

Church History (20): Forerunners to the Reformation

"In one sense, the Reformation originated in Luther's so-called 'tower experience,' which probably predated his 95 theses (1517). But in another sense, the Reformation flowed out of earlier attempts for renewal, the most notable of which were led by Peter Waldo and his followers in the Alpine regions, John Wycliffe and the Lollards in England, and John Huss and his followers in Bohemia" (Beeke).¹

I. Forerunners to the Reformation

1. *Peter Waldo (1140-1217) and the Waldensians.* "The founder of the Waldensians was a wealthy French merchant of Lyons called Waldes (or Waldo). Some time between 1173 and 1176, Christ's command to the rich young ruler deeply impressed him: 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me' (Matt. 19:21). Waldo obeyed this command literally, gave away all his wealth to the poor, and began a new life as a lay preacher, living only on voluntary contributions of food, clothing and money from others" (Needham).² He opposed some of the errant views of the established church (such things that would later be associated with Roman Catholicism). Waldo conflicted with the local bishops, as he and his followers began to preach. "The archbishop and clergy of Lyons became hostile toward him as Church law restricted preaching to the clergy. He appealed to the 3rd Lateran Council of 1179. Pope Alexander III (1159-81) praised his devotion to poverty, but denied him and his followers the right to preach without the approval of their local bishop. The archbishop of Lyons excommunicated them in 1182, and in 1184 Pope Lucius III excommunicated all Waldensians" (Needham).³

After being excommunicated from Lyons, and the established Church, the Waldensians settled in the Alpine Mountain regions of France and Italy, and then migrated into Austria and Germany. Persecution began against them in Southern France, and the first Waldensian was sentenced to death by burning in 1316. Greater suffering would begin 150 years later. "In 1487, Innocent VIII, announced a crusade, and called upon Charles VIII of France to execute the decree. Everything the Waldenses had endured before was a 'roses and flowers' compared with what they were now called to suffer. Innocent furnished an army of eighteen-thousand" (Schaff).⁴ And yet, even greater suffering would come during the Reformation. "The most bitter sufferings of this Israel of the Alps were reserved for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, after they had accepted the Reformation" (Schaff).⁵

"The Waldenses, leaning upon the Scriptures, sought to revive the simple precepts of the Apostolic age. They were the strictly biblical sect of the Middle Ages. This fact, and the pitiless and protracted persecutions to which they were subjected, long ago won the sympathies of the Protestant churches. They present a rare spectacle of the survival of a body of believers which has come up out of great tribulation" (Schaff).⁶ "The Waldensians were excommunicated for disobeying the church, not for holding heretical views. But they developed new ideas which the church did regard as heretical. They insisted that preaching was the primary means of salvation, and that it was more important than the sacraments. As the movement progressed, they continued to become more radical, rejecting belief in purgatory and in transubstantiation." (Hill).⁷ Throughout the sixteenth centuries, the Waldensians produced a number of confessions, which largely align with Protestant doctrine, and even possibly Baptist

¹ Joel Beeke, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism*, 1

² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:333

³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:333-334

⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:499

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:499

⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:493

⁷ Jonathan Hill, *History of Christianity*, 211

doctrine. "The efforts of Waldo and his followers were the seed of the Reformation. Five years after the reformation was born in 1517, the Waldensians made contact with Martin Luther. A little later they approached the southern German and Swiss Reformers. In 1532, they invited some Protestant representatives, including William Farel (a close associate of Calvin's), to attend their official gatherings at which they adopted a new Confession of Faith" (Beeke).⁸

We confess that baptism in water is a visible and external sign, which represents to us that which, by the invisible power of God thus taking place, is given us, namely the renovation of the Spirit and the mortification of our members in Jesus Christ, by whom also we are received into the holy congregation of the people of God, both protesting and declaring this our faith and change of life.⁹

We believe and confess the free remission of sins effected by the mercy and pure kindness of our Lord Christ, who died once for our sins, the just for the unjust, who took away our sins in His body on the cross, who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is Jesus Christ the righteous, who is our advocate with God. He is the price of our reconciliation, faithful and just to forgive us all of our sins. His blood cancels the certificate of debt to which we had been bound, and cleanses our consciences from dead works to serve the living God, who alone pardons and abolishes the sins of humanity, that they may be turned from an evil life and put away the iniquity which is in their hands, that they may have the sorrow which is according to God, which produces sure repentance unto salvation.¹⁰

