

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## Lesson 48

### John Wyclif and the 1300's

Barbara W. Tuchman wrote a book on the 1300's titled, *A Distant Mirror – The Calamitous 14<sup>th</sup> Century*.<sup>1</sup> The title is very appropriate. The 1300's were a time of great turbulence. The jolts to Western civilization over that 100 years mark a change from the knights, castles, and chivalry of the Middle Ages with the seeds of what becomes the renaissance, and ultimately, the modern western world. In the midst of the century, the English University Professor and churchman, John Wyclif, lived and died. Today, our study will consider the turbulence of the times, the effects on the church, and the unique role of John Wyclif.

### THE 1300'S

For the most part, the 1300's started much like the 1200's. In truth, the 1200's were little different than the 1100's, 1000's, or 900's. Civilization's progress was slow.<sup>2</sup> Although, as we saw in the Aquinas lessons, the establishment and growth of the University system in the 1200's and the re-discovery of Aristotle among the Western scholars propelled academics and intellectual curiosity forward. Certainly, the Crusades brought about international travel and removed the insulation of thought that comes from isolation. But in the 1300's, major events changed civilization such that by the 1400's, the Middle Ages quickly become a fading memory.

Why were the 1300's such a pivotal century? There are numerous reasons, but our focus will look at the interaction of the Church and Western government, corruption within the Church, and the bubonic plague (the "Black Death"). Examining the plague, we will consider its direct effects on the Church, the Church's reactions (good and bad), and the church's changes in the aftermath.

### CHURCH AND STATE

As the 1300's started, Boniface VIII was the Pope and Philip IV was the King of France. The two did not get along!

---

<sup>1</sup> Ballantine Books, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in several previous lessons, the consolidation of territories had started the growth of a capitalistic system more than the bartering system of the earlier middle ages. Similarly, Aquinas and others propelled learning in general forward, setting the stage for the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Toward the end of the 1200's, King Philip started taxing the income of the church's clergy,<sup>3</sup> and Boniface considered that an assault on the church and Boniface's authority. So in 1296, Boniface issued a bull (an official papal order) forbidding all clergy from paying any taxes to secular rulers without first getting papal permission. The consequence of violating this bull was excommunication.<sup>4</sup> Pope Boniface wanted there to be no question that the church leaders were loyal to the church over the king.

Philip responded with overt hostility toward Rome and Pope Boniface then issued a second bull in 1302. In this bull, entitled *Unam Sanctam*, Boniface declared, "It is necessary to salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman pontiff." With this, Boniface figured he had trumped King Philip.<sup>5</sup> This did not sit well with Philip. Philip issued his own order prohibiting money from leaving France. This hit Boniface in the bank account hard, for the church received much of its income from the French. By 1297, Pope Boniface issued a follow-up bull allowing for taxation of the clergy without papal permission in times of great necessity.

Several matters were at play here. First, there seems to be political maneuvering for worldly power. However, there was also a real fight going on where the Church was trying to keep its freedom from secular leadership. The government sought the right to appoint the Church leaders as opposed to the Church itself.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1300's, the two did not find peaceful co-existence. King Philip had a churchman arrested for treason. The Pope found this violated the rule that churchmen held allegiance to the church and pope, not to kings. So, Boniface issued a bull directing King Philip to realize he had no authority over the church or its clergy. As things continued to heat up, Philip eventually called a council to judge Boniface on charges that ranged from the religious (heresy, blasphemy, failure to fast appropriately) to the secular (murder, sodomy, sorcery). Boniface took none of this lying down – he prepared a bull excommunicating Philip.

---

<sup>3</sup> Philip and Edward I (King of England) were at war and both in need of war funds. Both added to their accounts by taxing the Church's clergy.

<sup>4</sup> Remember Catholic doctrine taught that salvation was found only within the church. Excommunication was a sentence to Hell, absent restoration before death.

<sup>5</sup> Since Pope Innocent IV (Pope from 1243-1254), the papacy had vocalized its right to depose secular rulers and act as a supreme judge over humanity. Philip and other kings did not accept this rule.

<sup>6</sup> This is an ongoing issue today in China.

As things continued a spiral downward, King Philip sent a small force and captured Boniface while at his summer retreat outside Rome in Anagni. Three days later, the citizens of Anagni managed to free Boniface, who had collapsed during the three days he was held. The 86-year old Pope never recovered, though, and was dead within weeks.

