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The Initial Cause of Wycliffe's Break with the Church-Doctrinal, Moral, Political?

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THE INITIAL CAUSE OF WYCLIFFE'S BREAK WITH THE CHURCH - DOCTRINAL, MORAL, POLITICAL?

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM AND TO THE LIFE OF JOHN WYCLIFFE

> Here, then, stood Wiclif before his judges awaiting his examination - a tall, thin figure, covered with a long light gown of black colour, with a girdle about his body; the head, adorned with a full flowing beard, exhibiting features keen and sharply cut; the eye clear and penetrating; the lips firmly closed in token of resolution - the whole man wearing an aspect of lofty earnestness, and replete with dignity and character.[1]

John Wycliffe[2]--his name is quite familiar, especially to Protestant and Lutheran Reformation scholars, and certain aspects of his life and work have been treated again and again. However, his stature in history--in fact, his popular title, "the Morning Star of the Reformation"[3]--provides those who are inclined to show an interest, endless opportunities to explore the many different facets that went into the making of John Wycliffe and his work. Regardless of the theologian's particular denominational orientation or bias, a study of Wycliffe cannot but help him to better understand the Reformation beginnings

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[1] G. Lechler, John Wiclif and His English Precursors (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Co., 1881), p. 184.

[2] There is no "correct" spelling of his name. As will be noted, the writer of this paper will use Wycliffe exclusively. However, in various quotations and references the reader may find a different spelling as the accepted one. A case in point is to be seen in the first footnote. One authority mentions that Wycliffe's name, has been spelled in more than twenty different ways. See footnote two of Philip Schaff's, History of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), VI, 315.

[3] This title has been used over and over again by many historians. There is no general agreement as to the source of this striking designation. Many of the authors consulted in preparing this thesis used the title often.

accomplished and nourished in the person of and as a result of the work of Wycliffe. Both in his lifetime and today, students of history have generally agreed that Wycliffe was among the most significant figures in History. Already in his day, an enemy like Knighton, a contemporary, had to acknowledge:

> At this time flourished Master John Wycliffe, rector of the church of Lutterworth in the country of Leicester, the most eminent doctor of theology of those days. In philosophy he was second to none, in scholastic learning incomparable. This man strove especially to eclipse the thoughts of others by the depth of his knowledge and subtlety of his reasoning, and to differ from them in opinion. He is reported to have introduced into the church many opinions which were condemned by the learned men of the universal church.[4]

Scholars today, of the caliber of Preserved Smith, are not less ready to concede that Wycliffe was "the most significant of the Reformers before Luther."[5]

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the reason which made Wycliffe the historical figure that he became, namely, his break with the Roman Catholic Church. The problem, the writer feels, can be stated in terms still more specific than this. He has attempted to do just that with the formulation of the thesis title, "the initial cause of Wycliffe's break with the church." Usually, three causes are ascribed to Wycliffe's break with the Mother Church: political, doctrinal, and moral. That other causes could be nominated, such as home

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[4]Edward P. Cheyney, Readings in English History Drawn from the Original Sources, a quotation from Henry Knighton (Boston, New York, Chicago, London: Ginn and Company, 1908), pp. 266-267.

[5]P. Smith, The Age of the Reformation (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), p. 37.

life, or personal desire for recognition or willingness to vindicate men who had rebelled before,[6] is not denied. However, since it is not within the scope of this paper to consider all these, the writer has arbitrarily limited himself to the three mentioned, believing that there is more or less general historical agreement as to the major importance attached to these causes. That all played a part in the break cannot be denied. Determining the initial cause, however, is quite another matter. After reviewing the influential causes which share in guiding Wycliffe to his break with the Roman Catholic Church, the reader will have to judge whether or not this writer's conclusion is historically accurate.

In this same connection, the reader must bear in mind that certain obvious facts and results in the life and work of Wycliffe will not be treated extensively here because they have no direct bearing on the initial cause which influenced his break. So, for example, many of his doctrinal works will not claim our attention because they were the products or results of his break with the church. The same is true of his excommunication and later work and development. All of these areas provide much material for further investigation, even today. But the very nature of such information is limited in its usefulness for the present discussion. Generally speaking, therefore, the thesis might be said to deal with a period of time beginning in 1300 and ending with Wycliffe's death in 1384. Actually, however, the middle decades of the fourteenth

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[6] Lechler, op. cit., pp. 14-86. On page 36 the author discusses men who were precursors of Wycliffe and what possible influence they might have had upon the Reformer.

century are of major importance for in them are to be found the conditions which influenced Wycliffe to break with the Roman Church. For these reasons the reader will not be surprised to find that the heart of this investigation involves three decades beginning with the year 1345.

Although the main purpose of this study is not to reconstruct a chronological history of John Wycliffe's life, one should be acquainted, in a general way, with his home background, age, and certain well-established facts that are known about him. Brief though it may be, the writer has reserved the remaining part of this introductory chapter for an overview of John Wycliffe's life--from his birth date to his death.

