John Wycliffe Biography

John Wycliffe (1330 -1384) was a theologian, philosopher, lay preacher and translator. John Wycliffe produced some of the first hand written English translations of the Bible and helped to make them widely available. He was an early critic of the Papacy and the clerical basis of the Catholic church; Wycliffe argued scripture was primary source basis of Christianity. He is seen by many as the precursor for the later Protestant Reformation of Martin Luther.

Preaching the Gospel exceeds prayer and administration of the sacraments to an infinite degree.

– John Wycliffe

Short Biography John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe was born in the North Ridings, Yorkshire. His family were of Saxon origins. As a young man he moved to Oxford to study natural science, mathematics and theology. He studied at Balliol college, where he would later became the Master of Balliol. Wycliffe was most interested in theology and studying scripture.

He became known for being an excellent scholar with a thorough understanding of the law; gaining the attention of the Archbishop of Canterbury, he was made head of Canterbury Hall in 1365. When the Pope pressed England to send taxes, Wycliffe was instrumental in drafting a reply arguing that there was no basis for demanding a tribute from a foreign power.

“Already a third and more of England is in the hands of the Pope. There cannot be two temporal sovereigns in one country; either Edward is King or Urban is king. We make our choice. We accept Edward of England and refute Urban of Rome.”

– John Wycliffe (Quoted in William Tyndale: If God Spare My Life — Martyrdom, Betrayal and the English Bible (2003))

The pope, keen not to antagonise the English, soon withdrew his request.

In 1374, Wycliffe also served as a negotiator in the Peace Congress at Bruges – between England and France; this furthered his political influence and stature.
From his early days at Oxford, Wycliffe contended with various aspects of Catholic philosophy and influence. Initially, this was more abstract and philosophical, but increasingly he became critical of the actions and power that the church wielded. He argued that the clerics were not justified in having so much secular power – because they often acted in an immoral way and because the gospels didn’t support it.

On his return from Bruges, with support from his patron John of Gaunt, he wrote tracts and books, expressing his views. (The most important was *Summa Theologiae*) This included denunciations of collecting indulgences for the remission of sin. He also asserted the right of the King to take away property from the church, if justified.

Wycliffe became a popular preacher in London, and many reformers allied himself to his views. Though as might be expected, he also attracted increased criticism from those with powerful positions in the church, who were now threatened by Wycliffe’s talk of reform. After calling for the secularisation of English church property, his opponents argued he was guilty of blasphemy. Wycliffe had to defend himself at Lambeth palace. With opinion split, he was forbidden to speak further on these matters.

However, with powerful backers, Wycliffe continued his reforming attempts. In particular, he began the very significant step of translating and writing out the New Testament in English. This was a radical step as it brought the gospels close to the ordinary person who could not understand Latin, and removed the Church as the ‘interpreter’.

For the next few years Wycliffe continued to attack the Pope and the church hierarchy. The church sought to destroy the English versions of his bible, but the fact that so many copies survived suggest, that under his leadership, the movement to distribute the Bible in English was quite successful.
Wycliffe began to attract a group of followers – known as the Lollards. They spread Wycliffe’s teaching and ideas throughout England. His political influence was such that he was even blamed for the peasant’s revolt of 1381 – though he disapproved of it.

Attacks against Wycliffe continued until his death. But, supported by a sufficient number of people (especially in Oxford, and Parliament) he was never excommunicated or derived of his position.

After retiring to Lutterworth, Wycliffe suffered a stroke on Dec 28, 1384 and died three days later.

20 years later, Wycliffe was condemned as a heretic and his books should be burned and his body exhumed and bones crushed. However, Wycliffe had left a profound mark on English and European thought. He had challenged the authority of the church and pope, laying the foundation for the future Reformation, which would reject the Papacy and promote the Bible. Also, his work to make an English version of the bible available was a critical moment in English Christianity. Citation: Pettinger, Tejvan. “Biography of John Wycliffe“, Oxford, UK – www.biographyonline.net. Last updated 2nd February 2014