Apparently out of political necessity, Boniface's successor (Pope Benedict XI) restored the King of France to the church and absolved him of any wrongs toward Pope Boniface. Benedict himself was likely poisoned just 8 months into his papacy by the same rogue who had captured Boniface.

The successor to Pope Benedict was Clement V, and with him, the church took a major turn. Clement V was a Frenchman, and it took 11 months to elect him pope. Clement moved the papacy from Rome to Avignon, France, where it stayed for the next 6 popes, each a Frenchman. Clement's rule over the church was plagued by a struggle to keep autonomy in the face of the King of France. The struggles of the papacy in the 1300's were struggles not only of church matters, but also of relations with the kings and governments. These struggles with the state covered financial and church authority issues throughout the century.

## **CHURCH CORRUPTION**

At this time (actually, at almost any time!), there was a great deal of corruption within the church. This corruption fed the power of those who sought to limit and reign in the church's role in matters of state. Much of the struggle between church and state was a fuss over finances. As the church sought income, we read of fundraising techniques that, by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards, seem way over the top.

The church raised money by selling most everything it had. It would sell all sorts of relics and holy items, even articles of clothing by Bishops and others.<sup>7</sup> Any sin could be pardoned for a price. All tithes and offerings were subject to a percentage going to the papacy. One of the greatest sources of income came from the selling of church offices. Selling these offices was lucrative because people would pay dearly for them. In the public's eyes, church officials had the ability to forgive sin and could assess a charge as penance for the sin. In other words, people were fined for their sins and these fines were the income of the assessor (with a share going to the church as well).

---

<sup>7</sup> Today this might appall some, but it is still found, albeit often in Protestant churches. Many items are sold and marketed (often on "religious television") for their touch of the "holy."

The bishop and those to whom the bishop granted faculties had the exclusive right to offer the Eucharist. In Catholic doctrine at the time (and today), the Eucharist was seen as sharing in the actual body and blood of Christ. The teaching was that upon the blessing of the priest, the common bread and wine transitioned some aspect of its being into the body and blood of Christ (the doctrine of transubstantiation).<sup>8</sup> The Eucharist was seen the place where man found forgiveness and salvation by sharing in the body and blood of Christ. A number of clergy would administer this necessary sacrament more readily to those who would contribute to the church.<sup>9</sup> The church hierarchy never endorsed this, but was it was found on the “street level” of day-to-day church life.

Because many of these priests came into office for less than pious or educated reasons, often the priests presiding over the conversion of bread to the body of Christ were illiterate and stumbling through the service and the Latin used in the liturgy. The public perceived much of the clergy “unfit” and found it difficult to accept that these were the intermediaries between man and God.

The discontent with the public would grow and recede throughout the century. There were frequent physical attacks upon clergy and efforts within the church to restore the propriety incited such anger. Even within some of the poverty movements in the church (the Franciscans, for example), excesses of wealth and vanity often exceeded that of the common man.

The church acted in concert with King Philip of France in dissolving the publicly respected Knights Templar<sup>10</sup> and seizing all their lands and funds (most of these were then given to the Knights Hospitalers of St. John who then cut back a large sum to the King of France.) This was not merely an announcement of dissolution. Most of the knights were forced to recant their claims to holiness and confess themselves as sinners. Those who did not do so readily were tortured. Those who still refused were then executed.<sup>11</sup> As the leader of the Knights Templar was being burned at the stake, his last words were reportedly a call for the King and

---

<sup>8</sup> In Catholic teaching, the word of God changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. A valid minister of the Church must speak the word (unless the minister is mute, in which event it can be prayed) to keep factions to a minimum.

<sup>9</sup> More than one commented on the fact that Judas sold the body of Christ for 30 pieces of silver, but many priests were selling it for much less.

<sup>10</sup> The Knights Templar were the most respected and feared knights in that day. They were the crusading knights who centuries earlier had captured the Holy Lands and kept many areas protected from Muslim invasion. A society of knights that kept strict vows, they claimed God’s divine assistance in all they did.

<sup>11</sup> History teaches us that Protestants would later use such force as a last resort to convert Catholics as well. The brutality of forced conversion or death was all too common.

Pope to meet him before God's judgment seat within a year. Both Philip and the Pope died within a year, and the legends grew that the Knight's Templar leader had actually called down a 13-generation curse.