The greatest difficulty is encountered in trying to establish, precisely, Wycliffe's birth date and birth place. Most historians begin in somewhat the same vague manner:

> The date of his birth is indeed very uncertain. He died in 1384, and could not then have been younger than sixty; and accordingly a date somewhere about 1324 or a little earlier is usually accepted as a convenient and probable year for the rise in Teesdale of the morning star of the Reformation.[7]

Lechler pretty well summarizes the viewpoint of those who hold for an earlier birth date,[8] certainly no later than 1324:

> Touching the date of Wiclif's birth, no direct documentary information has come down to us. John Lewis was the first who fixed upon the year 1324; and he has been followed in

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[7] J. C. Carrick, Wycliffe and the Lollards (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), p. 57.

[8] Among those who held a later date are: Cheyney, op. cit., p. 267, who gives his birth date as 1328, and the Cambridge Medieval History (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), VII, 486, which sets the date as late as 1330.

this date by the great majority of writers without further inquiry, although he never makes even an attempt to produce documentary evidence in support of it. But it may be conjectured that he proceeded upon the fact that when Wiclif died at the end of 1384, he may have been a man of sixty, and counting back from that year, he arrived at 1324 as the approximate year of his birth. But we have no voucher for the fact that Wiclif at his death was exactly sixty years of age. Younger than that he could hardly have been, but he might easily have been older. We know that during the last two years of his life he suffered from the effects of a paralytic attack, as he afterwards died from a repetition shock. If we assume that 1324 was his birth year, he must have had a stroke at fifty-eight, a comparatively early age; whereas all the notices which we have of his latest life are far from leaving the impression that his vigour had been broken at an unusually early period. This circumstance taken alone makes it probable, that when Wiclif died he had reached a more advanced age than is usually supposed, and was, at least, well on towards seventy. Add to this, that some expressions in his writings, where he speaks of his earlier years, when taken without bias, naturally produce the impression that the man who could so express himself must have been pretty well advanced in life. Thus, he says, in one of his Saints' Day sermons, - "When I was still young, I made extensive collections from manuals on optics, on the properties of light," etc. That does not sound as if we should take the speaker for a man considerably older; and as those sermons, by sure marks, could not have been delivered later than 1380, and not earlier than 1378, Wiclif could not have been more than from fifty-four to fifty-six years of age, if the common date of his birth is correct. All these indications make it appear probable, in our view, that when Wiclif died he must have been considerably older than is usually supposed. He must, in that case, have been born at least several years earlier than 1324; but we have no positive data for fixing with precision that earlier date.[9]

Little more need be said concerning the date of his birth. However, for practical purposes, the writer shall assume a birth date no later than 1324 (a possible earlier date will not be ruled out), in all questions concerning his age as it relates to the topic under discussion.

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[9]Lechler, op. cit., pp. 91-92.

> We are always more accurately informed of Wiclif's birth place than of the date of his birth, and we owe this information to a learned man of the sixteenth century, John Leland, who has been called the father of English antiquarians.[10]

For purposes of this study we need only note Lechler's conclusion:

> It no longer, then, admits of a doubt that Wiclif was born at Spresswell, not far from Old Richmond. His birth-place belongs to the district which, though not a county itself, but only part of one, is commonly called Richmondshire, forming the northwestern portion of the great county of York, or, more exactly, the western district of the North Riding, a hilly, rocky highland, with valleys and slopes of the greatest fertility.[11]

Here again it should be noted that there is not complete unanimity among historians as to Wycliffe's birth-place.[12] This writer gathered the impression, however, that some of the apparent discrepancy is due to a lack of precision and not one of intent. The proximity of the places named perhaps accounts for it. Carrick brought out this fact more clearly in his brief discussion of Wycliffe's place of birth and family:

> The village Wycliffe or "water-cliff" in Yorkshire . . . stands between Barnard Castle and Old Richmond . . . . It was not exactly in the village bearing his parents' name that the Reformer was born, but at Spresswell, a tiny hamlet . . . . Probably he was baptized in the old parish church of Wycliffe: his father was a scion of the house of Wycliffe, although nothing can be traced of his rank and profession in life. The family records contain no reference to the Reformer, and the family all through were staunch adherents of the Roman faith.[13]

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[10] Ibid., p. 87.

[11] Ibid., p. 88. The interested reader may refer to pages 87-88 of this work to ascertain how Lechler arrived at the conclusion cited.

[12] Cheyney, op. cit., p. 267, mentions Yorkshire village.

