

The History of the Reformation...



HOW CHRIST
RESTORED
THE GOSPEL
TO HIS
CHURCH

The Morning Star of the Reformation... John Wycliffe

Our subject this morning is the “**Morning Star of the Reformation**”. Now I think that term, that title, “**the Morning Star of the Reformation**” is just about loveliest thing any man could ever hope to be called. The term itself is a biblical term but it is a strange term in that it is applied both to the devil and to the Lord Jesus.

It is applied to the devil in Isaiah 14:12.¹

^{NIV} **Isaiah 14:12**...How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!

And it is applied to the Lord Jesus as well and it is applied to the Lord Jesus by the Lord Jesus Himself in Revelation 22:16.

^{NIV} **Revelation 22:16**...“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”

Now there is a sense in which it seems presumptuous for any man to be assigned any title ever used to identify the Lord Jesus. But in this particular case I think it is appropriate. I think the fact that the same title was applied both to the devil and to the Lord Jesus makes it especially appropriate to the man who is the subject of our study this morning.

He was a man who was both loved and hated. By many, especially those that fell under the sharp reproaches of his blistering tongue, he was considered to be the devil incarnate. By others, especially those who were fortunate to hear him preach, he was honored as a prophet...like one of the prophets of old.

Now, he is known and referred to as the **“Morningstar of the Reformation”** because of the darkness in the time in which he lived and because his light shone so brightly in contrast to the darkness of his age.

Now the reason they called him the **“Morning Star”** is plain enough. Sometimes in that darkest part of the night, when it seems like morning is never going to come...one star shines brighter than all the others. Usually, that star is not a star at all in the technical sense...usually it is the planet Venus. Whenever it appears in the east just before sunrise...whenever it appears in the east just before sunrise and there is no moon...it shines with extraordinary brightness. Usually, it is so bright that by comparison its brightness more or less dwarfs the brightness of all the other stars in the sky.

Its brightness makes it lovelier than all the rest.

It is lovely for its brightness and in a real sense it is also lovely for its isolation.

The bright and morning star is never the only star in the sky...but its brightness is so intense and that it isolates it from all the rest of the stars so that it seems like it is the only star there. Of course, when the sun does finally rise even the bright and morning star is blotted out by its transcendent brilliance. But then as the day presses on people remembering its comparative beauty and brightness begin to ask, **“Do you remember the time just before the first glow of the sun began to show on the eastern horizon? Do you remember when it was so dark and it seemed that no sunrise would ever come? Do you remember that one star...that morning star and how beautiful it was? Wasn’t it something grand?”**

That is how it was and is with our subject this morning, the **“Morning Star of the Reformation.”**

He was both hated and loved. He was admired and despised. He was pilloried without mercy by some and defended with swords by others. He was hated by the Catholic Church but loved by his country’s king. He possessed the mind of Calvin, the courage of Luther and the tongue of John Knox and besides all that he was...an Englishman.

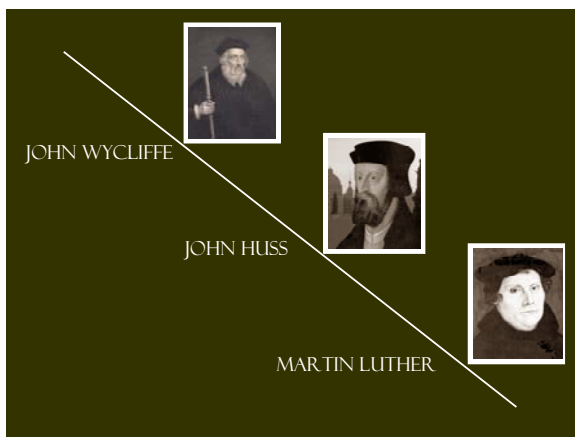
The unimpeachable John Milton once said of him:

He was honored of God to be the first preacher of a general reformation to all Europe.²

And that is mostly true. What he actually was, was a pre-reformer...a reformer before the Reformation. He was the **“morning star”** before the dawn of the recovery of the gospel.

His name was John Wycliffe. Now before we look at his life and his ministry, I thought I might preface our study with a few general remarks.

