for the Christian lifestyle and doctrines—Wycliffe began to skillfully dissect the various heresies and hypocrisies that had blossomed in the Catholic Church. This one booklet contained thirty-two chapters upholding the truth of the Scriptures against the lies of the papacy.

Wycliffe had crossed into a new frontier.

The Vision Was Forming

After King Edward III died, his young son, Richard II, was pronounced king. John of Gaunt became the head of England, ruling as regent, until young King Richard II was old enough to take charge of the throne in 1381.



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For the next three years, Wycliffe defended the validity of the Scriptures. The government still supported him, but Wycliffe was not its major concern; instead, the task of running the country without an official king took center stage. The Church was caught up with its own self-induced troubles. Rumors of Wycliffe’s heresy began to surface, but nothing came of them. Wycliffe countered that the real heretics were those who found inconsistencies and obscurities in the Scriptures and thought they needed “official” interpretation by the Church.

Wycliffe didn’t believe that “official” interpretation of the Bible was necessary. He thought that the Bible could be safely placed in the hands of even the most ignorant. Unlike the Catholic hierarchy, Wycliffe preached that the true “church” was made up of *all* God’s elect people—not just the leadership. Because of his belief, Wycliffe felt that everyone who trusted in the Lord had a right to know His Word. He said, “All Christians, and lay lords in particular, ought to know holy writ and to defend it,”¹⁴ and, “No man is so rude a scholar but that he may learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity.”¹⁵

***Wycliffe thought that the Bible could
be safely placed in the hands of even
the most ignorant people.***

From Wycliffe’s statements, it is obvious that God was forming a plan and a vision in his heart. No English person was able to read the Bible—it was all written in Latin! The difficulty of language allowed the Catholic Church to remain in control, because only scholars—the priests—could read it.

So, it’s clear to me that Wycliffe had a plan to support his statements. Somehow, the Latin Bible would have to be translated into common English—but when? Others in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had already urged the translation of an English Bible, but no one had acted upon it.¹⁶ Timing was the only key, and Wycliffe was not a man to rush or act hastily. He knew that God would provide the correct situation and the accurate timing for such a feat. It *had* to be done, and it would be—eventually.



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The Catholics were outraged by Wycliffe's teaching that the Bible was the *only* source for doctrine. They believed that the Church (i.e., priests, monks, friars, bishops, and the pope) was the sole source of all doctrine and that the Bible served only as an aid, filled with stories that served as illustrations for living a good life. But their outrage didn't faze Wycliffe.

Using the Bible as his foundation, Wycliffe began to separate the man-made ideas of the Church from the God-inspired principles of the Word.

Below is a summarized list of several Catholic heresies that Wycliffe attacked. He believed these heresies were all invented and propagated by man. Remember, Wycliffe wrote these findings while acting as a Catholic priest. He loved the ministry and the work of God, but he hated the abuses found within the Catholic Church system. Wycliffe felt these abuses were against God and against the people.

First, I'll briefly state what the Catholics believed; then, I'll provide a quotation from Wycliffe stating what he denounced.

1. He Attacked Confessionals

The Catholics instructed the people to come and confess their sins to a priest before they could be forgiven and taught that the priest, bishop, etc., was the only one who had the power to cleanse them from their sins. After confession was made, the priest would impose several acts of penance that the sinner had to perform in order to receive complete forgiveness.

Wycliffe wrote,

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...beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation.¹⁷



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2. Absolution

The Catholics taught that only a priest, bishop, etc., could release a person from the guilt of sin by merely speaking it over the person. Many times, absolution was paid for with money or some other sort of possession.

Wycliffe wrote,

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.¹⁸

3. He Attacked Indulgences

Indulgences were created as a money-raising technique to keep the Vatican out of debt—or to pay off the already-accrued, excessive debts of the Church. The Church taught that, through indulgences, the people could buy their way out of purgatory (a holding place after death where the consequences of sinful actions could be satisfied). The people were instructed that if they bought indulgences, the pope would command the angels to carry a departed soul straight to heaven (bypassing purgatory) because their sins were paid for. So, people did whatever they wanted and acted however they pleased, thinking that if they bought an indulgence, every action would be wiped away.