[13] Carrick, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

Information concerning Wycliffe's next few years is meager indeed:

> We have as little historical information on the subject of Wiclif's earliest education as on that of his birth year; and it would answer no good purpose to fill up this blank with the suggestions of our own fancy. But so much is implied in the nature of the case, that in years of his childhood and early youth, he grew up vigorously into the old Saxon pith of the family stem to which he belonged, and of the whole people among whom he was brought up. No doubt, also, the historical recollections and folk-traditions which lived among the population of Yorkshire, especially in their connection with certain localities, had very early made a deep impression on the susceptible soul of the boy, and became all his own. For I find the writings of Wiclif so full of allusions and reminiscences of the early times of his fatherhood, as to justify the assumption that from his youth up he had been familiar with patriotic scenes and pictures. The boy, no doubt, received the first elements of instruction at the hand of some member of the clergy.[14]

Wycliffe's Oxford days are almost as much a mystery as his early schooling--again due to a lack of historical evidence. Historians know that Wycliffe went to Oxford and that at least three of the colleges claim to have housed him in his student days--Balliol, Merton, and Queens. Despite the fact that Cheyney claims he entered "Merton College, Oxford, at the age of 16,"[15] the true situation is best stated by Lechler:

> If the question thus occurs, into what college Wiclif was received when he first came to Oxford, we must fairly confess it is one to which, in the absence of all documentary evidence, we are unable to supply any distinct or confident answer. We know that in the course of years he became a member, and sometimes head of several colleges or halls. Merton and Balliol, in particular, are named in this

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[14] Lechler, op. cit., p. 92.

[15] Cheyney, op. cit., p. 267.

> connection, to say nothing . . . of a third hall . . . . But all the notices we have of this kind related to a later period - not to Wiclif as a young scholar, but to his mature years.[16]

All questions concerning his teachers,[17] pursuit of studies,[18] and general student life, though interesting in many respects, must remain unanswered in the present discussion. An entire thesis could well be written on the student life, or aspects of it, of John Wycliffe. Students of Wycliffe seem agreed that his student life extended up to the year 1345,[19] although

> . . . we have no positive data to show to what length of time Wiclif's student course extended . . . . We know that in England, as well as on the Continent, university life in the middle ages was accustomed to claim a far longer period of study than at present . . . . To study for ten years was by no means uncommon . . . . At least four years were required . . . in the Faculty of Arts . . . . The study of theology . . . lasted . . . for five years at the least . . . . And if we were right in our conjecture above, that he entered the University about the year 1335, the end of his curriculum would have to be placed about the year 1345 . . . . Whether before the year 1345 he became licentiate of theology must be left undetermined. Herewith we leave Wiclif's student years, and pass onward to his manhood.[20]

From 1345 to 1350 the Black Death appeared on the scene (Wycliffe's relation to it will be fully discussed in the next chapter) and from that time on until 1356 we have no historical record of Wycliffe.

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[16] Lechler, op. cit., p. 94.

[17] "We are especially left in the dark as to the men who were his teachers." Ibid., p. 96. For further discussion consult Lechler at the reference given or see Carrick, op. cit., p. 62.

[18] We know that he studied the seven arts composing the trivium and quadrivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic; music, arithmethic, geometry, and astronomy), which were stressed in the medieval schools.

[19] Carrick, op. cit., p. 63.

[20] Lechler, op. cit., p. 103.

Whether or not the "John Wiclif" mentioned in connection with this date, as the rent-master of Merton College, is the Reformer has become a matter of debate. Needless to say, an attempted solution will not be made here.

By 1361 Wycliffe had become master of Balliol Hall, afterwards Balliol College, a position that he soon resigned, for in the same year he was presented to the rectory of Fillingham, a small parish in the country of Lincoln, which was about ten miles distant from the city of Lincoln. It appears that he continued his studies at Oxford[21] and perhaps even resided there for a time.[22] In any event, we know that in 1368 he obtained a two-year leave of absence from his bishop to study at Oxford. In this period of time, then, and for the next few years, Wycliffe broadened his field in scholastic learning, lectured on philosophical subjects--particularly in Logic, participated as Magister regens in the general body of the University, was for some time president of a college, took part as a Fellow of Merton College in the administration of that society, and served as Rector of a parish, if not regularly, at least for a time.

An unqualified statement that Wycliffe was appointed Warden of Canterbury Hall in 1365 cannot be made since, once again, there seems to be some doubt as to which "John Wiclif" was appointed to that position.[23]

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[21]Carrick, op. cit., p. 66.

[22]Lechler, op. cit., p. 114. It is interesting to note that documentary proof still exists in the account-books of Queen's College, that Wiclif, in October 1363, and for several years afterwards paid rent for an apartment in the buildings of that college.

[23]Ibid., pp. 115-128. A full discussion is presented within these pages on the controversy.

Somewhere between 1365 and 1374 Wycliffe received his doctor of theology degree, the highest degree of academic dignity--which means that he was a doctor in the theological faculty.