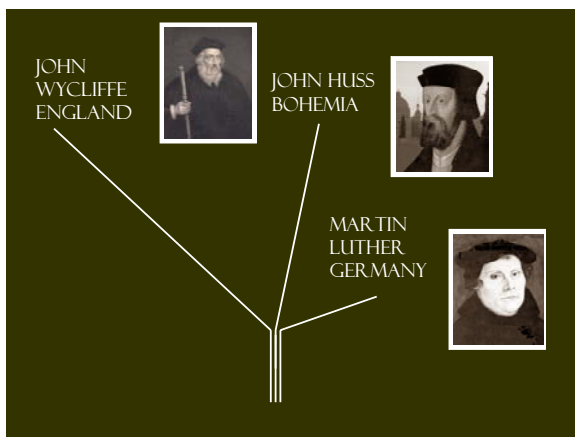
When people study history in general and the history of the Reformation in particular they tend, I think, to see an absolute linear connection between all of the particulars of history. That is, they tend to think that events always occur in a straight line and that each one builds neatly on the preceding event. They tend to think of history and the history of ideas as something like a long line of dominoes and because of that they tend to think that when a reformer comes along with a new idea or truth that his idea or truth knocks down a subsequent idea and all the rest follow quickly in a precise and orderly fashion. But history is never really quite that neat.



Take for example the case of John Wycliffe. Sometimes you will read a person or a biographer who seems to think that the line from Wycliffe to Luther is a straight line. They seem to argue that what Wycliffe held, Huss held and then Luther after him. And that is true to a point. But it is not completely true. Wycliffe actually held some views that were never embraced by Huss. Some of Wycliffe's views were never embraced until Calvin and those that followed after

Calvin. Huss, for example, disagreed with Wycliffe regarding transubstantiation. Luther disagreed with them both. But here's my point. That doesn't matter or at least it doesn't matter very much.

You see the dominoes of truth in actual history are almost never arranged in a perfectly straight line. One or two dominoes always wind up slightly out of line, slightly askew, and when a breakthrough occurs in the progress of history... truth will sometimes advance very quickly and then hit one of those places where the dominoes are askew and...stop. Sometimes it will even back up. To say it another way, sometimes after a visionary reformer...some dominoes remain standing and it falls to someone else to knock down the ones that were missed along the way. So, it winds up looking like this:



Now the reason that happens is because most of the time...a reformer's successors tend to embrace only a portion of his overall vision or insight and though the cause of truth still gets advanced...it is almost never orderly. It is almost never neat. Rather, and I hate to resort to such a cliché, it is something much more like two steps forward and one step back.

You see what usually happens is that a portion of the truth comes from one man and then a portion comes from another. Their ideas are tried like gold in the furnace of vocational ministry and perfected and compared to the Word of God and altered and improved or laid aside until the truth finally prevails. So when you study history you have to try to avoid the trap of taking what you know to be true and going back six or seven centuries and comparing it to what a man thought or taught and saying, **“Well clearly the man was an idiot!”**

It’s not always that simple. No, when you study history you have to examine a man and the times he lived in. You have to study his historical context and situation and see what he had to work with and what he had to contend with and then judge the man.

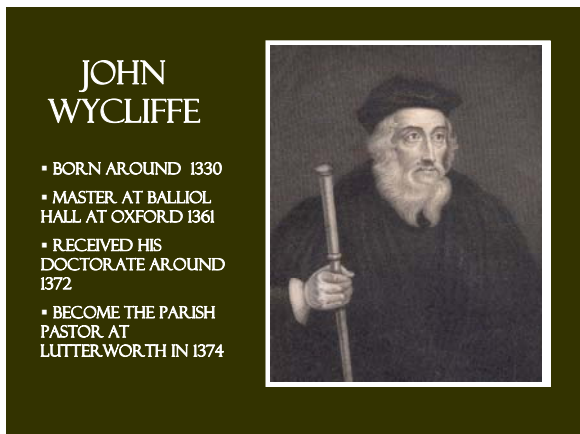
Now I bring all that up because for two or three centuries after the death of Wycliffe he was thought of as something of an embarrassment...much like the Scotsman John Knox is today. But then over time historians and theologians began to reevaluate his life and theology and all of a sudden Wycliffe came to be held in high regard...as he rightly should have been all along. Now I tell you that because Wycliffe’s life was so extraordinary. He is one of the few people who continued to make his enemies crazy long after his death. As far as I know, he is one of the few people in the history of the church who was ever excommunicated after having died and having been buried. He certainly is the only person I know of who was ever dug up forty plus years after having died to be burned as a heretic.³

Now the question remains, **“What kind of man could possibly evoke that kind of emotion? What kind of man could create that kind of anger? What kind of**

ideas could a man espouse that would lead someone to hate them so much?"

