

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 49

John Hus and the Bohemian Reformation

Last week, we studied John Wyclif, the Englishman who spoke out clearly on the need to use the Bible as ultimate authority in one's life and doctrine. It cost John Wyclif his appointment at Oxford. Similar views would cost John Hus much more.

Hus was born in Husinec, a small village in the southern portion of what is now the Czech Republic. It is believed that Hus was born on December 6, 1371, and his village was in the Bohemian section of the German Empire. Hus's last name comes from his village Husinec (at the time called Husinee).

We know a little about Hus's life as a child. His parents were incredibly poor. While we do not know his parents' names, we do know that they worked hard to give him a life with greater opportunities than their own. Hus's mother was a devout woman who wanted her son to serve God in life and vocation. She saw to this by both praying for Hus constantly and by baking bread and giving it to the local priests so that they would teach Hus when he was young.

The village was too small to have a church, so the family regularly made the two-hour round trip to church in Prachatice for communion and the mass service. This was the same town where Hus would get his early schooling.

Some note¹ that Hus grew up strongly impressed with the wealth and lifestyle of the local priests. To a poor village boy, the priests seemed almost regal with their nice homes and nice clothes. The priests had solid horses, good stables, and servants to tend to their needs. In his later years, Hus reflected on his youth and noted, "While a pupil, I yearned to become a priest and was possessed with the undesirable thought of riches in the priesthood."

When Hus was between the age of 16 and 19 (historians differ on the exact age), he moved to Prague and began studying at the University. Still impoverished, Hus would often sleep outside on the ground. To get money for food, Hus would sing on the street for donations. Hus also won money in a few occasional chess tournaments! Hus studied the liberal arts and received his B.A. in 1393. In 1394,

¹ There are a number of books on the life of John Hus, but many have not made it into the English language! We also have many of his sermons and writings, though they are mostly in Latin or the Slavic language. For our sources, we have used a number of different books and references, including *John Hus, Biblical Preacher* by August Adolph Skodacek; *John Hus: A brief Story of the Life of a Martyr* by William Dallman; and *Advocates of Reform* by Matthew Spinka.

Hus received a second Bachelor's degree in Theology. Two years later, Hus got his Master of Arts with his major in Philosophy.

As a relatively young man of 29, Hus received ordination as a priest in 1400. The following year, Hus became Dean of the Philosophy department at the University. Just two years later, Hus became the Rector of the whole school.

These were quick advances and heady accomplishments for Hus. He was an "up and comer." Many eyes must have focused on him as key man and leader for the future. His life seemed to have a halo of protection and prosperity. This became most evident when in 1402, Hus was given the pulpit of Bethlehem Chapel at the age of 31.

BETHLEHEM CHAPEL

Bethlehem Chapel was 11 years old, having been dedicated to use on May 24, 1391. The Chapel got its name from Herod's slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem while trying to kill the infant Jesus. Prague had a recent history of two preachers who had worked diligently to reach the disenfranchised of the city for Christ. The first of these two was an Augustinian monk named Konrad of Waldhauser. Konrad came into Prague in 1363 and taught in the German language, much like Wyclif did in English. Konrad was a church reformer who spoke out against the crass commercialism of the church. The second fellow was John Milic, Konrad's student. Milic was a wealthy man who gave his wealth and prestige up to serve as a chaplain under Konrad. Milic started visiting small villages and preaching in the more base Bohemian language of the rural people. The German clergy and power structure mocked and criticized Milic, earning a spot in his sermons. Milic would preach that anything not of Christian love and humility was of the Antichrist. This preaching got Milic arrested.

Milic was sent to Rome for trial and was put into jail after he posted his concerns on the door of St. Peter's Church at the Vatican. Once the Pope got back to Rome, he investigated the matter and sent Milic back to Prague a free man.

Milic then preached even more boldly. Many came to Christ as a result, especially a large number of street people and prostitutes. Milic began buying houses that he converted into street shelters. Eventually, Milic was indicted again for giving communion to repentant street women. Again, the Pope released him noting his strong work for sinners, in spite of the offense it brought to the wealthy and powerful. Milic soon died, but his influence (and that of Konrad's) was deeply felt in Prague.

