

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Seventeen

A Faithful Witness Part Two on the Life of John Wycliffe

In the previous program we saw how the church had become desolated by the time of the Middle Ages. The devil used many blind and perverted men, who became like wolves, not sparing the flock (Acts 20:29-30). Heretical doctrines and superstitions replaced the teaching of the apostles. Idolatry filled the cathedrals, and the church became unified with the world of wealth and political power. Now let us go on to see more of the details of John Wycliffe's environment, and learn how he became a faithful witness of the Lord.

A Subduing Atmosphere

The enormous wealth of the church, gleaned from the nations, became a source of many evils and was a major reason why many of the clergy became corrupt, proud and indolent. Much of the money from the tithes of the people and the taxes on the nations were used in the purchase of acres of property and on elaborate cathedrals and other buildings. According to the natural concept of man, great structures of architecture were built in the middle ages with steep roofs, stained glass windows, and with a dark and dim atmosphere. These large cathedrals with subdued lighting fostered a sense of solemnity and reverence and had a subduing effect upon people which created a feeling of awe and majesty and fear toward God by those in the pews and upon the places to kneel down in their worship of God. In these buildings only the clergy were authorized to perform the 'masses.' This clergy-laity system worked to nullify the understanding and function of the common people since these were in the Latin language. Thus the people were kept in darkness and ignorance.

Idolatry

These cathedrals were also filled with idols. The worship of images, relics, so called

'saints' and even statues of Mary who was claimed to be the mother of God, was common. The so called pictures of Jesus had their origin during these middle ages. The artwork produced was the opposite of what was spoken in Isaiah 53:2 which says that, "He hath no...comeliness; no beauty that we should desire him." People were dazzled by the buildings and the religious art. This fit the principle of leaven (Matt. 13:33) which is given to make bread easier to eat.

John Foxe, who wrote the *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* said: "The people were taught to worship no other thing but that which they did see; and they did see almost nothing that they did not worship."

Witness Lee said, "After Constantine, the church was corrupted by idolatry. The bones of the so-called saints were sold to superstitious people; this was a lucrative business. People worshipped the bones because of their superstition. More and more bones were sold, and many were fakes.

The problem of money is also present in the desolation of the church. Some people make preaching the word into a profession or make godliness a means of gain (1 Tim. 6:5). (*The Course of the Church*). He continues, "The Catholic cathedrals are full of idols. I spent much time to study the situation in Catholicism. . . I visited Catholic cathedrals. I was surprised to see all the idols. Under one idol, an image of a certain saint, was a note, saying that if someone prays to her several times a day, the sufferings of a relative in purgatory would be relieved. What a superstition this is!" (*The Testimony of Jesus*).



John Foxe

Repudiated Indulgences

Not only was Catholicism filled with idols, but many of its teachings were heretical. Wycliffe spoke out against the masses for the dead and the pilgrimages for money, but he especially repudiated the selling of indulgences for the forgiveness of sins. The friars claimed



in the pope's name that people could be granted pardon for their sins by purchasing these indulgences. Indulgences for greater sins were sold for more and it was less for smaller sins. People were told that as long as they bought these indulgences their sins would be forgiven.

Wycliffe pointed people to Christ who alone could pardon sin. He said, "There cometh no pardon but of God. There is no greater heresy than for a man to believe that he is absolved from his sins if he gives money."

Exposed the Corruption of the Religious Orders

Wycliffe also attacked the institution of the papacy, calling the pope an antichrist and "the proud, worldly priest of Rome." He disagreed with the strong papal control and questioned the necessity of the mediatory powers of the priesthood. He fought for the fact that man can have a direct relationship with God be directly responsible to God. He said that salvation was not dependent on being connected with the Roman church or through the mediation of the clergy through its sacraments, but was freely available to all.

He advocated abolishing the religious orders. He said that the monasteries had become places of corruption. Although the monks were prevented from individual wealth, corporately their affluence increased and the abbots became princes of wealth. The mendicant, or begging, friars spread throughout the land. Basically, they were agents of the pope. They solicited alms from the faithful by preaching fables and

encouraging superstition. Wycliffe spoke out against these abuses and wickedness in a tract called, "*Objections to the Friars.*"

He said they were full of hypocrisy, lying, and stealing. "Friars, that be called Masters of Divinity, live as lords and kings, and send out idiots, full of covetousness, to preach, not the Gospel, but chronicles, fables, and lies; to please the people, and to rob them."