Let us see if we can see the answer to that together.

John Wycliffe was born in the village of Wycliffe, Yorkshire sometime between 1324 and 1330, probably the later date 1330 is more likely. Almost nothing is known of his early life except that his parents owned land and were wealthy enough to provide him with an excellent education. In that sense, he was different than Huss. He was not named after the town where he was born. The town where he was born and raised was named instead after his family. Still, we know almost nothing of his life until the time he entered Oxford University. In 1361, he was listed as the Master of Balliol Hall, one of the colleges at Oxford, which meant that he had by that time already obtained his master's degree and was lecturing in various subjects...most like philosophy.



In 1363, he was appointed to a benefice at a local parish, which meant that he performed the duties of a parish priest and cared for the souls of a congregation and received in return, a small annual income for his labor. He was what was called a secular priest, which meant that he interacted with the public through preaching and ministry as opposed to being a monk or a religious priest who

was largely confined to the monastery. In 1366, he was appointed as one of the king's chaplains. In 1368, his benefice was moved to a different parish, one that paid less but was much closer to Oxford. Some time around 1372, Wycliffe finally received his doctorate, which opened up for him a whole range of possibilities. It allowed him to then both lecture and write on theological topics.⁴ By my reckoning he would have been about forty-two years old.

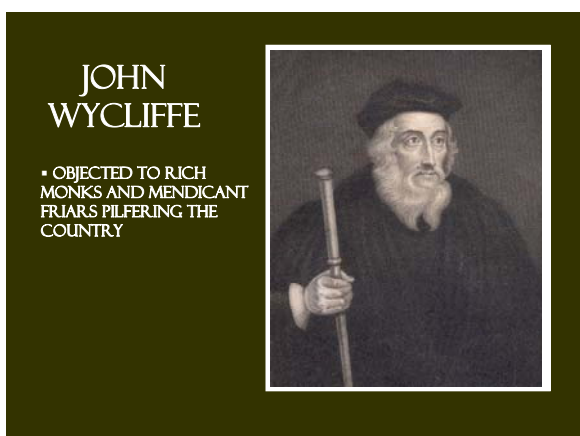
Later, in 1374 at the appointment of the king, Wycliffe was given the benefice of the parish at Lutterworth, which he retained till his death in 1384. His salary was set at £26 a year.

Now you shouldn't be too concerned about the fact that Wycliffe was both a professor at Oxford and a parish priest. It was common in his day partly because it provided professors the opportunity to make additional income and partly because the England of his day was still reeling from the dreadful effects of the Black Death. You see in 1348, all of Europe groaned under the weight and devastation of the bubonic plague. Some historians have estimated that up to two-thirds of the population of Europe died. Others estimate it to be less but it is reasonably certain that up to half of the population of Europe died in the plague.

Now I want you to think about that. Many farms were simply abandoned. Many fields went unplowed. Many harvests went unharvested. Farm animals wandered the countryside untended and that lack of care extended to parish churches. Many congregations were left largely on their own. Now what that meant practically is that many parishes had no pastors at all. One of the bishops of the time encouraged parish priests to try to preach at least four times a year in their parishes. You can see the expectation was not very high. As a result many

of the professors at Oxford and elsewhere were assigned the religious care of various parishes. Still many churches went unshepherded and the care of souls was left largely to traveling mendicant friars.