2. *John Wycliffe (1324-1384) and the Lollards (laa-lrdz)* An Oxford professor, Wycliffe wrote both in Latin and English (for learned and common). "He has been called the morning star of the Reformation because God used him to shine rays of light into the spiritual darkness of England and much of Europe" (Beeke).¹¹ "He was born about 1324 near the village of Wyclif, Yorkshire, in the dioceses of Durham. In sermons, tracts and larger writings, Wycliffe brought Scripture and common sense to bear. The directness and relevance of his appeals brought them easily within the comprehension of the popular mind" (Schaff).¹² He died of a stroke in 1384. In 1413 his works were ordered burnt, and in 1429 he was condemned a heretic and his bones dug up and burnt. "They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into Swift, a neighboring brook running hard by. Thus this brook hath conveyed his ashes into 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" (Schaff).¹³ "Wycliffe is the greatest of English reformers: he was in truth the first reformer of Christendom. The work of the Waldenses, excellent as it was, cannot be compared to his. If Luther and Calvin are the fathers of the Reformation, Wycliffe is its grandfather" (D'Aubigne).¹⁴

(1) His beliefs. Until 1366, he confined himself to his duties in Oxford and his parish work. But that year, "he appears as one of the king's chaplains and as opposed to the papal supremacy in the ecclesiastical affairs of the realm" (Schaff).¹⁵ In 1367 he published a tract wherein he referred to the pope as "the anti-Christ, the proud, worldly priest of Rome, and the most cursed of clippers and cut-purses"

⁸ Joel Beeke, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism*, 1

⁹ *Confession of Faith of the Waldensians of Provence*, 1543

¹⁰ *Confession of Faith of the Waldensians of Merindol*, 1543

¹¹ Joel Beeke, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism*, 1

¹² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:315

¹³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:325

¹⁴ J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England*, 1:82

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:316

(Schaff).¹⁶ This began an intense divide between Wycliffe and the established church. "He accused the clergy of having banished the Holy Scriptures, and required that the authority of the Word of God should be re-established in the church" (D'Aubigne).¹⁷ He denounced priests as "robbers, malicious foxes, gluttons, devils, and apes." He referred to the pope as "the head vicar of the fiend," and monasteries as "dens of thieves, nests of serpents, houses of living devils." "Like other major reformers, Wycliffe first devoted himself to a life of scholarship but became increasingly concerned about corruption in the church. In particular, Wycliffe placed special emphasis on the centrality, authority, and inerrancy of Scripture. As a result, he decried the authority of the pope, the activity of bishops, and the practice of indulgences and confession to a priest. In addition, he repudiated the doctrine of transubstantiation as unbiblical, impossible, and offensive" (Ferguson).¹⁸

Wycliffe believed Scripture, which is the rule of truth, should be the rule of reformation, and we must reject every doctrine and every precept which does not rest on that foundation. He declared that to believe in the power of man in the work of regeneration is the great heresy of Rome, and from that error has come the ruin of the church. Conversion proceeds from the grace of God alone, and the system which ascribes it partly to man and partly to God is worse than Pelagianism. Christ is everything in Christianity; whosever abandons that fountain which is ever ready to impart life, and turns to muddy and stagnant waters, is a madman. Faith is gift from God; it puts aside all merit, and should banish all fear from the mind.¹⁹

In looking over the career and opinions of John Wyclif, it becomes evident that in almost every doctrinal particular did this man anticipate the Reformers. The more his utterances are studied, the stronger becomes this conviction. He exalted preaching; he insisted upon the circulation of the Scriptures among the laity; he demanded purity and fidelity of the clergy; he denied infallibility to the papal utterances, and went so far as to declare that the papacy is not essential to the being of the Church. He defined the Church as the congregation of the elect; he showed the unscriptural and unreasonable character of the doctrine of transubstantiation; he pronounced priestly absolution a declarative act. He dissented from the common notion about pilgrimages; he justified marriage on biblical grounds as honorable among all men; he appealed for liberty for the monk to renounce his vow, and to betake himself to some useful work.²⁰

(2) His followers. The origin of the term "lollard" is uncertain. At first, it was a derogatory name given to supposed heretics with little or no formal education (such as the followers of Wycliffe). By the middle of the 15th century, "lollard" had come to mean a heretic in general. "One of the main ways in which Wycliffe impacted his world was through the Lollards, a wave of men who followed his example in preaching. A powerful preacher himself, Wycliffe commissioned men to preach throughout England. He called them the Order of Poor Priests, but Wycliffe's enemies scorned them as 'Lollards,' a derisive term probably meaning 'a mumbler.' They preached obedience to God, reliance on the Bible as the guide to Christian living, and the simplicity of worship" (Lawson).²¹ "Wycliffe's death manifested the power of his teaching. The master being removed, his disciples set their hands to the plough, and England was almost won over to the reformer's doctrines. The townsfolk crowded around these humble