> The fact then stands thus, that Wiclif, in 1374, was a doctor of theology, but not yet in 1365. In the intervening period between those two dates he must have taken that degree; but to fix the time with precision is impossible, for lack of documentary authority.[24]

Events as they unfold up to the year 1374 are not completely clear. Wycliffe, no doubt, continued to engage in many of the activities already discussed. A plausible conjecture, it seems to me, is made by some historians that Wycliffe was a member of the Parliament that met in 1366 to consider the demand of Pope Urban V upon the English King to pay the annual tribute of one thousand marks plus the payment of arrears extending over a period of thirty-three years.[25] In the light of his advanced schooling and demonstrated ability and also in conjunction with historical events that took place afterwards, such a conjecture seems most probable. However, the claim cannot be substantiated positively.

The year 1374 proved to be extremely important in the life of John Wycliffe. In the first place we know that he was one of the Royal Commissaries to Bruges.[26] This conference was held in connection with the

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[24] Ibid., p. 129.

[25] This payment goes back to 1213 when Innocent III imposed it upon King John.

[26] Ibid., p. 162. The list included John Gilbert, Bishop of Bangor, John Wiclif, Doctor of Theology, Magister John Guter, Dean of Segonia, Doctor of Laws, Simon of Multon, William of Burton, Knight, Robert of Belknap, and John of Kenyngton.

peace settlement still going on between France and England. John of Gaunt and others were in attendance for this. However, Wycliffe and his group were there to consider pending ecclesiastical questions of concern to England and the Pope.

Wycliffe embarked on his mission for Flanders on July 27. It seems that this was the first time he had been abroad. Undoubtedly the conference made lasting impressions upon him. He associated with highest authorities in the French Church and Court (this is the time of the Babylonian Captivity), and he, himself, must have been accorded high honor because of his rank--second only to the Bishop of Bangor. We might wish to know what his impressions of the Curia were after weeks of association with them but we are not told anything about his reactions at the time. Nor are we told how well he came to know John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, who later on was to play such an important role in the affairs of John Wycliffe. In all probability, John of Gaunt--due to his importance--had somehow been instrumental in selecting Wycliffe to be an official member of the delegation.

> Wiclif returned to England, after the close of the congress, before the middle of the September. Neither official documents nor any accounts of contemporary or later chronicles, have come down to us respecting the proceedings of the congress in the matter of the Church-grievances of England, although, no doubt, some original papers belonging to the subject lie concealed in the archives of Rome.[27]

Actual results of the congress amounted to very little. The Pope conceded no important points but continued to claim that England was his and the King only a tenant there and properly the Pope's vassal. A

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[27] Ibid., p. 166.

series of letters were exchanged between Pope and King but nothing of importance was accomplished by these efforts. Any real good was, perhaps, only to be seen in Wycliffe and what it did to widen his understanding of the Roman Catholic Church or government dealings in general.

The other important event of 1374 was Wycliffe's appointment as rector of the parish at Lutterworth. This, and other honors, probably resulted from his conduct at the Bruges conference.

> In recognition of his services at Bruges in defending English national rights and privileges as against Roman claims, the King presented him to the prebend of Aust in the Collegiate Church of Westbury, in Worcester diocese. A further honour was conferred upon him when he was appointed rector of the sweet parish of Lutterworth, on the borders of leafy Warwickshire and hilly Northamptonshire [28]an office which he held for nine years, until his death.

A consideration of the "Good Parliament" (1376) and Wycliffe's connection with it will be taken up in the next chapter. For the present it is sufficient to note that we are left in doubt as to whether or not Wycliffe was a member of it.

An enumeration listing some of Wycliffe's major doctrinal writings will be found in the chapter which discusses his doctrinal viewpoints as will also his appearance before the clerical convention (February, 1377) in St. Paul's. He had been cited to appear in order that the church might investigate his doctrine. Actually his appearance there "is involved in much obscurity."[29] Because of a bitter exchange

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[28]Carrick, op. cit., p. 99.

[29]Lechler, op. cit., p. 183.

between John of Gaunt and Bishop Courtenay, nothing was accomplished.[30] In fact, Wycliffe never opened his mouth and the meeting nearly ended in bloodshed.

In the same year five Bulls were issued against Wycliffe by Gregory XI. This was in May. Edward III died in June and so more delay was encountered in posting the Bulls. After Richard II had been crowned and Parliament made ready to hear Wycliffe's answer, it was late in the year. The very nature of Wycliffe's work and patriotism offered for England in the past, however, proved a strong influence on Parliament. The result was indefinite action.

Next, the Pope determined to work through His own prelates in England. The Papal Bull presented to Oxford University had produced little--the University authorities had merely asked for more time but no action followed. In a Bull addressed to the prelates the Pope said:

> Information has been received from persons truly worthy of credit, that John Wycliffe, rector of Lutterworth in the diocese of Lincoln, and professor of divinity, with a fearlessness the offspring of a detestable insanity, has ventured to dogmatise and preach in favour of opinions wholly subversive of the Church. For this cause the parties addressed are required to seize the person of the offender in the name of the Pope; to commit him to prison; to obtain complete information to his tenets; and transmitting such information to Rome by a trusty messenger, are to retain the arch-heretic as their prisoner . . . .[31]

Accordingly, England's new Primate, archbishop Sulbury of Canterbury, summoned Wycliffe to appear at Lambeth (Archbishop's Chapel) in April of 1378. Wycliffe made his appearance there without benefit of

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[30] The question involved was whether or not John Wycliffe should be seated. Courtenay said no while Duke John insisted that he should. This exchange developed into a personal quarrel.