Now that seemed like a wonderful solution but practically it created a great deal of conflict. You see, England was besieged in Wycliffe's day by hordes, and I really do mean hordes, of mendicant friars. Now a friar is not exactly the same thing as a monk. Monks were largely restricted to monasteries. Friars were like secular monks...they went out among the people. The term "**mendicant**" meant they begged for their bread. There were of course many monks at Oxford. Wycliffe despised the monks of his day. He accused them of laziness and gluttony and corruption of every sort. Wycliffe was always an advocate of the state taxing the wealth of the monasteries. He believed that the monasteries were bleeding the nation dry. They possessed up to perhaps a quarter of the land and as much as half of its wealth. Monks lived very well in Wycliffe's day as he noted in his studies at Oxford and Wycliffe despised them.⁵



He did not feel quite the same way about the mendicant friars. Now the term "**mendicant**" means they made their living or earned their bread by begging. In

addition, they often performed religious rites such as hearing confession or granting absolution. No most of the friars in Wycliffe's days were Franciscan. That is, they were members of the Order of the Franciscans founded by Francis of Assisi. They were everywhere in England in Wycliffe's day and they posed a special problem to individual parishes in that they wound up scouring the land of almost all of its revenue. In other words, after the mendicant monks passed through a parish there was not enough money left to sustain the regular ministry of a parish priest. They came through...heard confession...offered absolution...took the money and left. No you might be thinking to yourself, **"Well what is wrong with that? They preached. They listened to confessions. They did the work of the ministry. Why shouldn't they get the money?"**

One historian writes this:

These meddlesome friars not only interfered with the regular teachers at Oxford, but also with the work of those we would call the regular clergy, or incumbents of parishes. This interference was doubly troubling because they claimed superior loyalty and piety. Their preaching was rather attractive, with an off-hand freedom of speech, drawing the attention of the people, as we have noticed on the English streets a Punch and Judy show attracting the crowd for the ninety-ninth time. Their discourses consisted mostly of idle tales, sometimes the fables of Greece and Rome, more often the stories from the lives of the saints...Still if these mendicant friars had been limited to preaching it might have been well;⁶

But they didn't just limit themselves to preaching. You see, the problem was they were also granted the right by the pope to hear confession and to offer absolution.⁷ Now guess what that led to? It led to sins being absolved for money. You see the mendicant friars were constantly on the move. They had no tie to the community they passed through. They were never held responsible for what

they said or did. They were very content to absolve a man of his sins and to give them a paper of absolution if the money was right and it was that aspect that made Wycliffe crazy. You see Wycliffe understood first hand that a parish priest hoping to hold sinners accountable for the manner in which they repented of their sins had no chance at all against such a shameless bunch of mercenaries. So Wycliffe came to hate the mendicants. He hated them not because of their vow of poverty but rather because of the shameless way and manner they extorted money and deluded the weak and uneducated.

And it is very easy to see how that could have happened. The people revered the mendicants. They held them in awe as great and faithful servants of God because they believed they were true to their vows of poverty. In fact, one historian writes this:

Many made it an essential part of their last wills that their bodies, after death, should be wrapped in old, ragged Dominican or Franciscan habits, and interred among the Mendicants; for such was the barbarous superstition and wretched ignorance of this age, that people universally believed they should readily obtain mercy from Christ at the day of judgment if they appeared before his tribunal associated with the Mendicant friars.⁸

Now think about that. They believed that they were going to stand in better stead with God after death because they wrapped in the tattered rags of a mendicant friar. Wycliffe despised that kind of superstition and he went after them with all his being. Now I have to tell you, Wycliffe's objections early on were not theological. They were moral. He hated the dishonesty and greed and avarice of the monks and friars. That is why he objected to them so violently. Early on he admired their poverty. But when he saw how things actually worked

themselves out he fought them with all his being. That meant that wrote against them in the form of various tracts and sermons, tracts and sermons, which he wrote in English by the way.

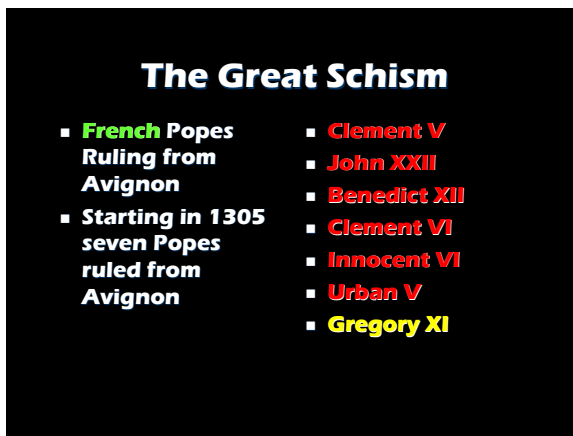
Let me just share one example to help you see how much he despised the mendicants. About 1376 or so, Wycliffe became very ill. Almost everyone was sure he was going to die. Now some of the mendicant monks heard he was dying and they came to visit him. AT his bedside they appealed to him saying, **“Now brother John, you’ve written some terrible things about us and now you are about to die. Shouldn’t you take this opportunity and repent of what you have said and written. Shouldn’t you do that... shouldn’t you repent of your sin before you die?”**