Wycliffe accused them of being Iscariot's children because they betrayed the truth of the gospel for money. They also persecuted those who truly sowed the Word of God. It is no wonder that his speaking and writing brought heavy opposition from the Friars.

Denied Transubstantiation

Of all of the teachings of the pope and his followers that Wycliffe denied, the one that stirred the most trouble was his denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation. This teaching asserted that the priests of the Roman Catholic church had miraculous power to change the bread and wine during the mass into the actual body and blood of Christ.

Wycliffe denied this, saying that the bread and wine are symbols of Christ only and that the bread and wine were the same after they were consecrated as they were before.

Watchman Nee said, "The Roman Catholic Church makes the bread the physical body of the Lord. But the Lord also says that He is the door (John 10:7). According to the Catholic interpretation, this must mean a real wooden door. The Lord also says that He is the vine. According to the Catholic Church's interpretation, this would mean that He is a physical vine. But we cannot become a physical branch even if the Lord becomes a physical vine. This twists the Scripture; it has gone beyond the boundary of proper biblical interpretation. There is no such thing as transubstantiation in the Bible. I hope that we will all see through such a serious heresy as transubstantiation in the mass. (*CWWN, Set 3, Vol. 60*).

Conclusion

John Wycliffe's ideas were radical in his time. He fought to rescue property given to

the church and exposed the idolatry and heresies, along with the greediness and falsehood that was rife within the church. He stood against the doctrine of transubstantiation. He pointed people to Christ, not to the clergy, for salvation. He taught that men should and could go to God directly without going through a priest.

Wycliffe stands out as one of the Lord's witnesses during this time period. Witness Lee comments: "Not everyone in the church participated in the corruption. There are many examples in church history of ones who loved the Lord and did not take part in the corruption; they did not want a transmuted church, and they did not approve of the union of the church with human government. Although these were few in number, they loved the Lord with a pure heart and followed Him faithfully, never accepting the corrupted and transmuted condition of the church. They stood apart from the corruption and transmutation; thus, they were not part of the unified, catholic church. Rather, they were excommunicated from the catholic church. This line of overcomers has continued unbroken throughout church history." (Lee, *The Course of the Church*).

John Wycliffe learned that centuries of darkness could not quickly be erased, but he declared, "The Truth shall prevail." He expected nothing but imprisonment and death for himself. But his testimony speaks to us that when the Lord sends forth His light and truth, many will be enlightened (Psalm 43:3). God's word was a lamp to the feet of Wycliffe and those who followed in his steps. The word of truth was becoming the light to their path (Psa. 119:105). Hallelujah for our brother as a luminary at his time!

As Merle D'Aubigne, in his *History of the Reformation*, describes Wycliffe as: ". . . the greatest English Reformer; he was in

truth the first reformer in Christendom If Luther and Calvin are the fathers of the Reformation, Wycliffe is its grandfather."

If Luther and Calvin are the fathers of the Reformation, Wycliffe is its grandfather.
D'Aubigne

References

- Broadbent, E. H. *The Pilgrim Church*. Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio Press, 1999.
- Cross, F. L. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Douglas, J. D. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.
- Fountain, David. *The Dawn of the Reformation*. Cheshire: Mayflower Christian Books, 1984.
- Hague, Dyson. *The Life and Work of John Wycliffe*. London: The Church Book Room, 1935.
- Lecher, Professor. *John Wycliffe and His English Precursors*. London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904.
- Lee, Witness. *The Course of the Church*. Anaheim: Living Stream Publishers, 1993.
- Moyer, Elgin. *Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1982.
- Nee, Watchman. *Collected Works of Watchman Nee*. Anaheim: Living Stream Publishers, 1993.
- Oberman, Heiko Augustinus. *Forerunners of the Reformation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
- Reetzke, James. *Biographical Sketches*. Chicago: Chicago Bibles and Books, 2003.