## THE PLAGUE

In October 1347, a ship docked in Italy that brought with it the bubonic plague. At the time, the plague was called the Black Death. It was a dreadful disease carried by the blood of fleas and rats. A flea or rat bite would bring the blood born disease into a person and bring rapid death. The disease could also spread by air and respiratory infection. The disease spread easily and rapidly. When one caught it, chances of surviving were very slim.

The plague quickly spread throughout Europe. Most scholars estimate that it wiped out a full one-third of the population. That means one out of every three people were dead within a decade. In the countryside, the death rate was less than in the cities. In enclosed areas like prisons or monasteries, the death rate was frequently 100 percent.

As in most crises, this brought out some of the best and some of the worst in the church. There were certain hospitals where nuns served and cared for the sick, even though it was apparent that most who did so would die themselves. We have reports of hospitals where the nuns would replace each other one by one as they died in an effort to care for those with the plague.

We also have a number of accounts where priests would refuse to meet with the dying, refuse to take confessions, and refuse last rites for fear of contagion. One bishop in England announced that lay people were authorized to take confessions where no priest was to be found.

People had no knowledge that there was a microscopic organism responsible for this outbreak. The knowledge of science was too limited. So, people were left questioning with insufficient answers. To many, this death was the hand of God bringing a Noah-like judgment upon mankind for its sin. This resulted in many turning their hearts to God.<sup>12</sup> Many others, however, turned their judgments against their neighbors and church. Many saw this as God's judgment against *others* sinfulness.

This was also a time of horrible oppression of Jews. Rumors surfaced that the death was a poison put into water wells by Jews who wanted to kill and destroy Christendom and take over the whole world. When the church authorized holy

---

<sup>12</sup> The city of Rouen ordered that all gambling, drinking, and cursing stop.

wars to kill the Muslim infidels in the Holy Land, it was not a hard sell to convince people to kill the infidels at home! Huge numbers of Jews were massacred in communities throughout Europe in the name of Christianity. In 1348, Pope Clement VI issued a bull prohibiting the killing of Jews without trial first, but his bull was not fully honored, especially the farther from Avignon one got. The Pope pointed out that Jews were dying from the plague at the same rate as non-Jews, a fact that seemed lost on the anti-Semites bent on killing.

Also from the plague, a number of splinter religious groups arose seeking to ameliorate God's anger. One of the more interesting groups was the self-flagellators. Groups of hundreds of these people would go from town to town and "perform" for the people. They would strip to the waist and beat themselves bloody with whips tipped with iron spikes. People would join a band under a lay master and pledge to follow and bludgeon each other usually for a 33-day period (symbolic of one day for each year Christ lived).

The towns would receive these self-flagellators as holy people who were scourged for the sins of the townspeople. Children were brought for healing; people dipped clothing in the flagellators' blood and consider it a holy relic.

The Masters of the troops were followed devotedly. In some cases, these masters started usurping areas of church authority, hearing confessions, and imposing penance. The flagellators and the townspeople stoned some priests who denounced this as standing against God and this newfound holiness. Once this was reported to the pope, strong measures and pronouncements against the flagellators brought the movement to an end.

Because the plague was indiscriminate in its victims, a large number of church people died as well as the public. Many questions about God, wrath, apparent abandonment by priests in a time of need, and attempts to rebuild a destroyed world contributed to the calamitous 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Into this world came one John Wyclif.

## **JOHN WYCLIF**

We are uncertain when Wyclif was born but it was likely around 1324. We know little about his early life. An Englishman, Wyclif was a teacher, a philosopher, and a devout lover of the Word of God. To some, Wyclif was a superstar. Montague Burrows claimed, "To Wyclif we owe...our English language, our English Bible, and our reformed religion... In Wyclif we have...the foremost intellect of his times brought to bear upon the numerous religious questions of the

day.”<sup>13</sup> To others, like Cambridge Professor G. R. Evans, these claims are more puff than truth, yet even Evans acknowledges that Wyclif is “heroic” though not as fully as others may believe.<sup>14</sup>

Wyclif studied at Oxford. He ultimately received a doctor of theology degree and was at one point the Master of Balliol College. Wyclif used his position to teach not only philosophy, but religion and doctrine as well. He would preach and teach on matters that touched on the church life of his day.

