

The Forerunners of the Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was not a sudden uprising without any antecedent. Prior to Martin Luther's nailing of his 95 theses on 31st October 1517, the Lord had already been working in the hearts and minds of men and women all over Europe – people whom the Lord would use to pave the way for the Protestant Reformation. They were the forerunners of the Reformation.

Throughout history, God preserved a remnant who remained faithful to Him and His Word. As in the days of Elijah when God preserved seven thousand men in Israel who did not bow to Baal (cf. 1 Kings 19:18), God kept a remnant in the Dark Ages that preceded the 16th-century Reformation. Though, in those days, the Roman Catholic church with its false brand of Christianity was spreading throughout the world, God preserved remnant groups and individuals who separated themselves from the apostate church and continued to study

and teach the Word of God. Some of them can be traced as far back as the 12th and 13th century.

The Waldenses

One such group was the Waldenses which was severely persecuted by the Roman Catholic church. In spite of this, the Waldensians stood firm on the truth for the cause of Christ and the Gospel. They stood so steadfastly that one writer said, "They must be amongst the most faithful of all the dissenters in the Middle Ages."¹

The Waldensian movement was founded by Peter Waldo (†1218), the son of a rich merchant who lived in Lyons, France. Waldo was troubled because he gained his wealth through usury and he saw the worldliness in his own life. He asked his priest for the best way to get to God and he was told to sell all that he had, give to the poor and follow Christ. Peter Waldo listened to the priest and gave everything

to the poor. Since then, he followed Christ.

Around 1170, recognising that the Word of God ought to be the basis of his faith and practice, Peter Waldo started employing men to translate the Bible. Nine years later, he gathered a group of men and women who had the desire to bring the truth of the Bible to others. The members of this group were named the Waldensians after their leader. This group would take up the task of translating, teaching and preaching the Word of God.

Initially, the Waldensians followed some Roman Catholic teachings. They existed like a religious order of the Roman church under the authority of the pope. They observed the Catholic sacraments and followed their church system. However, as they continually and constantly studied the Word of God, they soon saw the errors of the Roman Catholic church.

In obedience to God's Word, they started to reject the doctrines of Catholicism. It was later recorded of them "that they did not believe in the doctrines of the church of Rome. That they made no offerings or prayers for the dead. That they did not go to Mass. That they did not confess, and receive absolution. That they did not believe in purgatory, or pay money to get the souls of their friends out of it."²

The Waldensians believed and were convinced that the preached Word of God (and not the sacraments) was necessary for salvation. They saw the need for all of God's people to have the Word of God. They translated the Scriptures into the vernacular language of the people so that everyone might read and preach from it. Consequently, their opposition to the Roman church and their insistence on preaching the Word of God stirred up the wrath of that church.

This resulted in the Inquisition, which was a cruel and severe persecution campaign against the Waldenses – one of the most ruthless persecutions in history which lasted for

centuries. So vehement was the hatred of the Roman church against the Waldensians that Pope Alexander III commanded the bishop of Lyons to exterminate them "from the face of the earth"³.

In order to escape persecution, the Waldensians fled to the Piedmont Valleys for refuge. These valleys still remain today as a testimony of their endurance of the most horrible persecution for not renouncing their faith in Christ. In 1655, God used Oliver Cromwell to deliver them from persecution – this after more than 400 years of cruelty and oppression from the Roman Catholic church.

It was indeed a mighty act of God's providence that even during the Dark Ages of the church, there was a remnant who still saw the truths of Scripture so clearly. They were so convicted by the Word of God that no amount of persecutions would cause them to deny their faith.

The Albigenses

Another group that fiercely opposed the Roman church was the Cathars. This group is more commonly known as the Albigenses,

named after the town of Albi in southern France where they originated. The Cathars had its beginning in northern Europe around 1140 before they shifted south and established themselves in northern Italy and Languedoc. By 1200, with the support and protection they received from the French nobles, they became a powerful group. In their opposition to the Roman church, this was said of them, "It was the Albigensians that aroused the greatest anxiety and hostility from the Catholic church."⁴

Little is known about the doctrines and practices of the Albigenses. Because of the ferocious persecution unleashed upon them, many of their writings were destroyed. They have often been charged with teaching the heresies of Manichaeism and dualism. However, this accusation has not been verified even till today. These charges of heresies were often invented by their Roman persecutors to discredit their teachings.

Archbishop Ussher said of them that the charge "of Manichaeism on the Albigensian sect is evidently false". William Jones, a church historian,

concurred. He wrote "... that the general body of the Albigenses received the doctrines of Peter Waldo – that these doctrines had no connection with Manichaeism – and that the Waldenses and Albigenses were two branches of the same sect, inhabiting different countries, each deriving its appellation from its local residence"⁵.

If the Albigenses had the same doctrinal stand as the Waldenses, it was no wonder it brought great displeasure to the Roman church. Thus it prompted the church to organise the Albigensian Crusade to get rid of all the Albigensians by force. This crusade brought great bloodshed. In the process of getting rid of the Albigensians, they also destroyed France.

The Albigensians shocked the Roman church, for the latter was reminded that there were people who dared to oppose the church in order to stand for what they believed in. There were other groups such as the Lollards and the Hussites which were founded later, under the influence of John Wycliffe and John Huss respectively.

John Wycliffe

Wycliffe was known as the Morning Star of the Reformation. He was born in Ipreswell, Yorkshire, and lived from 1324 to 28th December 1384. He studied theology and ecclesiastical law at Oxford. For the early part of his life, Wycliffe was mainly an Oxford schoolman.

Wycliffe's public career coincided with the time during which nationalistic anti-papal sentiments and anti-ecclesiasticism were brewing among the English people. This dissention was due to their reluctance in having papal taxation brought to England. This greatly influenced Wycliffe's views on papal authority.

