

**John Wycliffe's Motivation for Translating the Scriptures
into his Vernacular Language**

By Corey Keating

Professor Nate Feldmeth
Medieval and Reformation Church History Class
Fuller Theological Seminary
Phoenix Extension
March 16, 2001

During the sixteenth century in England, the only version of the Bible that someone could find was in Latin (and possibly some parts in French). Even though a Middle English version of the Bible existed, publishing an unauthorized translation of Bible in English was punishable by death. Thus the common person, who was most likely illiterate, had no chance to find and read a Bible in his own language. Two hundred years earlier, the common people were not only discouraged from reading the Bible, but a vernacular translation of the Bible did not even exist. John Wycliffe (c.1329 – 1384) was the first person in medieval or modern history to undertake the producing of a vernacular translation of the Bible. What motivated Wycliffe during the fourteenth century to go against the popular opinion of his day and chance incurring the wrath of both Church and state by producing a vernacular translation of the Bible?

Wycliffe's motive for translating the Bible into the vernacular language of his day arose out of three convictions that are closely related and help to shape one another: Church corruption, the authority of Scripture, and individual responsibility. Wycliffe was deeply distressed by the corruption he saw within the Church. He saw that the Scriptures, as the rule for faith and practice, were the authority for combating these corruptions. Related to these ideas was the conviction that each person was directly and individually responsible to answer to God for the kind of life they lived.

Wycliffe saw the corruption within the church of his day and felt the need for reform of this unrighteousness. It seemed to him that the Church had failed to produce people living a godly life as he saw portrayed in the early disciples as recorded in the Bible. He felt compelled to write about these errors and seek to bring the Church back to where it used to be. Wycliffe wrote quite a few addresses combating what he saw as the ecclesiastical

corruptions of his day. He wrote against churchmen, mainly friars, gaining and holding land when they were living unrighteously. He wrote arguments condemning simony, auricular confession to a priest, and tithing. Some of the many booklets and tracts written by Wycliffe include: “Fifty Heresies and Errors of Friars”, “De Pontificum Romanorum Schismate”, and “Simonists and Apostates”. As the titles of these works suggest, they were polemic works that spoke against the evils and corruptions within the church of his day. ¹

He also spoke against the Pope as holding authority over the people and yet not representing God properly. He even went so far as to refer to the Pope as the ‘Antichrist’. In the book, “Wyclif, Select English Writings”, Herbert Winn summarizes Wycliffe’s view of the Pope in an introduction to one of Wycliffe's works entitled, “Pope or Antichrist?”. He says,

He [Wyclif] reached the conclusion that the Gospel does not ordain one Pope; that Peter was not above the other apostles nor the Pope above other bishops.

In his later years Wyclif denied the impeccability and infallibility of the Pope and used against him the doctrine of Predestination. The Pope, he said, might be destined for Hell. How dare such an one arrogate to himself the power to bind and to loose? ²

The evil practices of churchmen were obvious to others besides Wycliffe. He wanted reform as did other people in his day, but he was unique in that he was using the Scriptures as the measuring rod by which the ecclesiastical errors should be measured. Margaret Deanesly, one of the authorities on Wycliffe and his view of the Scriptures, wrote about how Wycliffe’s view of church errors and the Bible related to other people of his day.

The justification of Wycliffe’s theories lay in the evident need for reform and reconstruction in Christendom, ... Ecclesiastical evils of the day were as apparent to devout Churchmen throughout Europe as to Wycliffe: ... Churchmen acknowledged and lamented such evils as the non-residence of parish priests and worldliness of the

¹ See Thomas Arnold, ed. Select English Works of John Wyclif. Vol. III - Miscellaneous Works (Oxford: Clarendon Press, c1869-71)

² John Wyclif, Select English Writings (Edited by Herbert E. Winn. London: Oxford University Press, 1929) P. 67.