Inspired by these men and their influence on Prague, it was decided to build the Bethlehem Chapel. The chapel would seat 1,000 people. The altar was not the only point of attention in the chapel. The pulpit is as prominent as the altar (this was very unusual in church construction at the time!). The chapel was dedicated to preaching. The charter read that as a house of God, the chapel was to be occupied by preachers who would dutifully preach the Word of God in the common language of the people. This was also rare in the church. By and large, the church had kept its sermons in Latin.

The two men who built and paid for the construction of the Chapel also insisted that the Chapel's preachers be of bohemian birth. The Chapel was chartered to have two services/sermons on Sundays and holidays in Bohemian.

For its first decade, the pulpit was always filled. In 1402, however, a preaching position came open. Three men were considered for the job. Among them was John Hus, a young but impressive university professor. Hus got the job!

HUS, THE PREACHER

So, here we have a young man of 31 taking on a major preaching job. Hus kept his University duties, but went into his new job with great energy. Hus also had a wonderful role model of sorts.

The year was 1402, and just 18 years earlier, another University leader named "John" who had preached in the common language of the people had died – John Wyclif. Hus knew of Wycliff's work. In fact, the University at Prague had a number of contacts and students from England who had brought the writings and teachings of Wyclif over with them. Wyclif had a cult following of sorts at the University of Prague. Wyclif was seen as a man who taught the people in their language, who fought against the abuses of the church, who believed that a Christian's call was a holy call that should result in a holy life, and most importantly, Wyclif placed Scripture over any other authority in church, doctrine and life. What better role model for young John Hus?

Hus read (and eventually translated) the works of Wyclif. While Hus was no Wyclif clone, he was clearly inspired and influenced by the English reformer. Hus set himself to preaching. Hus's sermons were strong and scriptural. Using the local language, Hus would take scriptures and expound on them, using analogies and quotations from Church Fathers in the process.

This preaching approach used what today is called "exegesis" of scripture. It means taking scripture and working out of the passage the meaning and message contained in it. It is contrasted to the mere reading of scripture or to the thematic

sermon. This approach was rare in Hus's day. Many scholars see in Hus the genesis of that preaching approach which would soon become the norm in Protestant churches.

Hus's sermons were immensely popular. The church would have standing room only sermon after sermon. Hus preached against sin and vice regardless of where it was found. Hus would preach against the sin of the common man and the sin of the nobility. Hus would find his sermon material in the every day walks of life. From his own experiences and those of others, Hus would see things contrary to the Word of God and preach on them.

Hus's use of Scripture was strong and consistent. The Bohemian people had their conversion roots from the Eastern Church, not the Roman. They had already had a Bible translated into the common Bohemian tongue. Eventually, Hus would revise that translation and bring it into more modern and accurate parlance.

Practicing what one preaches has long been a problem that has plagued the church. It is much easier to get up and tell others what to do than it is to actually do it yourself. Hus, however, actually practiced what he preached. His personal life was a model sermon in itself. Hus was not out for money nor for personal pleasure. He lived very modestly and sought to use his time and energies teaching and preaching.

HUS'S SERMONS

Since we still have many of Hus's sermons, it is interesting to look at them and compare them to what we might hear. Hus spoke personally to the people. In using the common language, he went a step further and spoke personally and sincerely to the people. Over and over, Hus would address his audience as "Men and brethren"² or "Beloved."

No subject was off limits to Hus, though he always pulled his subjects into reference with Scripture. Hus preached on most every sin and he was never hesitant to point sin out, whether in a common person, priest, or even pope. Hus would preach against the nobility even while they attended his sermons. For Hus, Scripture provided a foundation from which moral righteousness could rule.

² We should not derive from this the idea that only men attended. Queen Sophia herself was a regular attendee of Hus. Hus would frequently direct special parts of his sermons to the attention of the women. When he did so, he would call them "women of the Church." Hus would use this term and reference at one fell swoop both the servant girls and the Queen herself. This unexclusive grouping of women in the same class for God's purposes was unheard of.

Hus believed that many people were not as familiar as they should have been with Scripture. Hus blamed this on the failures of other priests to teach as they should. He would denounce those who preached man-made laws rather than Scripture. He would similarly preach against many who would proclaim righteousness while living in blatant immorality. Hus believed and taught that everyone, including the Pope, was under the authority of Scripture.

Hus's would frequently infuse his message with short analogies. For example, Hus would compare priests to cooks. Some cooks, he noted, prepare excellent meals for their people. Other cooks have been known to poison others with their food.

