

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Nineteen

The Bible-Men of the Middle Ages Part Four on the Life of John Wycliffe

Introduction

As we have seen the English reformer John Wycliffe had the burden to make the Word available to every Englishman so that it might be read in his own tongue. With this in his heart, Wycliffe and his associates worked to translate the entire Bible into the English language – a previously unaccomplished task. The translation of the Bible into the vulgar, or language of everyday people, for their education and edification was a key step in ushering in the Reformation.



The Lord had given Wycliffe the time and place to do this translation work. Because of his lack of support from his fellows, he was driven away from the university to Lutterworth, a quiet village where he could work unhindered. It was there he not only accomplished his task of the Bible translation, but also spoke out more freely his ideas and teachings regarding the Bible. This little community thus became a beacon of light to shine forth to the whole country.

Interest in his work gradually arose. Although there was no printing press available at the time, over one hundred hands were enlisted to support this work. Many toiled to make copies and this new translation of the Bible began to have its effect. Eventually hundreds of so-called “Wycliffe Bibles” were produced and hand-copied. Those who were able to obtain one began to consider it as the only guide for their faith and conduct.

Need for Distribution

In addition to the work of translation,

Wycliffe realized that the word of truth needed to get out, to be made available to the people. In our time, we also have realized that there must be more than just an excellent translation of the Bible available. There is also the need for the Word to be interpreted, expounded, and explained with the hope that these truths could be distributed and understood by many.

After releasing many matters in both the spoken word and in writing, Wycliffe considered how to spread these truths. How would he let others know that the Bible was the only source of truth? He had spoken and written regarding the inappropriateness of the clergy to rule over the people. He had writings challenging the teachings of transubstantiation, indulgences, purgatory, and of the corruption of the religious orders. All these matters he publicized in short treatises, leaflets, and tracts. Now was the time for these ideas and teachings to be widely distributed. Wycliffe found that circulating these writings and teachings through tracts was the most effective means to spread the teachings of the Scriptures.

In Matthew 28:19 and 20 we are charged to go and disciple all the nations and to teach them to observe all He has commanded us. As we go, the Lord promised to be with us. In Mark 16:15 the Lord also charged us to go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to all the creation. Therefore, preaching the gospel and teaching the truth have been the Lord's commission to His children from the beginning.

In the going forth of the gospel and the distributing of the truth, tracts have played an important role. The Lord has used tracts over the centuries to bring salvation to men and to help usher ones out of darkness into the light by reading short portions of the Word opened up and expounded. It has been

an important practice in the church to prepare and distribute some effective tracts.

As Watchman Nee has pointed out, tracts are not limited by man's ability to speak or to one's personal condition, or to the age or status of the receiver. Tract distribution enables many to function because there is less of an intimidation factor. Tracts are also not subject to debate or limited by time (*CWWN, Vol. 60*).

Therefore, as Ecclesiastes 11:1 and 6 tell us, "Cast your bread upon the surface of the waters and you will find it in many days." Paul also mentions in 2 Cor. 9:6 that he who sows with blessings shall reap with blessings.

The Bible-Men

John Wycliffe completed his Bible translation work and went to be with the Lord in 1384. Many of those opposing Wycliffe hoped that his followers would be intimidated, scattered, and die out after he was gone. This was not the case. During the last years of Wycliffe's life he trained and equipped a number his followers with the same truths and understanding that he had. They picked up the same vision and burden and began to sound the same trumpet throughout the land. These became known as Bible-men because they spoke and taught the Bible. These were the 'poor priests' enlisted by Wycliffe to go forth to all and to evangelize. They were also known as the Wycliffites or sometimes derisively as the Lollards – a name meaning babblers. This name was given to many of the zealous believers who held evangelical principles and went about speaking the gospel.

Many of them were itinerant preachers, including John Purvey who gave himself to the revision of Wycliffe's original Bible. They were characterized by their pursuit of holiness and of a zeal for the spread of Scriptural truths. These considered it their highest service to be



able to preach the Word of God and to distribute the truths expounded by Wycliffe. They distributed the complete Bible, individual books of the Bible, and many tracts.

As preachers, they would expound the content of these tracts and the Bible. They would travel on foot from place to place and would stop to speak whenever they had a receptive audience. Their number multiplied over time as their influence spread. It was said that two men could not be found together and one not be a Wycliffite or Lollard. After Wycliffe's death, these Bible-men or Lollards pressed on with intensity.