[31] Carrick, op. cit., pp. 108-109.

protection (of Duke John or Lord Percy) and faced the assembly with a spoken and written defense--he also reviewed the nineteen articles of heresy charged to him. Two incidents occurred which indicated Wycliffe's popularity and tempered any plans the bishops hearing the case might have entertained. First of all, the people themselves threatened tumult if Wycliffe's reform program was discouraged, and secondly, "Sir Lewis Clifford, an officer in the Queen-mother's court, rushed in and demanded in his mistress' name that no final judgment should at present be given."[32] Wycliffe was warned to cease from spreading his views. And then he went home.

> No one dared to touch the brave rector of Lutterworth, and he quietly retired unhurt and uncondemned by the church's highest tribunal in England; and even the promise which the prelates endeavoured to extract from him to abstain from future teaching of his views was not made by Wycliffe, and accordingly he continued to preach and teach as formerly.[33]

In the meantime, Gregory XI had died and a new Pope was selected. This meant that a new Bull (or Bulls) would have to be issued against Wycliffe. Pope Urban VI, however, was a strict ascetic and desired moral reform all around. The result was opposition from the church itself--so much so that the Avignon Papacy was established and the great schism of forty years began.

While the papacy and the church stood thus, divided against itself ("How, said Wycliffe, "is the Head of Antichrist cloven in twain, and one part contendeth against the other"), Wycliffe returned to Lutterworth and Oxford and for three peaceful years continued his work of

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[32] Ibid., p. 111.

[33] Ibid., p. 111.

reform. In addition to his pastoral duties and constant preaching, he produced many of his most important writings, including his translation of the Bible into his homely English--a monumental work!

During this period he also fearlessly attacked the Friars for their worldliness, ignorance, and laziness.

> Wycliffe was at this time living partly at Lutterworth and partly at Oxford: severe illness brought on by trial and hard work came upon him. The friars venturing to his bedside, on one occasion, adjured him to revoke his errors. Wycliffe listened to them quietly till they had their breath quite out. Then, beckoning to a servant to help him to sit up in bed, he looked steadily at his cowled and sandalled visitors, and then suddenly scared them out of reason, so that they were thankful to beat hasty retreat, by crying out at the top of his voice - "I shall not die but live and declare the evil deeds of the friars."[34]

It was at this time when Wycliffe resolved upon his positive movement--the order of "poor preachers." Their vows were not in name only but in reality vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Many of these were Oxford graduates trained by Wycliffe himself. Their reception and success among the people is a story in itself.

The year 1381 is memorable for two important events. Wycliffe, like Luther, posted in Oxford, that year, twelve theses in which he denied transubstantiation. For this action he was condemned and deprived of his professor's chair by Oxford's Chancellor. In the second place, Wat Tyler led a rebellion whose violence reached the heart of London. Archbishop Sudbury was beheaded in the tower. Although these insurrectionists had expressed their sympathy with the mendicant friars who were

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[34] Ibid., p. 131.

Wycliffe's enemies, Wycliffe and Lollardism was blamed for sharing in the responsibility of the uprising. Consequently, a new move was inaugurated by Archbishop Courtenary, who had replaced Sudbury, against Wycliffe.

The "Earthquake Synod," took place in May of 1382.[35] Twenty-four articles or propositions from Wycliffe were read and condemned--ten as being heretical and the rest as erroneous. The King was induced to issue orders that anyone who would maintain the condemned propositions should be confined to prison. Although the House of Lords approved the action and the House of Commons refused to authorize it, the ordinance was placed on Statute Book May 26, 1382.

Parliament, meeting in November of the same year, heard Wycliffe's appeal and the King, with Common's consent, disannuled the persecuting mandate and repealed it. Archbishop Courtenay then turned to Oxford where both Parliament and Convocation were assembled. Wycliffe left his trial for heresy and returned to his beloved Lutterworth parish unharmed, where he remained until his death. It was after he left the trial that he was deprived of all university functions and expelled from university and city.

John Wycliffe died on the last day of the year 1384. On December twenty-eighth he had been struck down by paralysis while conducting a service in his church. He was laid to rest quietly in the churchyard of Lutterworth.[36]

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[35] So named because an earthquake did occur. It was interpreted as a good omen by both sides.

[36] Thirty years later, by direction of the Council of Constance, his bones were exhumed, burned to ashes, and the dust tossed into the river Swift.