Hus would identify himself with all the people of his congregation. It was important to him, especially when great nobility frequently came to hear him, that the most common person find a home in the church and a place in Hus's heart. Consider here Hus's sermon on John 10. Jesus declares:

¹I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice. ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. ⁷Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. ¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it

down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.

Hus was working his way through this passage and got to the point where Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep.” Hus started contrasting Jesus to the priests of his day. Hus claimed, “We shepherds of today do not know all our sheep, but only those which will give us more money for their wool!” Those are strong words for a man who has 1,000 plus regularly in his service!

Yet, Hus was a man who backed up what he said. Hus clearly knew his sheep and was loved by them. The Prague populace loved and revered Hus. He spoke truth to all regardless of place or position. But Hus did so humbly, noting himself as one of the least, even while his life exemplified the best of Christian virtue.

Soon, the local Archbishop set Hus up as a frequent preacher to the other priests. Hus continued to use the Word of God in those sermons. As the Bible is “sharper than any two edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12), the words Hus preached to the other priests often stung. After more than one sermon where Hus pointed out the evil ways of many monks and priests,³ complaints were lodged to the King himself. King Vaclav IV was reported to have said, “While Master Hus preached against us worldly ones, we bore it willingly and patiently, but now it is your turn! You also must bear it!”

Hus’s view that churchmen were to be moral beacons was something brand new! The common perception was that churchmen were entitled to be sinners just as much as the worst of society. That was just the way of the world. But Hus saw things differently, and many priests never forgave him for that.

HUS’S LAST STAND

In addition to Hus’s sermons, Hus wrote constantly. As already noted, he translated Wyclif and revised the Bohemian Bible. He wrote against common fund raising practices including the uses of relics as miracle points. This hurt the

³ Hus preached, “There are many among you who are given much more to drunkenness than the congregation. You go to the taverns while the people are going to church. You then return to church with unsteady steps and fuzzy tongues. As priests you should know you are acting ignorantly. At your banquets you have more rich and selected delicacies than even the higher class of people. This is all a mockery to the crucified Christ our Lord. You bodies revel in self-satisfaction, and you have unclean talk. You are more concerned about your personal business than that of the church. You spend your time and money hunting while neglecting the needs of the people. You take the gifts of food from people and feed them to your dogs rather than help the hungry on the streets. And in church, rather than tell people things they need to hear for learning and edification, you speak unintelligible nonsense!”

pocket book of more than one priest! Hus wrote that Christians should not be seeking signs and miracles, but rather the truth of Holy Scripture.

Many of the church people were not real happy with Hus over his attempts to reform the clergy.⁴ This was coming at a time when the English followers of the now dead Wyclif (called “Lollards”) were also creating quite a stir in the church in England. Many in the church saw this as the heresy of Wyclif. Efforts to stop Wycliff’s influence gathered momentum. Hus was seen as a teacher and adherent of some of the ideas of Wyclif, and the church sought to root those out as well.

At this same time, the church was undergoing a schism of its own. There was a fight over which pope was the proper pope. A council at Pisa in 1409 deposed both popes (Benedict XIII and Gregory XII) as heretics and elected Alexander V as pope (Alexander V would live only shortly until poisoned and then Pope John XXIII took his seat). The two deposed popes were still alive and both were still claiming the papacy. With this three-cornered fight between the ‘popes’, the various governing nobility were taking sides, as were the priests. The Archbishop over Hus sided with Alexander V as pope and convinced him that all the troubles in Bohemia were coming from the teachings of Wyclif as spread by Hus. The Archbishop argued that the teachings of Wyclif/Hus made the clergy disobedient to the church, made the congregants think they could lead the clergy, and made the king think he could take church property.

Pope Alexander V issued a bull in December 20, 1409, ordering the Archbishop to suppress the writings of Wyclif and any preaching in “unusual places.” This was a clear reference to shutting down Hus and the Bethlehem Chapel.

Hus would not be silent though. Hus defended both Wyclif and biblical teaching. Hus continued to rail against indulgences and much of the economic motives of some of the church. When Hus refused to quit preaching, the Archbishop excommunicated both Hus and his followers. Hus would write:

Having placed these saints and Christ the God before my eyes, I did not consent to obey Pope Alexander and priest Zbynek, the Archbishop, that I should not preach the Word of God... The Word of God says: “Preach the word to all the world.” But their commands are to the contrary: “do not preach the word to all the world...” Know accordingly that you are not bound to obey except in such matters in which you are bound by obedience to God.... Thus we should obey evil prelates or rulers in all

⁴ Hus was no fan of indulgence: Hus argued, “One pays for confession, for mass, for the sacrament, for indulgences, for churching a woman, for a blessing, for burials, for funeral services and prayers. The very last penny which an old woman has hidden in her bundle for fear of thieves or robbery will not be saved. The villainous priest will grab it.”

such matters and burdens that are not sinful. Such are all burdens which the faithful bear for Christ's sake. But we must not obey wrong commands which are against the commandments and counsel of Jesus Christ.

