

FORERUNNERS OF THE REFORMATION

In the 16th century a great event took place within the church. Under the leadership of gifted and sincere Christians, the church was once again renewed by the life-saving Gospel message. This return of the church to the teachings of the Bible was known as the Reformation. First, however, these reformers had to separate themselves from the Roman Catholic Church, which had become corrupt in its teachings and practice.

THE WALDENSES

The Reformation did not begin until 1500, yet many people were dissatisfied with the Roman Catholic Church long before then. In 1170 Peter Waldo saw that salvation was based on faith in but one Mediator, Jesus Christ. That meant that the works of man were as useless as prayers to the saints. Furthermore, there was no biblical proof that there was a place of suffering where the departed go to be cleansed of their sins known as purgatory.

Peter Waldo organized his followers to go out as teachers and preachers. Two by two they traveled throughout central and southern France preaching the Gospel. They were called “poor men of Lyons”, for they went about selling small household goods. In this way they met people and taught them the truths of the Scripture. When the church fathers became aware of the Waldenses, they began to persecute them. Those suspected of belonging to the Waldenses were tried and tortured and often burned at the stake.



JOHN WYCLIFFE

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John Wycliffe was a popular professor of theology at the University of Oxford, England. He taught that God, not the Roman Catholic Church, holds final authority. He also criticized the begging monks for their laziness and sinful lives. These teachings got Wycliffe dismissed from the university by the archbishop. The King of England however was impressed with his earnestness and appointed him to preach in the church at Lutterworth. Here Wycliffe came closer to the common people. He discovered how little they knew about the Bible and how their minds were filled with false ideas. The most important contribution by Wycliffe was his translation of the Bible into English. This meant the common people could finally hear the Bible read in a language they could understand.

Wycliffe organized bands of helpers called Lollards. Dressed in long cloaks and carrying a staff, they traveled about fearlessly attacking the evils of the church. The Lollards were severely suppressed, but their work bore much fruit.

The great preacher even dared to make an attack on the Pope, pointing him out as the Antichrist. He ridiculed the idea of worshipping images and relics, and he called masses the crusades and pilgrimages of fools. This aroused the anger of church officials and he was branded as a heretic. Many powerful nobles, however, protected Wycliffe and he died in peace on December 31, 1384. The Roman Catholics were so bitter toward Wycliffe that in 1415, thirty years after his death, a church council ordered his bones dug up, burned and scattered in the river. The seeds were being planted for a reformation in England and Scotland.



JOHN HUS

JOHN HUS OF BOHEMIA

The English king's wife, Anne of Bohemia, was acquainted with Wycliffe and approved of his teachings. Through her influence, many of his writings were sent to John Hus, professor at the University of Prague, Bohemia. As Hus studied Wycliffe's papers, he saw the truths that were being withheld from the common person. Hus began to preach sermons and wrote pamphlets speaking out against the Pope. He also exposed the sins of the bishops and priests and the superstition of the people. The Pope condemned Hus as a heretic and excommunicated him. Hus was forced to flee for safety to southern Bohemia.

In 1414 a great church council met at Constance in Switzerland. The Emperor and hundreds of bishops, princes and professors gathered to consider problems within the church—including heresy. Hus was invited to appear. The Emperor Sigismund gave him a promise of safe travel. Soon after Hus reached the city, however, he was thrown into prison

where he spent more than six months bound in chains and half starved. He was finally accused of heresy and was told to deny his teachings. Hus proudly refused to “lie in the face of God.” He was then abused and degraded in a formal ceremony in the great cathedral before many nobles, including the embarrassed Emperor who had promised Hus's safety. A paper hat was decorated with devils and placed on John Hus's head. That afternoon Hus was led out of the city to a nearby meadow where he was chained to a stake by the neck. Straw and wood were piled up to his chin and the fire was lighted. Hus calmly

TOPICAL INSIGHTS

GC-1

Lesson 5 Page 1

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sang a hymn until the smoke left him unconscious. His ashes were shoveled into a wheelbarrow and dumped into the Rhine River.

Many Bohemians armed themselves and marched upon the council demanding justice. When this was denied, a cruel war was waged which lasted fifteen years. The outnumbered followers of Hus finally were forced to submit.

SAVANAROLA OF ITALY

A critic of a different sort was Girolama Savanarola of Italy. He was an educated and cultured man who became a monk because of the miserable conditions of the world. This one monk soon became a popular preacher in Florence, Italy. In his preaching he spared no one—not even princes or Popes. Like John Hus, Savanarola was arrested, tortured and declared guilty of heresy. In May, 1498, Savanarola was hanged and burned.



MARTIN LUTHER
Portrait by Lucius Cranach

A MAN NAMED LUTHER

Although they did not know it, Wycliffe, Hus and other early reformers were preparing the way for the work of Martin Luther (1483-1546), who was to lead the people back to the teachings of the Bible and set them free from the oppression of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther was the son of a peasant, who worked in a rich mining district of north central Germany. Father Hans worked hard to save enough money to send Martin to a university. Luther's parents ruled their home with a strict hand, and Martin was taught discipline at an early age. Luther's early years were spent in the Mansfeld school. From here he went to Magdeberg, where the Brethren of Common Life had established a high school. After one year in Magdeberg he finished his high school in Eisenach.

At seventeen Martin entered the University of Erfurt where he studied law. Yet becoming a lawyer held little interest for this young man whose spiritual life meant so much. He finally called together some friends at a special banquet and announced that he was going to enter a monastery. To forsake the world of its sinful ways was the surest way for him to win a place in heaven. More and more he began to doubt how he could ever do enough to save his soul. Perhaps he was more troubled than usual in the spring of 1505. In that year two events greatly influenced his thinking. First a dear friend died of the plague. Luther was upset wondering what would happen to his soul should he die suddenly. Then on July 2, while returning to Erfurt after a home visit, he was overtaken by a severe thunder storm. A bolt of lightning struck nearby and threw him to the ground. In utter fear he cried out, "St. Ann, help me! I will become a monk!" This he believed was his call from heaven and his oath had to be obeyed. Luther became a monk. To him it seemed that the will of the Lord was clear.

HIS STORY

What does God say about those persecuted for their beliefs? (Matthew 5:10)

Wycliffe, Hus and Savanarola angered officials. Who also did the same? (Matthew 26:3-5)

What encouragement can we get from Peter in 1 Peter 2:20 and 5:10?

What must we be willing to do before we can follow Jesus? (Matthew 16:24)

Luther's conscience often troubled him in his early years. What alone can cleanse our consciences? (Hebrews 9:14)

TO THINK ABOUT

Why is it so important to constantly remind ourselves that works cannot save us?

What is purgatory?

What was it like to live at a time when the Bible could not be read because it was not in your language?

Would you be willing to criticize an unfaithful church?

Why did the early church feel it necessary to put to death their dissenters?

Martin Luther had a restless spirit. How might this have actually helped him?