Wycliffe propped himself up on his pillows and pointed his long skinny finger at them and said something to the effect of, **“Well now...because you have done this I am not going to die. In fact, I am going to come after you all the harder.”**

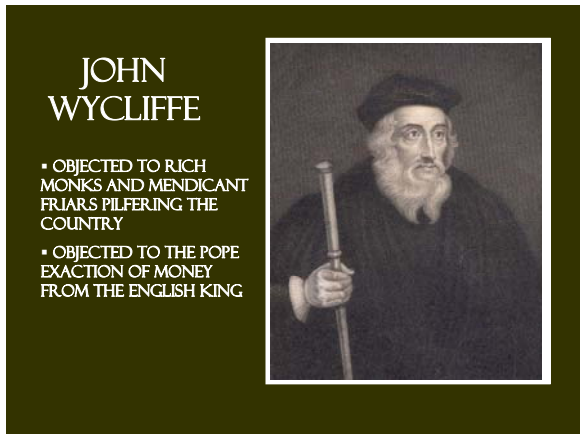
And in truth, that is what he did. He lived and went after them again...with all of his might. That is the kind of man he was. He was right to do that by the way but 150 years later Wycliffe’s objection to the morality of the mendicants led Luther to write the following:

Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don’t fight about life and condemn the papists on that account. Wycliffe and Huss didn’t know this and attacked the papacy for its life. I don’t scold myself into becoming good, *instead* I fight over the Word and whether our adversaries teach it in its purity. That doctrine should be attacked — this has never before happened.⁹

Now I know what Luther means by that but I have to tell you I think it is a bit unfair. It is unfair and though it grieves me to say it, I think Luther was wrong about Wycliffe. Oh, he was right enough about this issue with the mendicants but all that did was put Wycliffe on the radar screen of the English King Edward the III. Wycliffe's writing drew the kings' attention and the reason it did that, I think, is because Wycliffe was willing to attack the Catholic Church over the issue of money. The king liked that.



The reason Knox's writings against the mendicant monks drew Knox to the King's attention is because the pope, Pope Gregory XI, the last pope before the Great Schism, was demanding from England an additional ecclesiastical contribution to Rome of a 1,000 marks. Needless to say, the government was unable to pay the tax both because they were unable to get at the property set aside in the monasteries and because the begging friars had already scoured the parishes clean.



Parliament then backed Edward III's refusal to pay the tax and a commission was appointed by the King to go to negotiate with the papacy. Knox was appointed as a member of that commission.

After the return of the commission, Knox began to write against the papacy with an increased fervor.

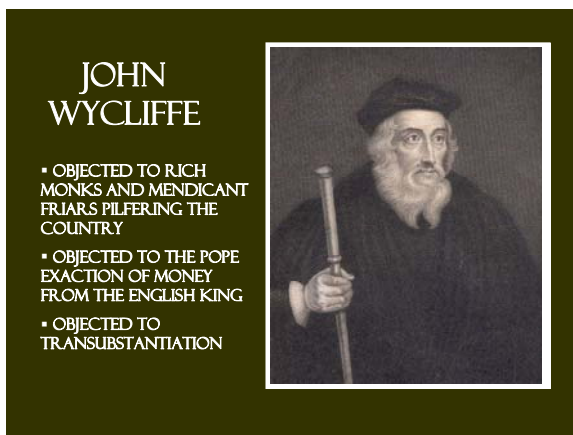
- He wrote that the civil magistrate was not under the dominion of the church.
- He wrote that the pope had no permanent dominion over anything and that his bulls or decrees only mattered as they were in conformity with the law of God.
- He wrote that the pope had no authority to excommunicate anyone who had not already excommunicated themselves by virtue of their sinfulness.
- He wrote that the thing that mattered...the only thing that mattered was the authority of the Word of God.