When Hus read this from the pulpit at Bethlehem Chapel, those in attendance cheered with approval.

Meanwhile Pope Alexander died, leaving John XXIII the Pope. Hus made two different appeals to John XXIII, but the excommunication on grounds of heresy stayed in place.

Hus was summoned to appear before the pope, but did not go for fear of his life. Hus told his friends and followers that he would surely not have a fair trial and his life would be forfeit.

Hus was forced to leave Prague as riots were instigated against him and his preaching. Hus went into exile in the care of a friend in the countryside. Hus found time to write extensively on the church and the crisis. This is also the time where he did most of his work retranslating the Scriptures into common tongue. Hus also preached in the countryside to massive audiences. Many of his Bethlehem Chapel flock would travel to hear him.

The church did not forget about Hus. His writings continued to pepper the issues and stoke the flames. Finally in 1414, the Emperor Sigismund (who was over the local king) and Pope John XXIII decided to call a general council to try and end the schism in the church. This council was to address the needed reform in the church and the "heresies" of Wyclif and Hus. The Emperor gave his word that Hus would be protected and no harm would come to him if he would come present at the council. Pope John XXIII also promised Hus protection saying, "Even if Hus had killed my own brother, he shall be safe in Constance."

Hus was doubtful for his safety, but felt compelled to go based on the assurances of the Emperor. The Emperor provided three armed bodyguards to escort Hus. Out of caution, Hus got his house in order before he left and said a precautionary farewell to his people: "Beloved, if my death ought to contribute to the Master's glory, pray that it may come quickly and that He may enable me to stand all my calamities with constancy. You will probably never behold my face in Prague."

On October 11, the 43-year-old Hus set out for Constance. Arriving at Constance, Hus was not impressed with what he saw. The Emperor had come with 20 Princes and 120 Counts. The Pope showed up with 29 Cardinals, 7 Patriarchs, over 300

Bishops, and 250 University professors. Hus had his three bodyguards, but even they belonged to the Emperor!

Without regard to the promises, the pope had Hus was imprisoned on November 28. He was hauled out repeatedly in a trial where he was pressured to confess and repent for his sins. Hus repeatedly told the inquisitors that he would gladly repent of anything he had ever spoken, written or taught, if anyone could show him where it was contrary to Scripture.

The Emperor was none too pleased that the Pope had broken the Emperor's promise of safety for Hus. The Pope responded that the Emperor had no authority over a heretic, and should stay out of the church's business. The Emperor relented and left Hus in the hands of the church. The Emperor added another wrinkle, however. The Emperor had the Pope John XXIII arrested as well and locked up in the same prison as Hus! Hus was kept in a small room behind the latrines. It was dark, damp, and so short that he could not stand up in it. Not surprisingly, Hus contracted a severe respiratory illness.

Ultimately, the pope agreed to step down in response to the charges (72 charges in total including murder of Pope Alexander V, rape, adultery, sodomy, incest, corruption, poisoning, denying the resurrection and eternal life, etc.). The pope's life was spared. Hus, on the other hand, was accused of the heresies associated with Wyclif (denying the economic engines of the church, asserting the pre-eminence of Scripture and its teachings) and Hus would not recant.

Hus was summoned before the council. He was asked if he had actually written his books and he answered, "yes." When asked again to recant, Hus said he would readily recant anything unscriptural. But Hus wanted to be shown in the Bible where anything he said was wrong. The council shouted Hus down when Hus tried to make a defense. Finally, Hus was heard to ask where had he erred. The council responded that Hus must first recant and then they would tell him his errors.

On June 8, 1415 the council again reviewed the charges against Hus. They laughed at the charge that Hus denied papal authority (Hus had said the pope was the Vicar of Christ only if he imitated Christ in his life). Hus also condemned other dignitaries of the church if they acted against Scripture and that was a charge against the council itself! For that, Hus was in trouble.