Wycliffe wrote,

It is plain to me that our prelates in granting indulgences do commonly blaspheme the wisdom of God, pretending in their avarice [greed for money] 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...are a manifest blasphemy, inasmuch as he claims a power to save men



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almost without limit....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.¹⁹

Wycliffe condemned such practices in his tract *On Indulgences* long before Luther posted his 95 theses. Wycliffe concluded the tract with these statements,

By the means of the tail of this dragon—that is, the sects of friars, who labor in the cause of this illusion, and of other Luciferian seductions of the church. But arise, O soldiers of Christ! Be wise to fling away these things, along with the other fictions of the prince of darkness, and put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ...sever from the Church such frauds of antichrist, and teach the people that in Christ alone and in His law, and in His members, they should trust...learn above all things honestly to detect the devices of antichrist!²⁰

The blood that Jesus Christ shed for us was enough—yet the medieval Catholics undermined that incredible price by adding to it and making people pay money for forgiveness. May God have mercy on those who believe this doctrine and open their eyes so that they may see the truth!

4. He Demanded the Use of Preaching

Many in the Catholic Church looked upon the ministry as an occupation where they would always be taken care of. As a result, many priests never realized the spiritual position they could have, and should have, held. So, priests were often found in worldly situations—for example, in the taverns, playing various games—and they lived careless lives. Except possibly for isolated monks, most of the priests never gave themselves to prayer and learning the Word of God. Many had never even read a Bible, so they could only tell stories and tales to



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keep the interest of the people. I can only imagine the gross error and deception that abounded because of it.

Wycliffe wrote,

The highest service to which man may attain on earth is to preach the law of God. This duty falls particularly to priests, in order that they may produce children of God.... 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....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.

*Wycliffe could not betray what he felt
from the Scriptures to be true, even
if it meant the loss of support.*

O marvelous power of the Divine Seed, which overpowers strong men in arms, softens hard hearts, and renews and changes into divine men....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.²¹

Wycliffe Attacks the Eucharist

Little by little, Wycliffe continued to expose the errors and deception of the Catholic Church. In 1379, Wycliffe took a position against the Church that made even his friends tremble. John of Gaunt had trouble with it and begged him to recant on this monumental position. But Wycliffe could not betray what he felt from the Scriptures to be true, even if it meant the loss of support. As a result, the English government held Wycliffe loosely, not knowing how to react to his latest revelation.



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Wycliffe's most famous controversy was over the Eucharist, or the Holy Communion. Catholics believed in *transubstantiation*, which simply meant that when a priest performed a Mass, the bread and wine of communion were transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, while keeping the appearance of mere bread and wine. They also refer to this as "The Blessed Sacrament."

Wycliffe found transubstantiation totally unscriptural. In his tract entitled *On the Eucharist*, he outlined his beliefs from two foundational points: First, transubstantiation wasn't in the Bible and, second, the belief of it was totally unknown until the twelfth century.²² It had not become a Catholic dogma (absolute truth) until 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council.

Wycliffe stated that the doctrinal theology of transubstantiation was simply man's invention—or misinterpretation—all for the purpose of keeping the Mass mystical and the priests superior. To him, transubstantiation dangerously exaggerated the importance of the priestly office, it exposed Christ to passive indignity, and it encouraged people to become idolatrous.

Wycliffe urged people to return to the faith and practice of early Christians and to reject man's invented doctrine.

Instead, Wycliffe believed in the *spiritual presence* of Christ and His blood and claimed that Jesus Christ was to be remembered in communion by personal faith in the price He paid. He urged people to return to the faith and practice of the early Christians.

He wrote, "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."²³

Wycliffe went on to explain how to interpret the Word of God and used communion as an example. "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....You will meet



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with such modes of expression constantly in Scripture and in these expressions, without a doubt, the production is made figuratively.”²⁴

Wycliffe wrote that the meaning of figurative speech in the Bible was hidden from those who did not know Jesus Christ.

“Therefore, let every man wisely, with much prayer and great study...read the words of God in the Holy Scriptures...Christ saith, ‘I am the true vine’ [John 15:1]. Wherefore do you not worship the vine for God, as you do the bread?”²⁵

He went on to state that Christ was not an earthly vine, “so neither is material bread changed from its substance to the flesh and blood of Christ.”²⁶

When Wycliffe protested against the superstition and idolatry he saw associated with the Mass in his tract *On Apostasy*, he was labeled a full-fledged heretic by the Catholic Church. Although no steps were made to excommunicate him, Wycliffe was now a man whom most tried to avoid.