CHAPTER II

THE ROLE OF THE BLACK DEATH

Possible initial causes for Wycliffe's break with Mother Church lay in the corrupt moral and social condition of the time. Behind these conditions, however, were certain factors which when combined produced the deplorable state of corruption that was everywhere evident. To be sure, these were a number of factors--varying in degree of importance. However, the one which, perhaps, played the most important role was the Plague or Black Death.[1]

Although the purpose of this investigation is not to consider the Black Death in all of its aspects the necessity of understanding what it was and how its results influenced later history, especially the Reformation history connected with John Wycliffe, still presents itself. Only after knowing something of the Black Death can we appreciate statements such as these: "In the year 1345 a remarkable event took place which had a definite and direct effect upon the mind of Wycliffe. A terrible plague broke out . . . ."[2]

The Black Death did not come riding on a black horse with head reaching above the roofs of the houses nor was it a giant of like

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[1] The Encyclopedia Americana (New York, Chicago: American Corp., 1953), IV, 33. The name by which we generally call the epidemic is the Black Death. The very nature of the disease provided the reason for its name. Inflammatory boils and tumors of the glands caused dark spots to appear on all parts of the body, even the tongue.

[2] J. C. Carrick, Wycliffe and the Lollards (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), p. 63.

proportions.[3] Rather it seems to have been spread by the main arteries of commerce then existing,[4] after its initial appearance in China (1333).[5]

> The disease came from Asia, and entering Europe at Constantinople, spread through Cyprus, Sicily, and Marseilles. It reached England towards the end of the summer (1349), and, though advancing slowly, laid a heavy hand on the realm.[6]

There is no general agreement as to the exact time of the plague's outbreak in England. However, all seem to place it sometime between 1345 and 1350. Carrick states that the disease descended upon Tartary,

> . . . and after ravaging Asia and Lower Egypt passed to the isles of Greece, the Mediterranean, and Italy. It spread even beyond the Alps, and every European nation suffered from its terrible ravages. For two years it wrought its havoc, and this was followed all over Europe by a series of earthquakes; and from June to December of 1345, England was drenched with tremendous rains. In August the plague was discovered at Dorchester and then at London[7] . . . .

Another history informs us that the plague first appeared at Melcombe Regis in Dorsetshire in 1348.[8] And in August, 1348, Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury cautioned his parishes to avert "the pestilence which had

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[3] Nohl, The Black Death, translated by C. H. Clarke (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1924), p. 17.

[4] Nohl, op. cit., p. 17.

[5] J. N. Larned, The New Larned History for Ready Reference Reading and Research (Springfield, Mass.: C. A. Nicholas Publishing Co., 1922), II, 1034.

[6] C. W. Colby, Selections from Sources of English History (New York, London, Bombay, Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), p. 101.

[7] Carrick, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

[8] Cambridge Medieval History (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1932), VII, p. 442.

come into a neighboring kingdom from the East."[9] By 1350 the terror had covered all of England and Wales, had invaded Scotland, and then began to fade away.[10]

Such was the coming of the Black Death. In space of time its duration, at best, was only a few years but the results were immediate and far reaching--in countless areas the Black Death left a mark that can still be seen. And, as we shall see, the results have direct bearing on the work of John Wycliffe. Wycliffe was about twenty-three years old at this time (1348), "and his youthful mind was impressed with the tremendous epidemic, which not only cleared villages and cities of their inhabitants but even spared not the beasts of the field."[11] As one author said:

> The Black Death is unique among pestilences which have invested Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire. It spared no country, no age, no rank . . . . Not only did it sweep away part of the nation, double wages, and provoke the Statute of Labourers: it caused widespread and permanent economic changes among which may be reckoned the rise of a new farming system whereby household were multiplied. A curious sign of its destructiveness is the small space which it fills in contemporary chronicles. It played havoc with the monasteries, and after it ceased, the task of repairing threw literary occupation into the background.[12]

To understand the grim facts that impressed themselves upon the mind of Wycliffe, one need only turn to the chronicles and eye witness accounts which have come to us from the time:

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[9] W. W. Capes, A History of the English Church (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1900), III, 72.

[10] Cambridge Medieval History, VII, 442.

[11] Carrick, op. cit., p. 64.

[12] Colby, op. cit., pp. 101-102.