The charges were read including Hus's statement that "if the pope, bishop or prelate be in mortal sin, then he is no longer pope, bishop or prelate." Hus defended this writing by asking "If John XXIII was a true pope, why did you depose him from his office?" Hus then said the church did not need a pope as

earthly head. Christ was the sufficient head of the church. The popes were, according to Hus, often monsters of iniquity.

The council shouted Hus down angrily at which point Hus added, “Surely the Church in the times of the Apostles was infinitely better ruled than now!”

Both the Cardinal and Emperor urged Hus to recant or die. Hus repeated that if shown in Scripture where he was wrong, he would recant. Until then, he would live by his conscience and Scripture.

A month later, one last chance was made to get Hus to recant. One bishop taunted Hus, “Do you think you are wiser than our whole council?” Hus answered, “I do not claim to be wiser than the whole council, but, I beg you, give me the least man of the Council to show me out of the Word of God and I will recant at once!”

The council voted on Hus’s execution on July 6, 1415. Each voting member stood up and delivered his own, often moving, speech that ended with a vote as to whether Hus should live or die. A sizeable minority voted to save Hus’s life, but the majority ruled.

After the vote, Hus was dressed up in priestly garb and asked once more to recant. With tears, Hus continued to plead that he would recant anything that could be shown unscriptural. Hus was then cursed, his priestly robes stripped from him, and he was forced to wear a paper hat that proclaimed him a heretic.

In the presence of the Emperor, who had promised Hus safe passage, Hus was condemned to death. Hus stared at the Emperor and reminded those in hearing range of the assurance of safe passage. The Emperor blushed, but did nothing to stop the proceeding.

Hus was taken out into a clover field where he was tied to a stake and had wood placed around him. The wood was set on fire and Hus was burned alive at the age of 44. As the smoke and flames killed him, Hus was heard singing, “Oh Christ, Thou Son of the living God, have mercy on me.”

HUS’S LEGACY

A trip to Prague today will find a huge sculpture of Hus in the middle of town. Hus became the father figure of the Reformation movement in that area. His influence on Luther and other reformers coming in the next 100 years was huge.

The town of Husinec has a solemn commemoration of Hus’s death each year. This celebration has been ongoing since 1868.

The Catholic Church has reassessed the role of Hus in history. The current Czech Cardinal Miloslav Vlk honors Hus as a “Catholic Priest and a reformer of the Church” rather than a heretic. Hus’s commitment to moral truth and sincerity” was key to Czech history (where he is considered a national hero) as well as positive effort to reform a church in need of reform.

Pope John Paul II wrote of Hus, “independently of the theological convictions he defended, Hus cannot be denied integrity in his personal life and commitment to the nation’s moral education.”

POINTS FOR HOME

Reflecting on the life of Hus, it seems appropriate to pause and consider the church and what place God has for us in his Church. We should take home from this inspiring life at least an understanding that:

1. The success of his preaching was the fact that John Hus’ life was a sermon before he preached it.
2. You are a link in God’s chain. Wyclif lived the life God called him to live. Connected to Wyclif is Hus, who translated some Wyclif’s writings into Bohemian, used some of Wyclif’s sermons in his own sermons, and taught from some of Wyclif’s textbooks. Connected to Hus is Martin Luther. You, too, are a link in everything you do. People are different because you interact in their life with them. And that should drive all of us to wonder in awe at God, and to spend more time in the Word and in our devotion to Him.
3. The church is the body of Christ, but the church is made of imperfect people. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Yet, that is never a reason for letting sin reign in the church. Paul asks, “Shall we sin so that grace may abound?” And then answers “By no means!” (Romans 6:1-2). In fact, chapters 2 and 3 of the revelation John had on Patmos are letters to churches to clean up their practices!
4. In this Church, we are called to work together to the glory of Christ. We work in different ways, but we all work together for the common good of the body of Christ. Paul wrote the Corinthians an appeal that, “all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Paul later adds, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (12:27). We are to serve in our roles and use our gifts for the good of the body. Jesus saw the importance of this and

prayed that not only for the unity of the church but also that the church would be sanctified “by the truth” (John 17:17).

Let’s commit to serve in the church, which starts with attending and plugging in to other peoples’ lives. Let’s decide that while we may not be called to die for the truth of God and his church, we might at least have a chance to sacrifice our personal comfort a bit and make the body of Christ a high priority.