They were in their day like Joseph was in Egypt, distributing food to the hungry (Gen. 41:33-41). These were the faithful stewards of the 14th and 15th century carrying out the Lord's commission to them. They had a wide circulation throughout England. They would speak in the open air, in gardens, in halls, or in cottages. At these gatherings Wycliffe's Bible or tracts would be read out loud and expounded.

They continued in the same spirit of Wycliffe by speaking out against Rome and its influence. They fought against the teachings of Rome regarding celibacy, saying that it was the source of many shameful evils. They proclaimed that the supposed miracles at the mass of the bread and wine changing into the body and blood of Jesus only led people into idolatry. They also spoke out against the pilgrimages, prayers for the dead, indulgences, and they continued to expose the waste and luxurious living of the officials of the church. They went forth urging people to come to repentance and directed them into the way of salvation by faith in the Lord Jesus.

Suffering Persecution

So, even without Wycliffe, the English Bible was beginning to spread. Although very costly, many paid a price to obtain at least a part of this translated work into their own language. The spreading of the Bible and the teachings of Wycliffe became known as Lollardry. Not all however were happy with these new developments. Some felt the gospel

pearl was being cast abroad and trodden under the feet of swine. It began to worry the Catholic church authorities. By 1407 this English translation was denounced as unauthorized. The work of translating and using a translated Bible was defined as a heresy and became a crime punishable by death through burning.

Some soon began to suffer persecution and even death. A law was passed in England saying that whoever read the Scriptures in English would forfeit land, goods, and life. They were condemned not only as a heretic in the eyes of the church, but also as an enemy of the crown as well. Violators could be hanged for treason and burnt for heresy. By the 15th century the king, Henry IV, introduced a law to please the clergy, and this made Lollardry punishable by death through burning.

Although some of the Wycliffites disappeared and were driven into exile, and others were compelled to meet secretly, many of the “heretics” began to be burned in England. Even a nobleman, Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham who was a leader among the Lollards and a distinguished soldier was martyred. His castle was a refuge and meeting place for the believers. He was captured and eventually hanged for treason and burned for heresy. He was the first English nobleman to die for his faith. Several others were martyred with steadfastness and faithfulness. Although some were terrified into recantation, and others were imprisoned, yet many stood faithful unto the death of the burning flames.

Even Wycliffe himself was denounced posthumously as a heretic. There was such vehemence in the church that at the Council of Constance such a decree was made. His body was exhumed and burned in 1428. Then his ashes were thrown into a river. Thomas Fuller said, “the little river conveyed Wycliffe’s remains into the Avon, Avon into the Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they to the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over.”

This is indeed what happened. The numbers for a time only increased as the

Word spread. Approximately one third of all the priests at that time identified themselves as Wycliffites. The Wycliffe Bible, even after the ban, was produced in great numbers, and today there are still a couple of hundred that remain as the largest surviving body of medieval English texts. A large number of Wycliffe’s writings still exist and some are held in the British Museum. But along with the written texts, Wycliffe’s teaching spread to Europe, especially to some Bohemians, including Jerome, and John Hus.

Conclusion

Thank the Lord for these faithful Biblemen. They cooperated with the Lord and the gift given by the Lord to the church, John Wycliffe, to send forth many precious truths in their day. The Word of God was spoken by God, written down by those moved by the Spirit, and then translated into many languages. The Lord has given some gifts to the church to do this work of not only translating, but also of interpreting and expounding the Word of God. These faithful saints at Wycliffe’s time began to learn some of these truths and went forth to share them with others at the cost of their lives.

Watchmen Nee spoke of them saying, “We can say that stories of the believers in the Middle Ages are most interesting. They are also very moving. Their faithfulness in loving the Lord, in standing for the truth, and their determination of opposition to a heretical church are most sincere. Although they suffered, labored, and were threatened and persecuted, although they suffered much more than those under the Roman emperors suffered, although they did not witness any miracles and wonders or have any organization or group to back them up, and although the people and the priests of the time invented many

condemnations against them, they marched on fearlessly to maintain God's testimony and were willing to sacrifice all comfort, their

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families, lives, and everything in the world to testify for the Son of God that the power of Hades would not be able to overcome the church.” (CWWN: *The Christian*).

In light of their testimony, it is worthwhile for us to consider anew our responsibility. We are those who have received much from the Lord. He has surely opened up the Bible to reveal many dear and precious truths to us. What He now needs is for some to cooperate with Him as these did in the past. May we be those who love the Lord and fulfill our responsibility and the Lord’s commission to spread the understood divine truths today!

Marty Robert and Bill Lawson

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