Clergy, ... More, probably, than in any other century it seemed to saint, socialist and sinner that the visible Church had failed, and that change and reorganisation were needed. ... So far Wycliffe was justified by his contemporaries in his estimate of the evil tenor of his days: but he was original in the insistence of his appeal to gospel and apostolic Christianity as the standard for succeeding ages.³

Thus Wycliffe was led back to the Scriptures as the final authority for defining what Church practice and doctrine should be. The early documents of the Church were to be the measuring rod to define present day practice and teaching. He appealed to the Scriptures and to the writings of the Church Fathers. Since the Church had strayed from what was recorded in these writings, the choice had to be made as to what was more authoritative. Since he saw obvious errors in Church practice, he concluded that the Bible was to be authoritative over and above tradition or pronouncements made by popes or other churchmen.

In summarizing parts of “De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae”, Wycliffe’s writing which focused on the truth of the Scriptures, Herbert Workman says,

From this insistence by Wyclif on this supreme authority of Scripture certain consequences followed. Wyclif sweeps away the whole mass of tradition, doctrine, and ordinances which set themselves as of equal or superior value to Scriptures, nor would he allow that what the pope decrees in matters of faith must be received, observed, and carried out as if it were Gospel. Such a claim would make the pope into Christ. Scripture alone is the standard of papal authority, and this the pope may fail to understand or misinterpret.⁴

This thought that the Scriptures were more authoritative than Church tradition was not a belief held by most people in Wycliffe’s day. The Church held that both Scripture and Tradition (including decrees made by the Pope) were equally important in defining doctrines and church practice. In fact, the Scriptures were only to be used as they were interpreted by the Church. Since the Church believed that the Pope carried on the appointment given by

³ Margaret Deanesly, The Lollard Bible and other Medieval Biblical Versions (Cambridge: University Press, 1920, 1966) P. 228-229.

⁴ Herbert B. Workman, John Wyclif A Study of the English Medieval Church (Vol. 1&2. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966) P. 152.

Christ to the Apostle Peter, the Pope was seen as the supreme ruler of the Church and could set doctrine as he pleased. If he interpreted Scripture and Tradition as indicating a certain doctrine, then that became the rule. Historian Benjamin Hart thus points out how Wycliffe's view of the authority of Scripture differed from the Church's view of both Scripture and Tradition:

‘All law, all philosophy, all logic and all ethics are in Holy Scripture,’ he [Wycliffe] said. The Bible is ‘one perfect word, proceeding from the mouth of God,’ and is ‘the basis for every Catholic opinion.’ Wycliffe’s thinking broke sharply from medieval scholasticism, which considered church tradition as co-equal in authority with Scripture; many saw the Church as the primary authority, a view articulated by Guido Terreni, when he said that ‘the whole authority of Scripture depends upon the church.’ Wycliffe said this was wrong, and that in fact the opposite was the case: ‘In Holy Scripture is all truth.’⁵

John Stacey, who wrote another clear work focusing on Wycliffe and his role in the reform of the Church, also recognizes Wycliffe's differing view of the authority of tradition versus the Scriptures. He says that, “Wyclif’s view of the all-sufficiency of Scripture sharply distinguished him from the medieval schoolmen who recognized little if any difference between Scripture and tradition, both of which were for them part of *auctoritas*.”⁶ He goes on to say that, “This position was a revolutionary one, for it meant that ‘Goddis lawe’ must take preference over the decrees and pronouncements of Mother Church as the competent and proper authority for Christian truth and practice.”⁷

Wycliffe realized that since there were so many existing corruptions within the Church (in both doctrine and practice), obviously it was tradition and papal direction that was to be blamed for going astray. These corruptions had come in after the time of the Apostles and after the writings of the early Church Fathers. Therefore, Wycliffe had no choice but to appeal

⁵ Benjamin Hart, John Wycliffe, Father of American Dissent (Published by Christian Defense Fund. Copyright 1988. Found on-line at <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/cdf/ff/chap04.html>) Chapter Four.

⁶ John Stacey, John Wyclif and Reform (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964) P. 80-81.

to Scripture as the authority, overruling what had been decreed by the Pope or what had slipped into practice by church tradition. Wycliffe thus declared that the Scriptures held the highest authority for Church doctrine and practice.