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:316

¹⁷ J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England*, 1:92

¹⁸ Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of our Lord*, 147

¹⁹ J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England*, 1:82

²⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:346

²¹ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 314

preachers; the soldiers listened to them, armed with sword and bucklers to defend them; and even the royal family was partly won over to the reformation. England was like a tree cut down to the ground, from whose roots fresh buds were shooting out on every side, ere long to cover all the earth beneath their shade" (D'Aubigne).²²

The Lollards were plain, meek, and often timid folks, attracted by the word of God, affected at the condemnation it pronounces against the errors of Rome, and desirous of living according to its commandments. God had assigned them a part – and an important part too – in the great transformation of Christianity. Their humble piety, their passive resistance, the shameful treatment which they bore with resignation, the penitent's robes with which they were covered, the tapers they were compelled to hold at the church door – all these things betrayed the pride of the priests, and filled the most generous minds with doubts and vague desires. By a baptism of suffering, God was then preparing the way to a glorious reformation.²³

(3) His legacy. It was Wycliffe's English translation of Scripture that proved his greatest legacy. "Wycliffe's chief service for his people, next to the legacy of his own personality, was his assertion of the supreme authority of the Bible for clergy and laymen alike and his gift to them of the Bible in their own tongue" (Schaff).²⁴ Wycliffe himself said: "Christian men and women, old and young, should study fast in the New Testament, and no simple man of wit should be afraid unmeasurably to study in the text of holy Writ. The New Testament is of full authority and open to understanding of simple men, as to the points that be most needful to salvation."²⁵

One of the labors on which Wycliffe was intent to complete, was a translation of all the books of the Old and New Testament, from Latin into English. This work he undertook, that his countrymen, of every class, having the Scriptures made thus accessible to them in their own tongue, might be armed in the most effectual manner against the errors and superstitions of the times. Before his time, portions of the sacred Scriptures had been translated into English, and passed, probably, in some instances, into the hands of wealthy and distinguished persons among the laity; but a translation of the whole volume into the language spoken by the people, that the highest and lowest might be alike readers of the Bible in their own tongue, and that men might everywhere appeal to it as their ultimate authority in respect to all questions of truth and duty—that truly Protestant purpose—owes its origin in our ecclesiastical history, to the intelligence, the piety, and the dauntlessness of Wycliffe.²⁶

3. *John Huss (1372-1415) and the Hussites*. "Many universities helped to give birth to the Protestant Reformation. The fires of reform were ignited in the university lecture halls. John Wycliffe taught at the University of Oxford and spread his Augustinian doctrine to his students. John Hus, a Bohemian Pre-Reformer, lectured at the University of Prague" (Lawson).²⁷ "Across the seas in Bohemia (Czechoslovakia), where the views of Wycliffe were transplanted, they took deeper root than in England, and assumed an organized form. In its earlier stages, the movement went by the name of Wycliffism. It was only in the later periods that the names Hussites and Hussitism were substituted for Wycliffites and

²² J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England*, 1:85

²³ J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England*, 1:90

²⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:338

²⁵ As quoted by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:341-342

²⁶ *Tracts and Treatises of John Wycliffe*, lvi

²⁷ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 287

Wycliffism" (Schaff).²⁸ Huss himself, in 1411, confessed to have read Wycliffe for more than 20 years, translating several of his books. The same year, Pope John XXIII called Europe to a crusade, promising indulgences to all who participated. Huss denounced the religious war and denied the pope's right to give indulgences. He publically taught that remission of sin comes through repentance alone and that the pope had no right to use the secular sword. The corrupt clergy appealed to the pope to be protected "from the ravages of the wolf, the Wycliffist Huss, the despiser of the keys" (Schaff).²⁹ Pope John had his church building razed to the ground, and Huss went into exile where his influence grew through his writings. Three years later he answered the charge of heresy at the Council of Constance (southern Germany), where he was imprisoned and finally sentenced to die. The sentence in part read, "the holy council, having God only before its eye, condemns John Huss to have been and to be a true, real and open heretic, the disciple not of Christ but of John Wycliffe" (Schaff).³⁰

When the chain was put about him at the stake, he said, with a smiling countenance, 'My Lord Jesus Christ was bound with a harder chain than this for my sake, and why then should I be ashamed of this rusty one?' When the fagots were piled up to his very neck, the duke of Bavaria was so bossy as to desire him to renounce. 'No,' said Huss, 'I never preached any doctrine of any evil tendency; and what I taught with my lips I now seal with my blood.' He then said to the executioner, 'You are now going to burn a goose (Huss = goose), but in a century you will have a swan which you can neither roast nor boil (some have applied this to Luther).' The flames were now applied to the fagots, when our martyr sung a hymn with so loud and cheerful a voice that he was heard through all the cracklings of the fire, and the noise of the multitude. At length his voice was interrupted by the severity of the flames, which soon closed his existence. Then, with great diligence, gathering the ashes together, they cast them into the River Rhine, that the least remnant of that man should not be left upon the earth, whose memory, notwithstanding, cannot be abolished out of the minds of the godly, neither by fire, neither by water, neither by any kind of torment.³¹