Cutting Off His Influence

The alarm at Wycliffe’s beloved Oxford finally sounded in 1380. Because of pressure from the papacy, the chancellor had begun to oppose Wycliffe’s doctrines in the schools and finally decided that the time had come for action to be taken against him.

A group of twelve doctors of divinity met in a council to discuss Wycliffe’s Eucharist doctrine. At the end of the discussion, a majority of seven moved that his teachings were erroneous. The chancellor was somewhat alarmed that the remaining five felt that Wycliffe had done no harm. In an attempt to silence any further support of Wycliffe, the chancellor threatened that those who taught or defended Wycliffe’s doctrines would be imprisoned, suspended from all university functions, and excommunicated.²⁷

Wycliffe was found disputing theology in the school when the verdict and sentence were publicly read to him. When Wycliffe heard the condemnation of his work, he was confused, yet he vowed that the opinions of these men could not weaken his beliefs.²⁸

Wycliffe appealed to the king to overturn the chancellor’s decision; it was ignored. John of Gaunt hurried to Oxford and attempted



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to persuade Wycliffe to obey the chancellor, but Wycliffe chose to disregard his pleas.

Wycliffe remained obscure until May of 1381 when he wrote *Confession*, a tract that defended his condemned opinions.

In the spring, Wycliffe withdrew from public life and finally detached himself from Oxford. It was a difficult decision for him, because the majority of his life had been wrapped up in the affairs of the university. It was unusual for a person to mention the name of Oxford without thinking of Wycliffe.

Wycliffe had now moved back to the isolation and obscurity of Lutterworth. But it was different this time. He didn't have the luxury or the outlet of being associated with Oxford.

I'm sure that we can all relate to how Wycliffe must have felt. He had been cut off from the place where his earthly identity had been established. Oxford had been his place of temporal security, and now, Wycliffe had to find his way without that avenue.

The change proved to be the highest point of his destiny on earth.

Destiny: The Door No Man Could Shut

Wycliffe felt cut off from everything. It was during this time that he turned to the Lord for direction. He knew he had a purpose on the earth, but Wycliffe had to hear from God. I believe it was through such prayers that Wycliffe came to understand the reason for his life.

In Lutterworth, Wycliffe would begin the venture he is known for today—the translation of the Bible from Latin into English.

Suddenly inspired, Wycliffe realized that Lutterworth would not be an obscure “prison” for him but instead would be a place of divine destiny—a place where the timing of the Lord and the vision in his heart would finally meet.

Now he understood. In the obscurity and peace of Lutterworth, Wycliffe would begin the venture that he is most known for today: the translation of the Bible from Latin into common English.



John Wycliffe—“The Bible Translator”

Several of his most loyal followers accompanied Wycliffe to Lutterworth. Among them were John Purvey and Nicholas of Hereford.

Purvey was one of Wycliffe’s closest companions. He was Wycliffe’s personal secretary and constant attendant until the end of Wycliffe’s life. Now fifty-one years old, Wycliffe dictated much of his prolific writing to Purvey, because it was clear to Wycliffe that his anointing and vision for writing would be passed on to Purvey.

Hereford was one of Wycliffe’s most educated colleagues from Oxford. A doctor of divinity, Hereford worked tirelessly along with Purvey in translating the Latin Bible into English. Unlike Purvey and Wycliffe, Hereford was known for his rowdy personality, noted as “the most violent” of the Wycliffe followers.²⁹

For the next few years, the group worked night and day. Wycliffe felt that the greatest anointing he had ever experienced was upon him, giving him the strength and energy to supervise the project. It is generally accepted that Wycliffe did the translation of the New Testament himself, while Hereford and Purvey translated the Old Testament under his constant supervision.