The basic principle upon which he [Wyclif] sought to ground his reform was the supreme authority of the Scriptures. This doctrine, which more than anything else links him with the reformation, was carefully worked out in *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (On the Truth of the Holy Scriptures), published in the very year in which the schism broke out. Wyclif asserts and defends therein the absolute superiority of the Scriptural doctrine over scholastic theology or the current assertion of papal supremacy in all matters of faith and practice. For him, ‘Holy Scripture is the highest authority for every Christian and the standard of faith and of all human perfection.’ The Bible alone is the supreme organ of divine revelation; the Church’s tradition, pronouncements of the councils, papal decrees, and all other expositions of Christian doctrine must be tested on the Scriptural touchstone. All truth is contained in the Scriptures. . . . This doctrine was basic to all Wyclif’s subsequent thought, and furnished him with a *locus standi* from which he could judge the monstrous abuses of the existing ecclesiastical practice.⁸

Along with these two dominating convictions of Wycliffe concerning the evils of the Church needing reform and the Scriptures having the sole authority to accomplish this, he also held firmly to the conviction of personal responsibility. He felt that each person was individually responsible to live their life before God and would one day answer to God for how they lived. This view could have risen out of his disappointment with the evils within the Church and the disgust he had for ungodly living among so-called churchmen. If the Church was not doing its job of properly representing God, nor helping to produce people who were living in a way that pleased God, then he concluded it was ‘every man for himself’. Wycliffe expressed this view of individual responsibility in certain books such as “On Civil Dominion” and “Dominion by Grace”. In it he argues that each person had a direct relationship with God and was responsible for living a godly life. One day each person would answer to God for

⁷ Ibid., P. 80-81.

how they had lived. The prevailing thought in his time was that the Church priests and the Pope were intermediaries between each person and their Creator. In the feudal conception of ownership (and ‘dominion’) land was owned by the king (or lord) and was held by tenants; first of all by tenants-in-chief and through them, held by the peasants. In the same way, the Church had the concept that the Pope was the ‘lord’ of all spiritual ‘property’ and was given out to the laity via the priests, acting as his tenants-in-chief. Wycliffe argued against the need for confession to a priest in order to be forgiven of sins. He dismissed these doctrines and stated that the Church is not the intermediary between God and humans, but that each man was directly and personally responsible to God.

Wycliffe’s characteristic theory, his main intellectual lever for the reform of the Church, was that of dominion by grace. ... The novelty of Wycliffe’s theory was that it discarded the idea of mediate dominion of ownership, and not merely with regard to spiritual powers, but temporal possessions. He taught that all dominion, power or ownership, came from God and that every man was His tenant-in-chief, owing no vassalage to any mense tenant.⁹

In another book, ‘*Speculum Secularium Dominorum*’, Wycliffe states his view of personal and individual responsibility this way,

Further, since all Christians, as the apostle teaches in 2 Cor. v. 10, must stand before Christ’s tribunal and give an account of all the gifts He bestowed upon them, it is necessary that all the faithful should know those gifts and their use, so that their answer may be plain. No answer by a prelate or attorney will then avail, but each will be required to answer for himself.’¹⁰

These three main beliefs of Wycliffe, Church evils needing reform, the Scriptures as the only authority to be consulted, and personal responsibility, led him to a logical and practical outcome. If each person is responsible to answer to God, and the Bible is God’s

⁸ Matthew Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform from Wyclif to Erasmus* (Vol. XIV of the Library of Christian Classics, eds., J. Baille, J.T. McNeill and H.P. Van Dusen. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953) P. 26-27.

⁹ Margaret Deanesly, P. 226-227.

¹⁰ John Wyclif, *Speculum Secularium Dominorum*, (as found in John Wyclif, *Select English Writings*, Edited by Herbert E. Winn. London: Oxford University Press, 1929, P. 6) P. 74.

highest authority and representation, they need the Bible in a language they can understand. So the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular of his day was not an underlying principle for Wycliffe, but was the logical outcome of his beliefs and views.

