

John wycliffe the forerunner of the reformation religion essay



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By the start of the fourteenth century, Christianity, led by a powerful papacy, had seen 250 years of growth Perry 274. This time also marked the decline of the Christendom papacy in part due to independent Christian philosopher's ideas on faith and reason. One such heretic, according to the Catholic Church during this time, was John Wycliffe.

John Wycliffe was born around 1324 in Yorkshire, England. Little is known about Wycliffe's early formative years, but he is known to have attended Oxford University in 1345. Wycliffe also went to Balliol College where he was a scholar, master and later became the headmaster in 1360. In 1361 he was given the parish of Fylingham in Lincolnshire and by 1365 was named the head of Canterbury Hall. Wycliffe obtained his doctor of theology in 1372 while leading the rectory of Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire near Oxford (John-Wycliffe. com). While Wycliffe was a brilliant scholar, teacher, and preacher, he is most remembered for three other accomplishments.

In 1366, Wycliffe made known his reformative ideals against the papacy. He believed the teachings of the church were not in line with the bible. Wycliffe served as a theological counsel for England against Pope Urban V concerning unpaid tributes for 33 years. Wycliffe's stand probably led to him serving England at the peace congress in Bruges. In 1374, during the peace talks between France and England, he served as the theological counsel to the England alongside persons trained in the law. Even though Wycliffe represented the other side in this ordeal, the Roman Catholic Church did not recognize him as being a threat (John-Wycliffe. com).

Wanting to find a better way to voice his ideas, Wycliffe returned home and began distributing his thoughts and ideas in tracts and eventually in the *Summa Theologiae*, Wycliffe's summary of theology. Wycliffe opposed the temporal rule of the clergy, the papacy's attempt to rule the political world. Using the "government of God and the Ten Commandments", Wycliffe announced his displeasure against the clergy's temporal rule. Wycliffe forcefully stated the king should be above the Pope and all gifts and indulgences given to the church hierarchy was bribery. Wycliffe entered the political world with the release of *De Civili Dominio*, Wycliffe's expression of how the government should be run which included the removal of the church from temporal things. Wycliffe's greatest arguments were expressly written concerning the State's business of changing the Avignon's system of wasting the Church's property. While the papacy was located in France, the church continually misappropriated funds and lands. If the Church cannot legitimately control its own assets, the control must be taken away and the king is negligent if he doesn't do something about it. *De Civili Dominio* includes 18 theories opposing the current governing methods by the clergy. Wycliffe spent the last six years of his life writing tracts and books opposing the theocracy of the Church. He truly believed the Bible contained the answers to governing a person and society, not the organized Church. Wycliffe's thoughts, words, and actions made him a predecessor to the Protestant Reformation (John-Wycliffe. com).

A second reason John Wycliffe is remembered today is his contribution to the first English language transcripts of The Bible. While it is not known exactly how much of the actual work Wycliffe did, he is credited with being the

leader and organizer of the event. Wycliffe believed all people should have access to The Bible, regardless of political or social status. He thought all Christians should possess the Bible in their own language. Until now, only the rich and noble owned Bibles and these were in French. Wycliffe only had access to the Latin Vulgate and that is what he translated into the day's English.

The Church was strongly opposed to Wycliffe, his translation, and the thought of commoners possessing copies saying, " The jewel of the clergy has become the toy of the laity". Even though the Church tried to destroy Wycliffe's versions, there are approximately 150 copies still to this day. Men who owned copies of Wycliffe's Bibles were called " Bible men" and these English versions of the Bible greatly influenced the language of the day (John-Wycliffe. com).

In 1381, the chancellor of the University of Oxford declared some of Wycliffe's thoughts on the Lord's Supper heretical. Wycliffe appealed to the king, Richard II, instead of Pope Urban and published his writings to the people. He gained many followers who were named Lollards. Also in 1381 there was the Peasant's Revolt, English peasants revolted against Richard's new poll tax. Although Wycliffe did not approve, he was blamed for this event. Of the 24 theories said to be from John Wycliffe, fourteen were declared inaccurate and the other ten heretical. Anyone caught holding these ideas were subject to arrest because the king issued a decree assisting the Church. Ironically, the opposition to the reformers was based at Oxford, where John spent most of his life and where most of his followers were (John-Wycliffe. com).

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Wycliffe was summoned to Oxford in November of 1382 to appear before a special council on religious issues. Wycliffe had just suffered a stroke but had enough composure to win the favor of the council. On December 28, 1384, Wycliffe suffered a second stroke while at church and died 3 days later on December 31, 1384. Thirty years later on May 4, 1415, Wycliffe was branded a heretic and a decree was issued to burn his books and exhume his body. It took twelve years, under Pope Martin V, before his body was exhumed, burned, and distributed in the river Swift (John-Wycliffe. com).

A third and much lesser known contribution of John Wycliffe is the bifocal, a two-part lens in eye glasses helpful in reading. Most literature today attributes the invention of the bifocal lens to Benjamin Franklin in 1760. However, there are those who believe John Wycliffe invented the lens out of necessity while translating the Latin Vulgate into English (John-Wycliffe. com). It seems the bifocal could be another proof to Plato's *The Republic*, "Necessity, the mother of invention".

John Wycliffe was not a man of physical stature but people of political and social status often took council with him and hung on his every word. William Thorpe said, " From him one could learn in truth what the Church of Christ is and how it should be ruled and led" (John-Wycliffe. com). Wycliffe held on to Jesus Christ's teachings and Word and truly believed and taught the Bible is authoritative and capable of being fully involved in the government. It was Wycliffe who started the Reformation thought "-the unique authority of the Bible for the belief and life of the Christian" (John-Wycliffe. com).