

JOHN HUS: THE PRE-REFORMER (1)

John Hus was a brave reformer a century before Luther and willingly forfeited his life to affirm the authority of the Scriptures.

In the middle of Old Town Square, in the heart of Prague, Czech Republic, stands a large discolored statue of John Hus (ca. 1370 - 1415). The Czech spelling is *Jan Hus* — pronounced, "*Yan Hoose*." Appropriately, Hus rhymes with the English translation of his last name — "goose," a term he often used of himself. Not far from the statue, about a ten-minute walk through the picturesque narrow streets and walkways of Old Town is a relatively small, non-descript, building known as Bethlehem Chapel. Many foreigners have passed by without realizing its significance — yours truly among them! It is the church where Hus preached for several years. Who was this man and why is his statue in the middle of a famous square?

John Hus was born in Bohemia (part of the region, along with Moravia, we now call the Czech Republic, ca 1370. He studied philosophy and theology at Prague University. Though only regarded as an average student, he received an undergraduate degree in 1396 and a Masters in 1398. In 1402 he was ordained as a priest in the Catholic Church and became rector and priest of Bethlehem Chapel. Hus lived in a time of great political and religious upheaval and to fully understand the man and his circumstances, some background is necessary. Domestic political turmoil was emerging in Bohemia and in the early 1400's the Catholic Church was enmeshed in the Great Schism in which three rival popes vied for control of the church. The schism led to the formation of the Council of Constance (1414-1418). The Council would prove pivotal to the fate of John Hus.

It could be said that the story of Hus actually began in Oxford, England. Although Hus never studied there, Oxford was the home of Hus' greatest human influence, Jon Wyclif. Wyclif died in 1384 but several Bohemians were students at Oxford in the late 1300's and, upon their return to Bohemia, they brought many of Wyclif's writings with them. These were soon translated into Czech. Hus himself translated some of Wyclif's work at the turn of the century.

Wyclif was no friend of the Catholic hierarchy, calling into question papal infallibility and declaring that a worldly pope was a heretic and should be removed. Contrary to accepted doctrine, Wyclif taught that the true church was "invisible," made up of only the elect of God and that no visible church or its officers can control entrance or exclude membership. Further, he taught that salvation did not depend on connection with the visible church or the priesthood, but on one's relationship to God. Wyclif taught that priests and bishops should be held in esteem, not because of their position, but because of their character. He also repudiated the common practices of selling indulgences and holding masses for the dead.

Against the will of Catholic leadership, Wyclif translated the Bible into English from the

Latin Vulgate. He insisted that Scripture held the supreme authority in life and that even the unlettered could understand it. In his preaching, Wyclif was principally an expositor of Scripture — something foreign in most Catholic pulpits. Wyclif's followers came to be known as the Lollards, experienced some growth after his death, but went into decline in the early 1400's in part due to the strong opposition of king Henry V (1413-1422).

Needless to say, the Catholic Church despised Wyclif. In 1415, the aforementioned Council of Constance condemned Wyclif, ordered his writings to be burned, and directed his bones to be exhumed and cast out of the consecrated ground where he was buried. In 1428, under papal command, his remains were dug up, burned, and the ashes were thrown in a nearby stream!

As the Wyclif movement waned in England, it found traction in Bohemia through the preaching of Hus. He became the chief exponent and defender of Wyclif at Prague University where he also was appointed dean of the faculty of Philosophy in 1402. Drawing large crowds, he became an extremely popular preacher among the common people and the aristocracy. Hus sought to reach the general populace with the Word of God by preaching in Czech as well as Latin. Though not his intent, his Czech preaching stimulated an increasingly fervent nationalism.

— Jeff Young in *Biblical Insights*,
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