Deanesly states this view in a number of places in her chapter entitled, 'Wycliffe as the instigator of a vernacular Bible'. She said, "Thus the need and usefulness of an English Bible was not the foundation stone of Wycliffe's teaching, or of that of his followers: but it was the necessary and inevitable corollary of his doctrine of dominion by grace, and the immediate responsibility of every Christian for following the life of Christ."¹¹ And again she says, "It [his doctrine of dominion by grace] also led logically to the demand for a translated Bible. If all men were in immediate relationship to God, and owed Him a righteousness and obedience to His law for which they themselves were personally responsible, they needed to study His law personally, to satisfy themselves that they were keeping it."¹²

Since each person was individually responsible for how they lived, it was necessary for them to know the truth of God for themselves. Because most of the people did not read Latin (the language the Bible) they had no way of reading the Bible for themselves. They were dependent on the church officials to teach them what the Bible said. However, Wycliffe felt that the teaching by the Church was in many points not biblical. He felt that many doctrines taught by the Church were full of errors and superstitions. The Church was not teaching people the right knowledge that they needed for salvation. It was the Scriptures that should define their beliefs and practices, not tradition which was often mixed with superstition.

¹¹ Margaret Deanesly, P. 228.

¹² Ibid., P. 227.

By giving people a vernacular translation of the Bible, Wycliffe saw he could empower the people in order to free their conscience from the bondage of wrong teaching promoted by the Church. For instance, G. M. Trevelyan in his book, “England in the Age of Wycliffe”, gives a very clear example of one of the evil traditions that Wycliffe fought against.

Wycliffe developed, as to the forgiveness of sins, a theory entirely different from that held by the Church. He did not believe that either penance or confession was necessary. Confession, however, he held to be good and useful, provided it was voluntary and made to a suitable person; best of all, it might be made in public as a sign of genuine repentance. But compulsory confession to a priest, who might be the most unsuitable of persons, he considered bad. It was not true Sacrament, and was quite unnecessary to absolution. Compulsory confession he declared to have been introduced into the Church by the Pope in later and more corrupt ages. He could find only voluntary confession among the acts of the Apostles. ‘And this shrift thus brought in,’ he writes, ‘seemeth to mar the church in belief.’ ... Wycliffe fully realised how the confessional subjected men to the priesthood, and although he wished for efficient and influential Church ministers, he had clearly grasped the necessity for the emancipation of the lay conscience and intellect. He declared that in ordering compulsory confession, ‘Antichrist hath cast his cast to make all men subject to the Pope, and lead them after that him liketh. Lord, where is freedom of Christ, when men are casten in such bondage? Christ made his servants free, but Antichrist hath made them bond again.’¹³

Wycliffe also argued that one of the reasons the Church didn’t want the Bible in the vulgar language was so that people would not see the Church’s errors and come out from under it’s bondage. In a written work explaining the function of proper teachers and pastors, Wycliffe gives a very strong argument as to why the Bible should be printed and read in English and why the friars (preachers appointed by the Church, under direction of the Pope) did not want the Bible in the common language.

The friars with their followers say that it is heresy thus to write God’s law in English and make it known to ignorant men. ... It seems first that the knowledge of God’s law should be taught in that language which is best known, because this knowledge is God’s Word. When Christ says in the Gospel that both heaven and earth shall pass

13 George Mcauley Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe (4ed. London, New York, Bombay and Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966) P. 140-141.

away but his words shall not pass away, he means by his 'words' his knowledge. Thus God's knowledge is Holy Scripture that may in no wise be false. Also the Holy Spirit gave to the apostles at Pentecost knowledge to know all manner of languages to teach the people God's law thereby; and so God willed that the people be taught his law in divers tongues. But what man on God's behalf should reverse God's ordinance and his will? For this reason Saint Jerome labored and translated the Bible from divers tongues into Latin that it might after be translated into other tongues. Thus Christ and his apostles taught the people in that tongue that was best known to them. Why should men not do so now? ... This is especially so since all Christian men, learned and ignorant, who should be saved might always follow Christ and know his teaching and his life. But the common people of England know it best in their mother tongue and thus it is the same thing to prevent such knowledge of the Gospel and to prevent Englishmen from following Christ and coming to heaven. ... Some say that the friars and their followers labor in this cause for three reasons; God knows whether they be so. First, the friars would be thought so necessary to the Englishmen of our kingdom that solely in their knowledge lay the knowledge of God's law, and to tell the people God's law in whatever manner they please. And the second reason is: Friars would lead the people in teaching them God's law and thus they would teach some, hide some, and cut off some parts. For then faults in their like should be less known to the people and God's law should be less truly known both by clerks and by common people. The third cause that men notice consists in this, as they say: All these new orders are afraid that their sins should be known and how their entry into the Church had no divine sanction. Thus out of fear they do not desire that God's law be known in English, for they could not put heresy upon men if English told what they said. May God move lords and bishops to stand up for the knowing of his law. ¹⁴ (For original Middle English version of this quote, please see Winn, Select English Writings, pg 19-20.)

