FACES OF THE REFORMATION

Jan Hus/John Huss

Born: circa 1373
Died: July 6, 1415

Jan Hus / John Huss

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A 15th-century Bohemian reformer who set the stage for the world-changing reforms of Martin Luther

Jan Hus was born in the village of Husinec in Bohemia around 1373. Although he was born into a poor family, Hus spent much of his early life at the University of Prague, where he received his Bachelor of Arts (1393), Bachelor of Theology (1394) and Master of Arts degrees (1396). After graduating, he continued to serve there as a lecturer and finally as rector of the university in 1402. He was ordained as a priest in 1400 and began preaching at Bethlehem Chapel in the common language, which was Czech. His preaching was popular, especially among the nobility.

Hus could have lived out his life as a professor and favored preacher in Prague, but that life would have gone against God's truth found in the Scriptures. Hus' ideas were greatly influenced by the writings of John Wycliffe, an English scholar and theologian of the 14th century, whose teachings stressed the sole authority of Scripture. Hus took a stand opposing the many abuses he saw in the Roman Catholic Church, such as simony (the act of selling church offices or roles), the sale of indulgences (granting remission of sins in purgatory for a price) and pilgrimages to view relics.

Hus' stance created many enemies amid his fellow clergy, and he soon became embroiled in a political controversy in the church. In December 1409, Pope Alexander V issued a papal bull ordering the suppression of Wycliffe's writings and forbidding preaching in chapels. Hus refused to stop preaching to his parishioners and was excommunicated and later forced to leave Prague in 1412.

He spent much of his time in exile writing and translating the Bible into the Bohemian language. The time of Hus' exile was brought to an end by the Council of Constance. A decision about the supposed heresy of Hus in following Wycliffe was to be made by this council. Despite being granted safe passage to Constance, Hus left Bohemia for the first time in his life expecting he could be going to his death.

After a month in Constance, Hus was imprisoned on Nov. 28. He appeared before the Council at Constance several times, unwilling to recant and unable to fully defend his stance. The final hearing was on June 8, 1415.

On July 6, 1415, Hus was sentenced to death as a heretic and turned over to the secular authorities to be burned at the stake. Following his death, his ashes were thrown into the Rhine.

Hus sparked reform in his homeland of Bohemia 100 years before Martin Luther did the same in Germany. His convictions centered on following God's truth, which was found only in the Scriptures — an idea that influenced Luther.

Many parallels are evident in the lives of Hus and Luther. They were both from poor, peasant families; bold preachers of the Gospel; and popular with members of the nobility. Both condemned the immorality of the clergy and the corrupt practices in the church, and each one worked on translating the Bible into the common language of his homeland while in exile. Most of all, however, both Hus and Luther inspired reform movements that could not be stopped.