(1) His beliefs. The beliefs of Huss were basically the same as those of Wycliffe. "Huss studied and greatly admired Wycliffe's writings – some of Huss' own works reproduce Wycliffe's almost word-for-word" (Needham).³² "In England, Czech students studying at Oxford became captivated by the Reformed teachings that had been handed down by John Wycliffe. In time, these inflamed students carried these God-centered truths back home to Bohemia, where Wycliffe's theological and philosophical views were widely adopted almost immediately. At the heart of this emerging movement was a return to Scripture and renewed pursuit of doctrinal integrity and personal purity" (Lawson).³³ His most influential work was entitled, *On the Church (De Ecclesia)*. "His main argument was that the Christian church is the universal body of those predestined to life. This work became the chief document of the Hussite revolution in fifteenth-century Bohemia. It even played an important role in Luther's eventual break with the papacy" (Lawson).³⁴

With a freedom, and in an evangelical spirit, which reminds us of Luther, he testified against the vices of the clergy and the nobility, and did not spare even the Pope and his court. Kindness and severity were both tried for the sake of silencing this voice, but in

²⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:358

²⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:365

³⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:371

³¹ *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, 143-144

³² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:420

³³ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 315-36

³⁴ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 323

vain. Many of his sermons are so eloquent, so penetrating and powerful, that they would scarcely be allowed, even in the present day, to appear without alteration. With him Gospel truth was everything, and in publishing this he cared little for persons and rank. He thought with the Apostles, 'If I yet please men, I should not be the servant of Christ' (Gal.1:10).³⁵

(2) His followers. "The news of Huss' execution stirred the Bohemian nation to its depths. Huss was looked upon as a national hero and a martyr" (Schaff).³⁶ After his death, his followers (called Bohemian Brethren), migrated to Moravia and became known as the Moravians. "By 1500, the Bohemian Brethren numbered 2000,000 scattered in 300 or 400 congregations in Bohemia and Moravia. They had their own confession, catechism and hymnology" (Schaff).³⁷ When the Moravians (Hussites) published their Confession in 1535, Martin Luther wrote a preface to it. "I therefore commend this Confession of the Brethren to all who are pious in the Lord. In it they will see clearly how unjustly they have been damned and harassed by the Papists up to this point."³⁸

We teach that through Christ, by faith in Christ, men are freely justified, saved, and given remission of sins through mercy, without any human work or merit. They teach that His blood and death alone suffice for the abolition and expiation of all the sins of all men. Peter agrees with this in Acts: 'There is salvation in no one else than in the one Lord Jesus, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved' (4:12). We teach in addition that all men are to come to Christ alone for pardon and the remission of their sins, for salvation, and for whatever else they implore through all the time of their lives (Heb.4:14-16). As Christ Himself cries out: 'If any are thirsty, let them come and drink' (Jn.7:37). 'Whoever comes to me will not hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst' (Jn.6:35). Again we teach that all confidence and hope should be placed in Him alone, and all care cast on Him. And we add to this, that because of Him and His merit alone, God is pleased and gracious to love us, took upon us, to have us as His children; and that there is eternal life in Him which all who believe in Him may possess (Jn.6:40, 47). Again we teach that none are able to have this faith by their own powers, desire, or will, for it is a gift of God, who works it in men through the Holy Spirit where and when it seems good to Him, so that they might receive for salvation whatever is administered to them through the external word and sacraments instituted by Christ (Jn.3:27; 6:44, 65). We also teach that men are justified before God only by faith or confidence in Jesus Christ, without any efforts, merits, or works of their own (Rom.3:21-22; 4:5; Acts 13:39).³⁹

(3) His relation to the reformation. "The compelling story of John Huss reads like a dress rehearsal for what would follow a century later with Martin Luther. When writing to Melanchthon in February 1520, Luther said, 'Without knowing it I both taught and held the teaching of Huss: in short, we were all Hussites without knowing it.' Luther saw himself as a fulfillment of Huss' prediction of a coming swan, writing in 1531: 'John Huss prophesied of me when he wrote from his prison in Bohemia: They will now roast a goose, but after a hundred years they will hear a swan sing; him they will have to tolerate. And so it shall continue, if it please God'" (Lawson).⁴⁰

³⁵ J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *History of the Protestant Church in Hungary from the Beginning of the Reformation to 1850*, 20

³⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:391

³⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:399

³⁸ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Bohemian Confession* (1535)

³⁹ *The Bohemian Confession* (1535), Article 6: Christ the Lord and Faith in Him

⁴⁰ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 329-330