Wyclif was incensed over the wealth of many in the church. He spoke out against the church as a financial institution and became strongly anti-papal. In sermons, lectures, as well as writings, Wyclif would assert that the Pope was not God’s supreme leader or authority on earth. The pope was followed only as to points where he was consistent with Scripture. Wyclif taught that the Bible, rather than the pope, was man’s authority on God and the church. Wyclif would write and preach that the Bible was “the mirror of eternal truth.”

This was so important to Wyclif that he took the Latin bible and made the first translation of it into English so that those non-schooled in Latin would have the scriptures available.<sup>15</sup>

Wyclif’s bible study led him to believe in predestination. He taught that everyone is chosen for either heaven or hell and is human.

Dale Hearn has offered this synopsis of Wyclif the Preacher:

#### Wyclif’s Preaching<sup>16</sup>

Sermons were boring, tedious, and monotonous in John Wyclif’s day. Everyone preached the same way, using many of the same illustrations and allegories. The medieval sermon listener did not mind complaining. They would laugh, chatter, sleep, and play games during sermons (Some things

---

<sup>13</sup> Montague Burrows, *Wyclif’s place in history: Three Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford in 1881* (London, W. Isbister, 1882), pp. 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> G. R. Evans, *John Wyclif – Myth and Reality* (Intervarsity Press 2005), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Scholars dispute how much Wyclif actually translated directly himself versus how much he oversaw his students translate.

<sup>16</sup> Much of this is derived from Clyde Fant and William Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*. (Word Books 1971) Pp. 226 – 249.

never change. I sat next to a lady text-messaging on her cell phone during last week's service). One medieval preacher rebuked a woman in his congregation, who had been gossiping with her neighbor, when the woman jumped up and said, "Indeed sir, I know the one who has been doing the most babbling!"

Into this poor preaching atmosphere, John Wyclif was a breath of fresh air. His first specific contribution to preaching was his insistence on "the naked text". He would do his exposition of the Bible without the accumulation of tradition. It sounds so obvious to those of us in an evangelical/conservative church today, but Wyclif insisted that preaching should be based upon the Bible and ONLY the Bible.

There was a lot of sacramentalism going on during medieval times. Worship of images, lighting candles, genuflections, pilgrimages and other practices should all be abolished, said Wyclif. He believed that each deacon and priest should preach the word of God rather than "say matins and canonical hours."<sup>17</sup> The strongest statement he made on this was in the manuscript *Contra Fratres*. "The highest service that men may attain to on earth is to preach the word of God." Wyclif preached strongly against the recluses (hermits) and mystics of his day. "What charity is it," he asked, "to choose his own contemplation and rest, and suffer other men to go to hell?" He wanted all to use common speech and to speak to audiences, "even if they are small, and our fame should be little." His sermons often contained stern attacks on the abuses of his day.

There were basically two methods of preaching in Wyclif's day: declaring and postillating. In declaring, the preacher announced his subject and delivered an oration or essay, rather than a sermon. To postillate, the preacher would first read a portion of scripture and then examine it, phrase by phrase (today in homiletics, which is defined as the art of preaching, this would be known as an *analytical homily*.) Most of his sermons were "postills".

There was a new, third method that had become greatly popular in Wyclif's day. It took advantage of the fact that the Bible had recently been divided into chapters. The preacher would choose a portion of scripture as the basis of their sermons and then subdivide and/or outline it. Wyclif regarded this practice as dubious and stuck to the two previous methods.

---

<sup>17</sup> G.R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926) p. 133.



Wyclif's written sermons are mostly brief, but he was known to go off on an extemporaneous discussion, much longer than his notes indicate. Wyclif liked to keep his sermons simple and speak directly and clearly, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. More than 300 of his sermons are preserved to today.<sup>18</sup>

As a good sample of his preaching, we might consider Wyclif's sermon entitled "*Christ Preaching at Nazareth*". Using Luke 4:16 as his text ("And Jesus came to Nazareth, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day"), Wyclif said:

Surely the travail of the preacher, or the reputation of having good understanding, should not be the end of preaching – but profit to the souls of the people. And however this end best comes, is most pleasing to God. And the curious preaching of Latin is full far from this end, for many preach themselves, and fail to preach Jesus Christ; and so sermons do less good than they did in humbler times.<sup>19</sup>

Wyclif was a reformer. He preached that the pulpit should be free from "episcopal control" and that "Christ was not hindered then by arbitrary jurisdiction to preach among the folk..." This was a challenge to other preachers to flout the control of the church. Wyclif even encouraged preachers who were not ordained and it led to a group of itinerant preachers known as "poor priests".