So, even though John Wycliffe is most widely known for being the one that initiated a vernacular translation of the Bible, that really was not what lay at the foundation of his motives or beliefs. It was instead his desire to deal with the ecclesiastical corruptions of his day, coupled with his view of the all-sufficiency of scripture. Once he realized that it was the responsibility of the individual to live a godly life, not being bound by the beliefs or practices of the corrupt Church, then it was the logical conclusion that the Bible had to be put into the hand of every individual person.

¹⁴ John Wycliffe, On the Pastoral Office, Translated and edited by Ford Lewis Battles (as found in Matthew Spinka, P. 49-51).

In looking forward from John Wycliffe's time, he really had many ideas that were foundational to the Protestant Reformation that was going to take place in less than one hundred and fifty years after his death. John Stacey, recognizing how the views of John Wycliffe was to affect Church reform at a later date, commented as follows,

To reform the Church a sufficient authority had to be found to replace the all-embracing authority of the medieval Church. It had to be absolute and unquestioned, having its source in itself and not in the Church which had determined its precise form. It was John Wyclif who persuaded those who were willing to hear that the Bible was such an authority, and this conviction of his came to be accepted by the leaders of the Reformation in the sixteenth century.”¹⁵

¹⁵ John Stacey, P. 87.

Selected Bibliography

- Ahrens, Herman C. Jr., ed. Why Wycliffe Translated the Bible into English, Christian History 2, no. 3 (1983): 26.
- Arnold, Thomas, ed. Select English Works of John Wyclif, Vol. III - Miscellaneous Works, Oxford: Clarendon Press, c1869-71.
- Bates, Ernest S. Biography of the Bible. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937.
- Butterworth, Charles C. The Literary Lineage of the KJB 1340-1611. New York: Octagon Books, 1971.
- D'Aubigne, J.H. Merle. History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. Translated by H. White. Vol. I. New York: American Tract Society, 1849.
- Deanesly, Margaret. The Lollard Bible and other Medieval Biblical Versions. Cambridge: University Press, 1920, 1966.
- Hart, Benjamin. John Wycliffe, Father of American Dissent. Published by Christian Defense Fund. Copyright 1988. Found on-line at <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/cdf/ff/chap04.html>.
- Poole, Reginald Lane. Wycliffe and Movements for Reform. New York: Anson D.F. Randolph and Company, 1978.
- Roberts, Donald L. John Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation. Christian History 2, no.3 (1983): 10-13.
- Spinka, Matthew, ed. Advocates of Reform from Wyclif to Erasmus, Vol. XIV of the Library of Christian Classics, eds., J. Baille, J.T. McNeill and H.P. Van Dusen. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953.
- Stacey, John. John Wyclif and Reform. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964.
- Trevelyan, George Mcauley. England in the Age of Wycliffe. 4ed. London, New York, Bombay and Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966.
- Westcott, Brooke Foss. A General View of the History of the English Bible. William Aldis Wright, rev., 3d ed. New York: Lemma Publishing Corporation, 1972.
- Workman, Herbert B. John Wyclif A Study of the English Medieval Church. Vol. 1&2. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966.
- Wicliffe, John. An Apology for Lollard Doctrines, Attributed to Wicliffe. Translated by James Henthorn Todd. London: John Bowyer Nichols and Son, 1842.
- Wyclif, John. Select English Writings. Edited by Herbert E. Winn. London: Oxford University Press, 1929.