

Andrew Cook:

If you've been with us recently here on *Serving Today* you'll know that it's the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and we've been learning how it began and what its long-term effects have been on the church and in wider society.

Continuing with the series, we now hear about some of the key characters who were used by God to bring about this great change.

Today we go actually back to fourteenth century England, before the Reformation itself got underway. John Wycliffe's influence on Bible based Christianity was, and remains, revolutionary. To tell us more about him, here is Trevor Low, now a retired pastor.

Trevor Low:

John Wycliffe was born in the county of Yorkshire in Northern England somewhere between about 1324 and 1330, we're not sure exactly when he was born. At the age of about 15 he went to Oxford University. In those days you did not simply study for three or four years to get your degree, but rather you would study for nine or ten years for a Bachelor of Arts and then that would be followed by a further perhaps eight or nine years of specialising in theology.

He then became eventually a Professor in Divinity at Oxford University. He was known as the 'flower of Oxford' and because Oxford was probably one of the leading universities in Europe at that time, he was probably one of the leading scholars in Europe in the 14th Century.

Andrew:

Can you tell us something about what the general background was in England at the time?

Trevor:

There were many, many people employed in the church; there were monks and friars and priests and bishops. But unfortunately the church was rather corrupt in the 14th Century; they taught that sins could be forgiven by the paying of money. [...] there was very little true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and very little regard for the teaching of the Bible.

Andrew:

It was as a student that he was truly converted to Christ. At the time something called the Black Death was spreading throughout England and the rest of Europe, as Trevor goes on to explain.

Trevor:

This was that plague which came right across Europe; they reckoned that somewhere between a third and a half of the population died. And this created in John a great fear of death, a fear of judgement and he cried to God for mercy and he repented and he began to read the Bible for himself.

He then realised that the teaching of the church was not the same as the teaching of the Bible and that was when he really made it his life's ambition that the ordinary people of England should have the Word of God in their own language.

Up to that time, of course, everything that was taught in the church was taught in Latin, which the ordinary people did not understand. And so when John asked himself the question: well, why did people not realise that they're being taught error, the answer was because they are being taught in Latin and they don't know any different.

Andrew:

So John Wycliffe is most famous for translating the Bible from Latin into the common language of the people. This was in about 1380.

Trevor:

And within about two years he had most of the Bible translated. Almost certainly he was helped by some friends and colleagues, but he believed very firmly that the ordinary man should have the Bible in his own language and this is exactly what he did.

Andrew:

But this desire and purpose to translate the Bible wasn't without its cost to Wycliffe himself and to his followers.

Trevor:

The church of course in those days did not want their practices to be seen as wrong. They did not want the truth of the Bible to come out because of course they were making so much money from the mistaken ideas that they were teaching. And Wycliffe was tried in various church courts and threatened and so on, but he was very, very faithful to what he believed was his calling.

This included not simply translating the Bible but he got a number of men around him. They were known as Lollards (almost certainly this came from a word meaning 'to babble'). It was a rather nasty term that people would apply to him and his followers, but they were called the Lollards and these were lay preachers who went out into the countryside and they preached the truth of the Word of God to the ordinary people.

Andrew:

One of the reasons for learning about important figures in the history of the church is to find out what lessons we can learn from their lives. This is how Trevor sees what the life of John Wycliffe can teach us.

Trevor:

His own personal faith in the Lord Jesus as he had discovered it in the Bible.

Secondly then, his belief that everyone has the right to hear the truth of the Bible, whether that be through reading it or to have it preached to them.

Thirdly, I think his sheer perseverance because life was not easy for him and people hounded him and tried him and pursued him. But he stuck to his task as he saw that task that God had called him to do and he was very, very faithful in that.

Andrew:

Wycliffe died on the last day of 1384, in his mid to late fifties. We should be thankful for his life because he established the principle of making the Bible available in the common language of the people.

Finally, Wycliffe is often called the 'Morning Star' of the Reformation because he prepared the way for people like Martin Luther and others. And, as we've heard previously in this series, one of the Reformation's big ideas was shared by Wycliffe, and that was that Bible's teaching was of much greater importance than the teaching of men. So, in that sense Wycliffe is sometimes called the 'Morning Star' of the Reformation.