

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Twenty One

Recant or Die

Part Two on the Life of John Huss

Tumultuous Times

There was a great difference between the fourteenth century church and the early New Testament church in the book of Acts. After thirteen centuries of degradation the church was vastly different from what the Lord promised to build in Matthew 16:18. Many sinful and evil teachings and practices had invaded the church. The church was no longer sojourning on the earth, but had become a great worldly power. Instead of being a nourishing little herb, it had become a great tree filled with many evil birds. What had been built up over thirteen centuries was not the glorious church as a chaste bride of Christ, but a great harlot, filled with all manner of idolatry and spiritual fornication. The church was no longer filled with lovers of Christ, rather, it was inhabited with lovers of self, lovers of money, and non-lovers of God (2 Tim. 3:2-4). The loss of the first love at the beginning of the church age became the source of the centuries of degradation that followed. The simplicity and sincerity of the believers was replaced by worldliness and political power. Even the word of God was replaced by powerless teachings, customs, fables, and traditions.

Growing Discontent

In the midst of this darkness, there were still some who loved the Lord and loved the truth as revealed in His word. Although many loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil, there were some who came to the light. Some within the church, out of their discontent, began to question and challenge many of the teachings and practices that most blindly accepted. There was a growing desire in some believers for a return to the purity and simplicity of the early church. But who could begin to voice these concerns in the fourteenth century of Europe? There was a need for someone to rise

up like John Wycliffe had in the previous century to study the truth and to speak it out in a clear and strong manner in order to begin to penetrate the thick veil of ignorance that covered the eyes of the majority. The sovereign Lord raised up John Huss as such a one to be His mouthpiece during that age.

Speaking with Conviction and Clarity

The Bethlehem Chapel in Prague became a center where the truth began to be released in the common language of Bohemian by

John Huss.

This was according to the original desire of those who gave financially



Reconstruction of the Bethlehem Chapel

for the building of this chapel. They hoped that the common people would be “refreshed by the bread of holy preaching” in their own language. Huss began to proclaim the word and to commend it to all men’s consciences. His speaking was gladly received by many, but he also began to make enemies because of his criticisms of the doctrines and practices of the church. He caused much consternation when he asked, “What does the Bible say?”

As Huss continued to read and become more familiar with the writings of Wycliffe, he became increasingly sympathetic with them. Eventually he even became the main proponent of the teachings of Wycliffe, and recommended his writings to others. Huss eventually translated some of Wycliffe’s works into the Bohemian language.

Like Wycliffe, Huss began to question the supposed miracles of the ‘saints.’ He argued that only Christ was the true Head of the church, and not the pope. He declared that only the Bible was the standard of faith, and

not the pronouncements from Rome. He fought for the truth that man could be forgiven by God alone. Like Wycliffe, he continued to expose the fraud of selling indulgences as pardons for sin. Huss was strong to proclaim, "Let the Pope, or a Bishop, or a Priest say 'I forgive thee thy sins; I free thee from the pains of hell,' – it is all vain, and helps thee nothing. God alone, I repeat, can forgive sins through Christ."

Huss also condemned the sins of the clergy. Based on all the abuses that he saw, he began to denounce some of the clergy as those, "deserving hanging in hell." Huss said that they were "fornicators, parasites, money misers, drunks and gluttons." Huss asked, "How is it that fornicating and otherwise criminal priests walk about freely . . . while humble priests . . . are jailed as heretics and suffer exile for the very proclamation of the Gospel?" Of course the immoral clergy greatly despised these words and began to seek a way to silence Huss.

The Battle Intensifies

Although the whole city of Prague was moved by the speaking of Huss, his speaking was too much for the church officials. They began to take steps to 'catch this goose.' Some felt they must inform the archbishop of the multiplication of Wycliffe's writings. One wrote saying, "that various books of that pestilent Englishman, Wickliffe, are multiplied in your diocese—books full of

damnable errors and errors that have been already condemned. On my bended knee most earnestly do I beseech you to be on your guard, lest by the multiplication of these

pestilent books your flock shall drink in that infidel poison which will destroy their souls.



For neither pestilence, famine nor sword can inflict such evils as will spring from this perfidious depravity of heretical men."

The church officials firstly declared that all the works of Wycliffe were heretical and then they openly set fire to volumes of his books. Although upset by this loss, Huss declared, "Fire does not consume truth."