The Five Rules for Bible Study

Why did Wycliffe take on such a tremendous feat? In the natural realm, the task was against all odds. In all of Europe, there had never been a Bible in the common language. The Latin was preserved because the language was deemed holy and mystical, reserved only for the educated. In addition, most of the common people in England were illiterate. Furthermore, the printing press would not be widely manufactured until the next century, so the supply of common English Bibles would be very limited. It was a massive endeavor, and only one who had truly heard from God would have even attempted it; without a doubt, Wycliffe had heard.

As I’ve stated, his unflinching conviction was that the Bible was the sole authority for all of life. Wycliffe 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



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church, state, and Christian life, without human traditions and statutes.³⁰

Wycliffe knew that the common people would never know the true basics of faith unless they knew what the Bible said. Wycliffe also realized the people would never know the Bible unless it was in their own language. He stated,

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 [common] tongue...believers should have the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand.³¹

Wycliffe's heart was heavy for the common people. He realized that if they obtained a Bible in their language, and if they could read it, they would need instructions on how to study it. So Wycliffe completed his task by outlining five basic rules for the translation and study of the Bible:

1. Obtain a reliable text.
2. Understand the logic of Scripture.
3. Compare the parts of Scripture with one another.
4. Maintain an attitude of humble seeking.
5. Receive the instruction of the Spirit.

So Wycliffe and his staff proceeded to translate the entire Bible from the Latin Vulgate into the Midland English dialect. Although many translations have followed since this incredible feat, we can still see the effects of some of his terminology. Some of the terms such as "mote," "beam," and "strait gate" came from Wycliffe's translation.³²

Medieval "Hot Air"

I want to take some time to share some of the responses that the Catholic Church made concerning Wycliffe's translation. It's amazing how thoroughly religious deception can blind a person through the attitude of control.



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Translating the Bible into the language of the common people was considered total heresy by the medieval Catholic Church. An early and very famous church father, Jerome, had already revised their Latin edition around 450 A.D. Jerome’s revision was called the Latin Vulgate, and it was the only official and “sacred” version the Catholics recognized. To divert from the Vulgate was in the ranks of blasphemy.

Wycliffe’s feat was that the Bible was made available to the people so they could know God in a personal way.

A Catholic writer in Wycliffe’s time 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....But this Master John Wyclif[fe] translated the Gospel from Latin into English—the Angle [Anglo] not the angel language. And Wyclif[fe], 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....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.³³

I don’t know about you, but if I was a church member, I wouldn’t appreciate being called a “swine.” However, the article perfectly illustrates the mind-set of the day: If you weren’t a part of the elite Catholic clergy, your life amounted to nothing. Women were reduced to dirt. Why he wrote that the Bible was the “highest gift of the clergy” I’ll never understand. They seldom—if ever—read it! And Scripture says nothing about the angels speaking Latin as a common language.

Years later, Arundel, the archbishop of Canterbury was even more venomous with his disturbing comment. I believe this particular archbishop was one of the most evil and wicked men of his time.



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He said,

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.³⁴

The only thing these harsh words produced was the hot air that carried them through history. The real substance—the true feat already accomplished—was that the Bible was made available to the people so they could know God in a personal way. Wycliffe's actions honored the blood that Jesus shed for us all, and for that, we can be eternally thankful. The Catholic Church attempted to keep the price that Jesus paid in a secret box. They attempted to elevate themselves to a man-made position of divinity.

God does not live in statues; He lives in the heart. He is not the Head of a clique; He is the Head of the true church.

They Still Hate Him

I've noticed that, in many theological references written or edited by Catholics, Wycliffe's name still appears in the list under the heading "Heretics." Some seem to feel that Wycliffe undermined the unity of the Catholic faith. Yes, he did this, but it was an action ordained by God. God cannot be found in religious politics; He is not found in controlling tactics or deception. God does not live in statues; He lives in the heart. He is not the Head of a clique; He is the Head of the true church.

John 3:16 clearly states that "*whosoever*" believes and trusts in Him will have everlasting life. That simply means that the opportunity for salvation is open to *anyone* who will hear.

Romans 8:14 maintains that "*as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.*" To know God in the Spirit comes from a personal relationship with Him. It doesn't come from a mere religion.