> There died at Leicester in the small parish of St. Leonard more than 380; in the parish of Holy Cross, more than 400; in the parish of St. Margaret of Leicester, more than 700; and so in each parish a great number. Then the bishop of Lincoln sent through the whole bishopric, and gave general power to all and every priest, both regular and secular, to hear confessions, and absolve with full and entire episcopal authority except in matters of debt, in which case the dying man, if he could, should pay the debt while he lived, or others should certainly fulfill that duty from his property after his death. Likewise, the pope granted full remission of all sins to whoever was absolved in peril of death, and granted that this power should last till next Easter, and everyone could choose a confessor at his will. In the same year there was a great plague of sheep everywhere in the realm, so that in one place there died in one pasturage more than 5000 sheep and so rotted that neither beast nor bird would touch them. And there were small prices for everything on account of the fear of death. For there were very few who cared about riches or anything else: for a man could have a horse which before was worth 40 S., for 8 d., a fat ox for 4 S., a cow for 12 d., a heifer for 6 d., a fat wether for 4 d., a sheep for 3 d., a lamb for 2 d., a big pig for 5 d., ...[13]

People died like animals and were treated like animals because there was nothing else that could be done. As the disease claimed more victims in all areas of the country, the ability to bury the dead became more and more difficult due to the great numbers that died each day. No one accompanied the body to the church or joined in the funeral procession -- not even the grave makers and coffin bearers, unless the price was high enough.

When burial services were conducted (and in many cases they were not because the priests had died or deserted) there was always more than one body to be buried. Often when one or two priests were to bury one body, as many as six or eight biers followed behind to take advantage of

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[13]Edward P. Cheyney, Readings in English History Drawn From the Original Sources, a quotation from Henry Knighton (Boston, New York, Chicago, London: Ginn and Company, 1908), p. 255.

the Christian burial of the priests; and those bodies were dumped into the open grave of the first corpse.[14] It was the graves which were scarce. "As many as twenty, forty, or sixty corpses were delivered to the church burial in the same pit at the same time."[15]

Many historians would maintain that it is an understatement to say, "the whole national life suffered, and even grave level-headed men declared that the world had lost half its population."[16] Statistics, of course, do not tell the story and yet they indicate what complete devastation the Black Death left in its wake. The following figures show that whether you are liberal or conservative in an estimation of the mortality rate due to the plague, the result is still terrifying. Some limit the mortality rate to one-fifth of the population while others credit the Black Death with taking the lives of nine-tenths of the population. Many sources count Hecker a reliable calculator and go along with his figure of twenty-five million or one-fourth of Europe's population dying in the epidemic.[17]

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[14]Wohl, op. cit., p. 26.

[15]Colby, op. cit., p. 102.

[16]Carrick, op. cit., p. 64.

[17]Most encyclopedias give this figure. See The Encyclopedia Americana, 33. Wohl, op. cit., p. 3, says of Hecker's report, "The number of victims of the plague in the fourteenth century in Europe is estimated by some to be too low if placed at 25 per cent of the population . . . . Germany's losses for 1348 are estimated at 1,244,434. Statistics of a number of towns add up to 90,000. Hecker is mistaken when he reduces this number to 9,000." Colby, op. cit., p. 101, "If the mortality of England were placed at one-half of the population, the statement would be hard to disprove." Carrick, op. cit., p. 64 (already cited), "The whole national life suffered, and even grave level-headed men declared that the world had lost half its population." Pope Clement VI reported the total mortality of the world from the Black Death (1348-1349) at 42,836,486 - Wohl, op. cit., p. 17. Cheyney, op. cit., p. 243, " . . . one of every two died during this epidemic." George M. Trevelyan, History of England (New York: Longsman, Green and Co., 1934), p. 237, says of England, "The reduction of the English subjects of Edward III in sixteen months, from perhaps four million to perhaps two and one-half million souls . . . ."

As can be imagined, such chaotic conditions led society to moral disaster.

> The physical troubles led to moral ones, and the whole national character and morale became deteriorated - husbands being deserted by wives, children by parents, and the people by the clergy. Rapine, lust, theft, wickedness of every kind became rampant.[18]

All of these experiences had been a part of Wycliffe's young life. When the scourge abated Wycliffe was still found to be very much alive, but he "ever after took a grim and despairing view of the future of the human race, which is abundantly exhibited in his earliest work, published in 1356 - eight years later - entitled The Last Age of the Church . . ."[19], as well as in many of his later writings.

Direct results of the Black Death were the changes that occurred in the economic conditions. Briefly must be mentioned the rise of the working class on the financial ladder. At first they found themselves confused and uncertain, and then, as it became evident that their services were more and more in demand by the wealthy who had returned with the subsiding of the pestilence, peasants and laboring people began to exploit their landowners and former task masters. Landlords found peasants demanding and getting twice as much for the same work after the plague as they had received before the plague.[20] The cost of rural

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[18] Carrick, op. cit., p. 64.