When Wycliffe's works were condemned, it just created further curiosity and eagerness to read them.

Fire does not consume truth.

Huss continued to speak out. He not only exposed the corrupt doctrines and practices of his day, but also endeavored to enlighten men's understanding by proclaiming a saving knowledge of the truth. The more he criticized the evils within the Roman church, the more his enemies began to raise their voices in calling him a 'heretic.' Although forbidden to teach outside of designated church buildings, Huss did not waver. He said, "I avow it to be my purpose to defend the truth which God has enabled me to know, and especially the truth of Holy Scripture, even to death, since I know that the truth stands and is forever mighty and abides."

The pope and his agents proceeded to sell indulgences all over Europe in order to raise money in support of their wars. These 'pardons' eventually were regarded as permissions to sin in advance. It was a sort of pre-payment plan for upcoming sins. Huss felt he could not stand by as a silent observer. He continued to proclaim to all that "God alone can forgive sins through Christ!" Shortly after this, he was excommunicated. Others were warned not to associate with him or to supply him with life necessities. The Roman Catholic Church placed an interdict on the city of Prague, not allowing any church services including church weddings or burials. Eventually Huss decided to withdraw from the city for the sake of its people. His going out into the country and preaching in the fields only increased his popularity among the local people and throughout Bohemia.

The Council that Killed the Reformer

A gathering of the pope, cardinals and other church and political figures assembled at the city of Constance in the latter part of 1414. This Council of Constance, as it was known, was assembled to discuss the future of church reforms. The church had allowed most sins to be forgiven through its sale of indulgences, but the sin of criticizing the church was not to be tolerated.

Huss was encouraged to attend this council by the king of Bohemia, who



considered the council as an opportunity for Huss to clear up all misunderstandings and accusations of heresy regarding his teachings. Huss agreed to participate. The Emperor promised Huss safe travel and return to Bohemia regardless of the outcome. This did not happen – Huss was quickly arrested and imprisoned for months in a low filthy dungeon. Huss nearly died. The pope did not want Huss to die in this manner, so he sent his own doctor to attend to him.

Eventually Huss was able to appear before the council, but to no avail. He was questioned and accused, but hardly given any chance to respond. The council's main complaint with him was that he extolled the authority of the Bible above the decisions of the church. With many threats the council members tried to persuade Huss to abandon his teachings and views, but he would not. He stood as a soldier of Christ faithful to the word of God. Ultimately he was sentenced and condemned by the authorities at the council. They gave him an ultimatum: recant or die. Huss refused to recant. Then he was mocked and condemned to death as a heretic. The bishops said, "We commit thy soul to the devil." Huss exclaimed, "And I commit it to my most gracious Lord, Jesus Christ." Then he was escorted out by the soldiers to the stake in the meadow outside the city which had been prepared for him.

Martyred

Nearly six centuries ago on July 6th, 1415 in Constance of South Germany, John Huss was led to the place of his execution. Upon reaching the stake, John knelt in prayer while reciting the Scriptures (Psalms 31 and 51). He prayed, "Lord Jesus, it is for Thee that I patiently endure this cruel death. I pray Thee to have mercy on my enemies."

The soldiers bound him to the stake, piled up the wood and straw to his neck, and set him aflame.



He was martyred on behalf of Christ and for the word of His truth. It was John Huss' forty-sixth birthday.

The Bohemians were outraged with the execution and they repudiated the council and its authority and declarations. Eventually many reconciled with the Catholic Church, but some refused to compromise, later forming the *Unitas Fratrum* or "Union of Brethren." This group became the foundation of the Moravian Brethren. Count Zinzendorf, whom we will study later, was one of the Moravian Brethren.

The seeds sown by Huss would spring up a century later to influence Martin Luther. In Luther's early days as a monk, he found a volume of Huss' sermons in the library at Erfurt. He said: "I was seized with a curiosity to know what doctrines this great heretic had taught. The reading filled me with incredible surprise. I could not comprehend why they should have burned a man who explained Scripture with so much discernment and wisdom. Huss would later become a hero to Luther and many other reformers. His teaching of the Scriptures and his steadfast faithfulness was a strong encouragement and inspiration to Luther.

Thank the Lord for the testimony of John Huss. As a pre-reformer, he overcame the degradation of his time and shined as a

luminary in a dark night. Thank the Lord that he did not recant, but rather died in faith. What a precious seed that was sown in order that the truth of the gospel might come to future generations.

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