John Wycliffe—“The Bible Translator”

Those Loud Lollards

The last three years of Wycliffe’s life were very eventful. In 1381, the famous Peasant’s Revolt erupted, in which the English common laborers arose in a struggle for civil liberty. They were tired of being overtaxed and oppressed by unfair laws. In the early summer, one hundred thousand angry peasants descended upon London, demanding to see the young King Richard II.³⁵

Wycliffe’s name was attached to that revolt, although everyone knew and agreed that he had nothing to do with it. He was busy translating the Bible in Lutterworth. But the Church still held that it was the Wycliffe doctrine and teaching that produced this sort of unrest.

Historians agree that, during this year, the “Lollards” became a prominent group of people. Many mistakenly place the name of the Lollards totally with Wycliffe’s followers, but it was not so. That mistaken identity came as a result of Courtenay banning the teachings of Wycliffe and silencing the major Lollard leaders of Oxford that associated with him.

The name *Lollards* meant “mumblers” and, eventually, it simply classified *any* group that opposed the Catholic Church. The Church also referred to this group as heretics.³⁶



Wycliffe sends the Lollard men out into the world.



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Some of the educated Lollards *were* Wycliffe followers—to be historically correct, they were the Wycliffites. But the uneducated, peasant Lollards didn't hold to a particular set of doctrines; they were simply political activists who hated the unfair burdens the Catholic Church imposed upon them.

The centers of Lollard activity were in the cities of Oxford and Leicester.³⁷ The Lollards were so popular in Leicester, the saying was that “every second man was a Lollard.”

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact beliefs of these people, as they are varied according to personal circumstance. But basically, the Lollards were parishioners who refused to pay tithes, denied the authority of the Catholic Church, belittled papal authority, attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation, and regarded all of the Catholic liturgy and doctrines as arrogant necromancy, or telling the future by communicating with the dead.³⁸ The list goes on and on.

But in 1382, the Lollards met with their first official trouble. Wycliffe's name was involved with it, although he was far from the action. Hereford, one of Wycliffe's most loyal followers, decided to hold a Lollard meeting on the Oxford campus. He gave a rousing and rowdy sermon, calling for the loyalty and support of Wycliffe against the Catholic hierarchy. Hereford and all of Wycliffe's followers who had remained at Oxford were excommunicated as a result of this meeting.

The Earth Quaked

The year of 1382 was even more eventful than the previous.

Sudbury, the former archbishop of Canterbury had been murdered during the Peasant's Revolt. Finally, Courtenay had obtained his dream—he was inducted as the new archbishop of Canterbury. His first and primary goal as the new archbishop was to take care of Wycliffe's doctrines and followers.

Courtenay called for a council to meet at Blackfriars to officially and formally condemn Wycliffe's opinions. He invited nine other bishops and thirty-six graduates of theology to make a decision on twenty-four of Wycliffe's writings. Interestingly, Wycliffe's name was never mentioned at the council—only his writings.



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The proceedings were brought to an end on May 21, 1382, after four days of discussion. Ten of the propositions were found to be heretical and the rest erroneous. Courtenay decreed that the king’s officers were to arrest any of the “poor preachers” who were caught preaching throughout the countryside. He also passed sentence that all Wycliffe’s teachings and tracts—anything he had written or edited—were to be immediately seized. Any student at Oxford found guilty of following the Wycliffe doctrine would be expelled without discussion.

Determined to silence the followers of Wycliffe, Courtenay left Wycliffe himself untouched. History has never discovered why.³⁹ Perhaps John of Gaunt made a secret deal with Courtenay, probably involving money, if Courtenay would leave Wycliffe alone. Given his hatred for Wycliffe and knowing his love for wealth and influence, this may be the only logical answer for why Courtenay never pursued Wycliffe personally. Wycliffe was never summoned, and he never intervened. He remained secluded and unmolested at Lutterworth, translating the Bible.

However, on this particular day, Courtenay’s council was cut short by an uncanny and unusual earthquake. Both sides—Courtenay and Wycliffe—attributed the unusual occurrence to the judgment of God upon the other. Courtenay felt that God was on his side; Wycliffe believed God was angry at the council’s conclusions. That famous council meeting is known today as “The Earthquake Council.”

Undercurrents of Reformation

The year of 1382 also brought another very important event. It was the marriage of England’s young King Richard II to Anne of Bohemia. The marriage united the separate countries and, at the urging of Queen Anne, opened the door for Bohemian students to become educated at Oxford.