...Back to Lanier

Ultimately, Wyclif was forced to leave Oxford for his teachings. Although much of what Wyclif taught was bitterly critical of the pope and the rights claimed by the papacy,<sup>20</sup> those opinions never cost him his job. Indeed, much of England was disillusioned with the Avignon/French papistry.

What ultimately pushed Wyclif beyond the acceptability of those around him was his view on the Eucharist. Wyclif struggled with the idea that some of the priests who presided over the Eucharist were themselves unsaved and impious. Yet, these unsaved priests were supposedly turning ordinary bread into the actual body of Christ for the salvation of others. That did not seem right to Wyclif. Between his

---

<sup>18</sup> Scholars debate how many of these are actual Wyclif sermons and how many were in the spirit of Wyclif. Wyclif would prepare sermons not only for himself, but also for others to deliver.

<sup>19</sup> This is Fant's modern English version of Wyclif. Wyclif was a contemporary of Chaucer and his writings read in the same English vernacular.

<sup>20</sup> Wyclif would both write and preach on his belief that the pope was the antichrist.

philosophical study and his biblical study, Wyclif decided the church's doctrine on the changing of bread into the real body of Christ was wrong.

Wyclif did not think the Eucharist unimportant. He just taught that its significance has been distorted. For Wyclif, the body and blood were present in the Eucharist because God met humanity there in a spiritual sense. He believed it blasphemy to think that priests, many of whom he thought were predestined for Hell, could actually create the body of Christ. Wyclif wrote and preached on this topic, and ultimately, it drove him away from Oxford and much of the church.

Wyclif retreated into relative obscurity for the last few years of his life. He died from a stroke around the age of 60 in 1384. Thirty-one years after his death, the Council of Constance<sup>21</sup> declared him a heretic, ordered that his writings be burned (though they were not successful in getting all of them burned!), and directed that his bones be exhumed from consecrated burial ground, burned and cast into the river. Wyclif's bones were ultimately removed, burned, and the ashes scattered on the nearby River Swift another 13 years later, ironically by Richard Fleming, Bishop of Lincoln, one of Wycliffe's first pupils.

Wyclif influenced not only his country but also continental Europe. In England, there arose a movement of "Lollards" that were extremely evangelical, teaching and preaching in the common tongue rather than Latin. Many scholars believe that the Lollards (who for a few decades had an amazing success at influencing English common people) eventually were forced underground and died out a few decades later because of Wyclif's views on predestination.

Wyclif's influence was also great in Continental Europe. John Hus (whom we study next week) and others used much of Wyclif's thought and material in their efforts to reform the Church. Ultimately, we will see Wyclif's fingerprint on the theology of Luther and Calvin as well.

From a current Catholic perspective, Wyclif is seen as paving the way to Bibles in the vernacular. That is viewed as a good result from Wyclif's life. Catholics today would view much of his theology as heresy. Most all admit that Wyclif's protests are based on real abuses that many serious and intellectual people (including Catholics) of his day wanted corrected. The difference between Catholic and Protestant on this point is the manner of the fix!

## **POINTS FOR HOME**

---

<sup>21</sup> At this same Council of Constance, John Hus was also branded a heretic and ordered to be burned at the stake.

1. Life has strange turns! The world we live in can turn upside down on a personal level or a civilization level. But, behind it all is God. God never loses control. The Psalmist asks the question: “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” The answer for the Psalmist is the same as it is for us. God. Psalm 11 continues, “The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them.” In the small things and on a personal level, God knows our pains and our crises. He cares for us and is there for us.

On the world’s stage as well, God is in control. We live with an assurance that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love, neither “trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or sword” (Romans 8:37). We also “know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

2. Preaching is important! We should preach clearly in easy to follow words! As Paul asks in Romans 10:14, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

3. John Wyclif was right! Preaching the gospel can be simple. You do not have to be a brilliant theologian to teach or understand the good news of Jesus Christ. (See “The Great Commission – Fear No More” lesson/materials on the Biblical-Literacy.com website). It is not difficult to teach people, “That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9).

4. The word of God is worth our time, attention, and study! It offers us God’s word. It is a measuring stick for doctrine and practice. For “all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.” (Isaiah 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24-25).