Now needless to say, that drew the ire of Gregory XI, who insisted that the crown submit Wycliffe to be examined by the archbishop of Canterbury or the Bishop of London to determine whether or not he was orthodox or a heretic.

Now that cause was taken up by the Bishop of London, William Courtenay who summoned Wycliffe to St. Paul's in London. Wycliffe arrived at St. Paul's in the company of the King's son, John of Gaunt...the Earl of Lancaster and four Dominican mendicant friars who were planning to represent him. But the examination never took place. The Bishop of London and John of Gaunt got into a fight over whether Wycliffe had to stand or was to be permitted to be seated during his examination. John of Gaunt, the four Dominicans and John Wycliffe had to fight their way out of St. Paul's. Needless to say it was a breach that was never healed.

Shortly after the riot at St. Paul's Gregory XI, the last pope before the Great Schism, issued five decrees or bulls against Wycliffe and insisted that he be shipped off to Rome for trial. John of Gaunt, Edward the III's son and the Protector of young Richard II refused and simply placed Wycliffe under house arrest at Oxford.

Wycliffe promptly began to write against the doctrine of transubstantiation.



When Wycliffe did that he argued that that the benefit of receiving Christ only occurred as the elements were received in faith. He didn't really deny that Christ was present in the supper. What he denied was that priests had any ability in and of themselves to consecrate the elements to turn them into the body and blood of Jesus. He denied that the elements ever stopped being bread and wine. He argued that the bread and wine always remained bread and wine.

Now the implication of his argument was pretty dramatic. It meant, when logically followed out to its conclusion, that salvation then was no longer in the hands of priests. It meant that each man might come to God on the basis of faith and not on the basis of receiving the body and blood of Jesus in the sacrament. If the priests had no ability to transform the elements into the actual body and blood of Jesus and individuals were still able to sacramentally feed on Jesus by faith it meant that man's relationship to God was mediated by Jesus and not by some priest or by the church.

In the Mass, it is said, **"I believe in one God only, Jesus Christ, by whom all things be made"**...And you then, who are an earthly man, by what reason may you say that you make your Maker? You say every day that you make of bread the body of the Lord, flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, God and man;...If you make the body of the Lord in these words, **"Hoc est corpus meum,"** you yourself must be the person of Christ or else there is a false God...¹⁰

This idea was his most radical idea and yet today we see it and accept it as something rather obvious. But it cost Wycliffe his post at Oxford. He was banned from the university. Even John of Gaunt, his able defender at St. Paul's, abandoned him. Still, to their praise it must be said that they refused to submit

him to the discipline of the papacy, which would have been hard because at that point there were two popes but you already know all about that.

Now had Wycliffe been an ordinary man that would have been it for him. He would have retired to his parish at Lutterworth and lived out his life and died and been buried and been forgotten. But he was not an ordinary man. Wycliffe simply could not get the idea of the "**mendicant friars**" out of his mind.

Though he loathed their behavior and their greed, he could not get out of his mind what a wonderful chance had been missed in sending men out to the countryside. If only they had had the Word of God to preach and had actually done so. The idea of sending priests to the countryside was a great idea. It was just that they took the wrong them with them.

So here's what Wycliffe did. He began to translate the Bible into English. He and the men still loyal to him began to translate the Latin Vulgate into the language of the people of middle England, which would have made him a legend by itself...to give the common Englishman the Bible in his own language would have made him a legend. But that is not all that he did. He then recruited young men from Oxford to voluntarily submit to a life of poverty and to take the Bible he had translated out to the parishes and preach to the poorer people.

These men, clothed in simple garments...often barefoot...they called themselves the "**poor priests**"...they took the gospel out to the countryside. Later on these educated men were joined by even simpler men. They preached wherever they could and they actually preached the Bible. Imagine a poor uneducated farmer in England hearing the Word of God in English. The mendicants mocked them as

rubes, of course. But that didn't stop them. Sometimes they simply read passages and gave the sense of the words in the common language of the people. Sometimes they expounded the texts fully. Sometimes they led worship and sang psalms and preached. The people all over England loved them as they had loved the mendicants before them...only in loving them they came to know and love God through their preaching.