Once at Oxford, the Bohemian students began to secretly study and agree with the writings of Wycliffe. One of the most famous Bohemian students to attend Oxford was Jerome of Prague. Jerome eventually carried back the writings of Wycliffe to Bohemia, where they fell into the hands of the famous Reformer John Hus. Although Wycliffe had been silenced in England, within a few years, his



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Religious reformer John Wycliffe preaching from his bed.
Getty Images

teachings exploded in Bohemia, and the Hussite movement carried us into the Reformation.

In 1382, Wycliffe found time to write his most famous document to date, entitled *Triologue*. The writing takes the form of a discussion between Truth, Falsehood, and Wisdom, and covers briefly all of the subjects Wycliffe had previously dealt with in length. It was his first writing to be printed, although Wycliffe never saw it. It wasn't printed until 1525; but, historically, it is credited for being the one original Wycliffe writing that linked him to the Reformers in the sixteenth century.⁴⁰

Amid the torrent that flowed from Wycliffe's pen, he suffered the first of two strokes in 1382. This first stroke left him partially paralyzed. The pope attempted to summon Wycliffe to Rome to answer certain charges, but because of his weakened condition, Wycliffe was unable to comply.

Death of "The Parson"

The year of 1383 was somewhat uneventful for Wycliffe. Because of his profuse writings, it is doubtful that he personally pastored the



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church at Lutterworth. Although he was the main figure there, no doubt other pastors tended to the people on his behalf.

Wycliffe's second stroke came at the end of December in 1384 while he was listening to Mass. This stroke caused acute paralysis. Wycliffe could no longer speak. Three days later on December 31, 1384, Wycliffe died, leaving the earth to be with the Lord.

Even with the Catholic Church's hatred of him, Wycliffe was never excommunicated. His funeral was simple, and Wycliffe's body was buried in the consecrated ground of the Lutterworth church.

Purvey, his faithful associate, continued to work on the English Bible. The first version was finished before Wycliffe died, but a revision was put into motion by Purvey, who named it, appropriately, *The Wycliffe Bible*.

Wycliffe's influence spread far past the clergy. He didn't stay isolated in a ministerial “box”—Wycliffe obviously had friends in every arena of life. We know he had good friends in the government and faithful friends among the common laborers. The famous English poet Geoffrey Chaucer lived during Wycliffe's time, and the two were friends. Both wrote in the Midland English dialect, and both shared the same friendship with John of Gaunt. It is said that in Chaucer's famous *Canterbury Tales*, the part of “The Parson” was written as a tribute to John Wycliffe. It says,

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.⁴¹

Wycliffe's friends are a tribute to the way he lived his life. He never compromised his principles or his values, but it's clear that Wycliffe affected every person he came in contact with.



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It's sad to see ministers so caught up in the church world that they can't identify with the common man, or with someone who is not in their particular field or calling. To truly be effective as believers, we must learn that our security doesn't come from those who believe like we do. Jesus came to touch the world—not a part of it, but all of it.

Live your life for God before every man, regardless of what they believe or how they act. Don't isolate yourself; instead, allow the Holy Spirit to work through you, and dare to go into every arena of life, turning others to God through your example, your witness, and your good works.

They Still Tried to Win

Although Wycliffe had many good and faithful friends who cherished his memory, his death could not satisfy the hatred and contempt that the Catholic Church still had for him.

In 1408, twenty-four years after Wycliffe's death, Arundel, the archbishop of Canterbury, summoned a group of clergy and decreed that no further translations of the Bible could be issued by way of book or tract and that no man was allowed to read such a translation, in private or public, as "composed in the time of the said John Wycliffe...under penalty of the greater excommunication."⁴² If a person was caught with one of Wycliffe's translations, he would lose his land and all his personal property to the Church.

Twenty-nine years after Wycliffe's death, a papal decree in 1413 ordered his books to be burned.