From 1374, he had become more active in religious reform in which he rose to stand against the pope. Wycliffe sought to remove the Roman church's immoral clergymen, confiscate ecclesiastical property and refute her false teachings. 1378 marked the year in which he inaugurated himself as a doctrinal reformer.

Wycliffe introduced many theological and practical reforms. He preached against the pope, bishops

and friars, and warned the people against the deceptions of the Roman church. He condemned the teachings of indulgences, transubstantiation, and the false ideas behind pilgrimages and papal infallibility. He was the first to call the pope "Antichrist". Some of Wycliffe's accusations against the pope were directed at "his usurpation, his infallibility, his pride, his avarice, and his tyranny"⁶.

Church historian Philip Schaff says, "His assault may be summarized under five heads: the nature of the church, the papacy, the priesthood, the doctrine of transubstantiation and the use of the Scriptures."⁷ Wycliffe further taught that Christ, and not the pope, is the head of the church; the Bible, and not the pope, is the sole authority of life and truth; and that the church should follow the example of the New Testament church.

Through sermons, tracts, pamphlets and other writings which were penned with much conviction and passion, Wycliffe reached the hearts of the people in his bid to break down priestly pretensions. He also exalted preaching and

attempted to bring the pure Gospel to the people. Around 1380, Wycliffe began a movement against the friars. He trained “poor priests” – also known as the Lollards – from Oxford graduates and laymen, and sent them forth as itinerant evangelists to spread the Gospel of Christ. This movement inspired a rapid spiritual reformation.

One of the most significant contributions Wycliffe made to the church was his translation of the New Testament into English from the Latin Vulgate in 1382. He wanted to see that the Bible was accessible to the common English people. During the same year, his views were condemned in London and he retreated to Lutterworth. There, he never stopped labouring to spread the truth of God.

Wycliffe died of a stroke on the 28th of December 1384 but his influence did not die with him. The Lollards’ preaching of the Gospel of Christ would reach Bohemia, where it would influence a man named John Huss.

John Huss

Huss was born of Czech parents in 1369, in Southern

Bohemia. He studied at Prague where he earned several degrees. In 1400, he was ordained priest, and the following year, he was appointed preacher of the Bethlehem Church in Prague and later became the Dean of Philosophy.

Having been influenced by the teachings of Wycliffe, Huss strongly defended and promoted the Gospel of Christ. In 1405, Pope Innocent VII forbade the propagating of Wycliffe’s writings and his views, and renewed the condemnation of 45 articles of Wycliffe’s teachings. Huss’ refusal to submit to this prohibition resulted in him being stripped of his position as a synodal preacher.

Under the rule of Alexander V, the archbishop further accused the Lollards of instigating all ecclesiastical disturbances in Bohemia. Thereupon, the pope issued his bull (a papal decree) on December 20, 1409, that all books of Wycliffe were to be surrendered, his doctrines revoked and free preaching disallowed. John Huss protested in vain but he did not give up preaching and teaching the truth.

Huss’ teachings were very similar to that of

Wycliffe’s. He preached against indulgences; he taught that the church was not the Roman church, but the universal body of believers; Christ, and not the pope, was the head of the church; people should be permitted to read the Bible in their own language; the Scriptures, not the pope, was the final source of authority and truth; and church membership and office did not guarantee salvation. Because of his teachings, Huss was excommunicated a year later and went into exile. He, however, never ceased to champion the preaching of the Gospel of Christ.

His strong anti-papal views resulted in him being summoned before the Council of Constance. Accompanied by Bohemian nobles and promised safe conduct, Huss set off for his journey on October 11, 1414, and reached Constance on November 3. However, after a few moments with the cardinals, he was soon imprisoned in the Black Friars’ convent without any fair trial. Though he was severely ill-treated there, he still wrote tracts and letters.

After many prison transfers and hearings before kangaroo courts,

Huss was condemned to be burned at the stake on July 6, 1415. Wycliffe's manuscripts of the Bible were used as kindling for the fire. John Huss never recanted. Instead, his last words were full of boldness and faith. He said that there would arise a man whose call for reformation could not be suppressed.

His words turned out to be prophetic. About a hundred years later, Martin Luther would realise that the teachings of Huss were very

similar to his own, so much so that he was charged by the Catholic theologian, John Eck, to be a Hussite during their Leipzig debate. When Luther examined Huss' writings, he returned and declared loudly, "I am a Hussite!"

God had paved the way for the ushering in of the Reformation movement through these men amongst others. They were the sparks that set off the flames of the Reformation. What Martin Luther did

on the 31st of October 1517 officially marked the beginning of the Reformation movement, but let us not forget that God had always been working in history even before Luther was born – by preparing the hearts and minds of men and women who would receive and defend the truth of the Gospel even at the cost of their lives.



Joshua Yong

ENDNOTES

1. Herman Hanko, *Portraits of Faithful Saints*, (Greenville: Michigan, Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1999), 97.
2. John Fox, *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, (Electronic Edition: E-Sword 7.98), chapter 6, part 1.
3. *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, chapter 4.
4. N.R. Needham, *2000 years of Christ's Power - Part II: The Middle Ages*, (London, Grace Publications Trust, 2000), 311.
5. William Jones, *The History of the Christian Church: From the Birth of Christ to the XVIII. Century: Including the Very interesting Account of the Waldenses and Albigenses*, (London: R. W. Pomeroy, 1832) p. 318
6. Fox, chapter 7.
7. Schaff, 6:10.

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the pope nor the councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound captive to the Word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other, so God help me!"

(Martin Luther when asked to recant his writings before the Diet of Worms)