These "**poor priests**" later came to be known as "**Lollards**". Now it is hard to know exactly where the name came from and there are all kinds of arguments about its original derivation. Some think the name came from the Dutch "**lull**" which meant something like "**sing**"...although their enemies argued that it meant "**mumble**." Others, obviously enemies, said the word came from the Latin word for "**tares**"...the implication being that they were weeds in God's kingdom.

Now later on, these "**poor priests**," these "**Lollards**" were persecuted without pity by Henry the IV and this grieves me to say even by Henry V. In fact, the word "**Lollard**" would later come to be associated permanently with Wycliffe and anyone opposing the Roman church. But that was thirty or forty years off. In London today there is a famous spot marked as the "**Lollard's Pit**" where Thomas More and others executed hundreds of Lollards.

John Wycliffe died in 1384 at his parish church in Lutterworth. He was buried not excommunicated but as a parish priest in good standing with the church. At the Council of Constance, the council that condemned and burned John Huss some thirty-one years later, he was excommunicated and condemned. Martin V demanded that his body be dug up and cast out of hallowed ground. The English refused...but then finally in 1428 at the insistence of the papacy, some forty-four

years after his death...his body was dug up and his bones burned and cast into a little brook called the Swift.

The words of Fuller, describing the execution of the decree of Constance, have engraven themselves on the page of English history. **“They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into Swift, a neighboring brook running hard by. Thus this brook 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.”**¹¹

And you know as I thought about that it occurred to me that they may have burned his ashes but they failed to diminish the brightness of his star.

Let’s pray.

¹ See EBCOT, Isaiah 14:12...“To interpret v. 12 and the following verses in this way means that the passage points to Satan, not directly, but indirectly, much like the way the kings of the line of David point to Christ. All rulers of international significance whose overweening pride and arrogance bring them to ruin under the hand of God's judgment illustrate both the satanic and the Antichrist principles, for these principles are really one.”

² George S. Innis, *Wycliffe: The Morning Star*, (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1907), 15.

³ David S. Schaaf, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 4: The Middle Ages A.D. 1294-1517* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1910), 325. Schaaf writes: “...members, such as Gerson and D’Ailly, we might have expected tolerant treatment, formally condemned his memory and ordered his bones exhumed from their resting-plane and ‘cast at a distance from the sepulcher of the church.’ The Holy Synod, so ran the decree, ‘declares said John Wycliffe to have been a notorious heretic, and excommunicates him and condemns his memory as one who died an obstinate heretic.’ In 1429, at the summons of Martin IV., the decree was carried out by Flemmyng, bishop of Lincoln.”

⁴ “Wycliffe and Scholasticism,” *Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes, Volume 2: The End of the Middle Ages, 1907-21.*

⁵ Martin Luther, *Vol. 30: Luther’s Works, vol. 30 : The Catholic Epistles*, Trans. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed. In Luther’s Works 1 Jn 4:11. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House , 1999, c1967). “This, I fear, will happen to our monks, even to those who appear to be the saintliest. For we see that their sects are only sects of perdition, because they want to propitiate God by means of their vows and their sanctity. The works of Christ and Christ Himself are

superior by far to our works, in which we have lived at least 40 years and have accomplished nothing. John wants this one and only article, namely, that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world and that we live through Christ alone, committed to us. This article Satan tries to take away from us. In this article the monks have erred; and if they have not repented, they have been damned, as Wycliffe has said. **I am surprised that he saw this in his time.**"

⁶ Innis, 130.

⁷ The four mendicant orders included: *Franciscans*, Minorites, or Gray Friars...named after Francis of Assisi. *Augustines*...named for St. Augustine. *Dominicans*, or Black Friars...Thomas Aquinas was there most famous member. *Carmelites*, or White Friars...reformed by Teresa of Avila.

⁸ James Strong & John McClintock, "Mendicant Order" in the *Cyclopedia Of Biblical, Theological And Ecclesiastical Literature*.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Vol. 54: Luther's Works, Vol. 54 : Table Talk* Trans. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed. in *Luther's Works Vol. 54*, Page 110. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1999, c1967).

¹⁰ *Christian History Magazine*, Vol II, No. 2, Issue 3, 1983. 24.

¹¹ Schaaf, 325.