In 1415, thirty-one years after his death, the general council of the Western church met in Constance and condemned Wycliffe's teachings on three hundred accounts. They condemned his memory as "one who died an obstinate heretic" and ordered his bones to be exhumed from their resting place and "cast at a distance from the sepulchre of the church."⁴³

By then, a bishop by the name of Philip Repton was the head of the Lutterworth diocese. To his credit, Repton left Wycliffe's grave untouched.⁴⁴

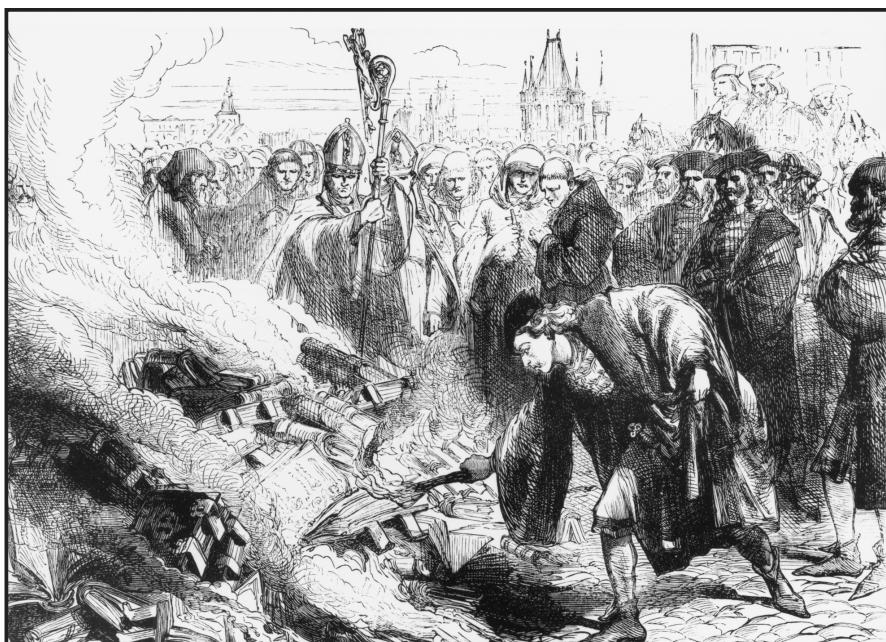
It wasn't until 1428, some forty-four years after Wycliffe's death, that the pope commanded that Wycliffe's bones be exhumed and burned; the new bishop of Lutterworth, Richard Fleming, carried out



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the task. After Wycliffe’s bones were exhumed and burned, the ashes were cast into the Swift River in an attempt to be free of any trace of him. But there was no chance of that. His memory was etched in the foundations of Christian liberty.

Thomas Fuller, describing the events, engraved his words forever in history. He so beautifully wrote, “They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into Swift, a neighboring brook running [nearby]. Thus this brook hath conveyed his ashes into the Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed the world over.”⁴⁵



The burning of Wycliffe’s books.

His Vision Exploded throughout the Earth

Wycliffe never lived to see the effects of his vision. He never lived to see if his Bible translation caught on with the people; all he had was the vision in his heart and his love for the common people.



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All he knew to do was to plant the seed and trust God to complete what He began—and God certainly did it.

After the printing press was invented in 1450 and began to be widely used, large volumes of the English Bible were printed at a rapid rate. The Catholic Church could no longer contain the “heresies” of the Reformers. Now the people were free to examine the Word of God and to know Him in a personal way. They were free to examine the fruits of their actions by His words—not the words of men.

The coming Reformers would translate the Bible into thirty-four languages. In a period of less than three hundred years, three-fourths of those translations were for Europeans. By 1818, Bible translation was worldwide as missionaries carried the Word to other nations and translated the Bible into their own language. By 1982, there were 574 translation projects listed by the United Bible Societies, involving members of two hundred different denominations and missions.

***Wycliffe planted a seed and then trusted
God to complete what He began. Today,
we can examine the fruit.***

In recent years, a high percentage of Bible translations has been done by believers in their native lands. For example, in the United States, Native American tribes are translating Bibles into their own languages. They have realized that they are able to establish their own churches if the Bible is in their native tongue. The concept is simple: first a Bible, then a convert, then a church!

In 1942, Bible translation became a career with the formation of Wycliffe Bible Translators. Founded by William Cameron Townsend, the organization's sole purpose is to fulfill the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:19) through Bible translation. In this organization, translators, literacy specialists, and support workers from thirty-four countries have teamed together to produce over five hundred translations, and one thousand more are in progress. They have estimated that there are still more than three thousand groups of people waiting for a Bible translation in their language.⁴⁶



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Today, Bible translation is offered in four American universities, and in England, Germany, France, Brazil, Japan, and Australia. The nations of Nigeria, Ghana, Brazil, Philippines, Cameroun, Kenya, Korea, and New Guinea have started their own national Bible translating organizations.

I will add that today, since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has somewhat changed its attitude toward Bible translation and the common man having access to the Scriptures. Of the 574 projects listed by the United Bible Societies in 1982, Roman Catholics were actively involved in 133 of them.⁴⁷ However, they still have their own translation of the Bible, as well as several Old Testament books that Protestants do not accept as the inspired Word of God.

If only Wycliffe could have seen what his vision was to become. You can see why, at the beginning of this chapter, I stated that you should *never underestimate the power of planting a seed*. Don’t be discouraged if God has instructed you to do something and nothing seems to be happening. Continue to be obedient—continue to plant the seed no matter how hard and cold the ground, or the work, seems to be. As the seasons of the earth always evolve, so will the fruits of your labor. Just remember that underneath the cold, hard ground of winter lies the makings of a beautiful flower or the fragrant fruit of spring! The timing is in the hands of the Lord and the obedience of your heart to do what He has asked you to do.

So, I close this chapter with the words of Jesus in John 4:34, 36–37, fitting verses for Wycliffe’s life.

My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work....And he that reapeith receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeith may rejoice together. And herein is that saying true, One soweth, and another reapeith.



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Notes

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² “Wyclif, John,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 15, (New York, N.Y.: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1987): 488.

³ *Christian History Magazine*, 11.

⁴ “John Wycliffe,” EPC of Australia. <<http://www.epc.org.au/literature/bb/wycliffe.html>> (5 June 2001)

⁵ *Christian History Magazine*, 12.

⁶ K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London, England: English Universities Press, Ltd., 1952): 76.

⁷ *Christian History Magazine*, 18.

⁸ “John Wyclif,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15722a.htm>> (25 May 2001)

⁹ *Christian History Magazine*, 18.

¹⁰ *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

¹¹ *Christian History Magazine*, 17.

¹² *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

¹³ “H371—The Reformation before the Reformation: John Wycliffe.” <<http://www.theology.edu/h371.htm>> (15 May 2001)

¹⁴ McFarlane, 91.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Christian History Magazine*, 25.

¹⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹ Peters, Edwards, “Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe.” <<http://topaz.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/indulge.htm>> (4 June 2001) [This information has moved to www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/indulge.htm as of August 2003.]

²⁰ *Christian History Magazine*, 24.

²¹ Ibid., 34.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 24.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.



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²⁷ McFarlane, 98.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 102.

³⁰ *Christian History Magazine*, 26.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “History of the Christian Church.” <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/6_ch05.htm> (1 June 2001)

³³ *Christian History Magazine*, 26.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Wat Tyler’s Rebellion,” *The World Book Encyclopedia* 21 (Chicago, Ill.: World Book, Inc., 2003): 113.

³⁶ McFarlane, 100–104.

³⁷ “Lollards,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09333a.htm>> (16 May 2001)

³⁸ “Lollard Conclusions, 1394.” <<http://topaz.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/conclu.htm>> (1 June 2001) [This information has moved to www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/conclu.htm as of August 2003.]

³⁹ McFarlane, 115-116.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 117.

⁴¹ “John Wycliffe, The Parson,” *Word Alive*. Reprinted with permission from *Word Alive* magazine, Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada. <<http://www.wycliffe.ca/wbthist/john/parson.html>> (9 June 2001).

⁴² *Christian History Magazine*, 26.

⁴³ “History of the Christian Church.” See also <http://www.island-of-freedom.com/wycliffe.html>.

⁴⁴ McFarlane, 120.

⁴⁵ “History of the Christian Church.” See also <http://www.island-of-freedom.com/wycliffe.html>.

⁴⁶ “History of Wycliffe Bible Translators.” <<http://www.wycliffe.org/history/wbt.htm>> (9 June 2001)

⁴⁷ *Christian History Magazine*, 27–29.