[19] Ibid., p. 64 (The writer is aware that this particular work has been discounted as a product of Wycliffe. For further information see G. Lechler, John Wiclif and his English Precursors, translated by Peter Lorimer (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Co., 1881), pp. 485-486. However, one need not conclude that Wycliffe's reactions to the plague are limited to this work. He expresses similar feelings in major works of h

[20] Cambridge Medieval History, VII, 463.

labor increased by 50 per cent while living expenses for the same rural laborers remained static. Landowners and employers felt this keenly, especially since many of them lived on fixed incomes.[21]

When, then, the government attempted to enforce the Labour Statutes and control the rising prices, the net result was only to increase discontent[22] and provoke the Peasants Revolt.[23] It is true that the poor peasant and the laboring man[24] had suffered most from the Black Death, but large numbers of the rich and of the nobility had likewise faced the same suffering and the same death upon equal terms. This, in effect, did away with the medieval caste system. And for the first time in many centuries the peasants and rural folk sensed the inequality and unfairness to which they had been and were being subjected. Combine this with the policy of the church--which was hopelessly connected with government, the bishops, and the abbots to acquire and control large portions of English land upon which these lowly workers were forced to make a living (under men, who despite their name "Christian," were devoid of any real Christian brotherhood or justice) and it is not difficult to understand why the people became skeptical of accepting the traditions and the

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[21] Ibid., VII, 464.

[22] Cheyney, op. cit., p. 256. "Meanwhile the king sent proclamations into all the countries that reapers and other laborers should not take more than they had been accustomed to take under a penalty appointed by statute. But the laborers were so lifted up and obstinate that they would not listen to the king's command: if anyone wished to have them he had to give them what they wanted, and either lose his fruit and crops, or satisfy the lofty and covetous wishes of the workmen."

[23] Cambridge Medieval History, VII, 464.

[24] Ibid., 443. Nearly all reports agree in stating that the Black Death claimed a majority of its victims from among the poor and badly nourished.

political institutions--much less the ecclesiastical institutions.-- of the time!' With these concerns and realizations Wycliffe grew up. They were a part of him. "Without a doubt the terrors of the night and of the day through which Wycliffe passed in the time of the plague and the earthquake and the flood, quickened his earnestness and deepened his purpose."[25] But there was an even more important direct result of the Black Death.

Perhaps the greatest blow struck against the Roman Catholic church by the Black Death was among the clergy. No individual class suffered so much from loss of numbers as did this group.[26] Certain results were inevitable.

Almost immediately the church found herself forced to relax her rules. She permitted both regular and secular priests to hear confessions and absolve.[27] In times of need people could confess sins to one another and the confessinn would be considered valid. Deacons could

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[25]Carrick, op. cit., p. 65.

[26]The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences III, 575, notes that 40 per cent of the clergy died. Mortality rates in the monasteries ranged from 10 per cent to 50 per cent. Capes, op. cit., 74, goes into great detail to show how depleted the ranks became in only a very short time. In East Anglia in a single year upwards of 800 parishes lost their priests, 83 of them twice and 10 of them three times in a few months. This did not include the chaplains and stipendiary priest of whom no account is given. In the house of Augustinian Canons at Heveringland, prior and canons died to a man. At Hickling only one survived. At Meaux, only ten were left and of fifty monks and lay brothers at St. Alban's forty-seven of the inmates, besides many scattered in the cells, sickened and died, together with the abbot. Colby, op. cit., p. 102, cites the examples of the Cistercian Abbey of Melsa in Yorkshire where the abbot, twenty-two monks, and six lay brothers died and the Abbey of Croxton in Leicestershire where the whole community, save abbot and prior, died.

[27]Cheyney, op. cit., p. 255 (already cited).

administer the Eucharist when a priest was not available.[28] Such "emergency exceptions" had their effect upon the people who wondered why such arrangements were not to be considered proper as a general rule.

Not only were rules relaxed so far as the people were concerned but the clergy were also effected. Standards were lowered in order to fill the gaps created during the epidemic. To obtain young men for the priesthood, the age requirement set by the church was disregarded.[29] Mental and character requirements were not scrutinized carefully either. This, together with accelerated programs of study, produced an alarming share of ignorant, lazy, and unlearned priests. To add to the confusion, the church imported into England priests who could not speak English. One consequence was that preaching fell into disuse.

These conditions were bad enough in themselves. But to make matters worse, the cost of living had risen while the "salaries" of the priests had remained approximately the same. It is not particularly surprising to read that such meager incomes "forced many to steal."[30] Others left the ranks of the priesthood or simply took other jobs and cared for their flocks in such spare time as was awarded them - if, indeed, they had any![31]

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[28] Capes, op. cit., 75.

[29] Ibid., 75. Just one example, among many, perhaps, that could be given concerns the Bishop of Norwich who ordained sixty young men below the fixed canon age--with papal sanction!

[30] George M. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe (New York: Longsman, Green and Co., 1925), p. 124.

[31] Ibid., p. 123.

If the higher clergy had understood the situation and earnestly desired to remedy it, there might have been hope for a successful adjustment to problems created by the Black Death. However, the prelates were large land-owners and important dignitaries in the government. Instead of helping the lower clergy they very often gave indications that they despised them. These divergent attitudes and differing standards of living created divisions among the clergy that were never really healed--although they did unite, more or less, to oppose Wycliffe and his Reform efforts.

Over against the regular clergy we have, in the monks and friars, an even sadder picture. Before the plague visited England the monasteries had provided the Pope and the church with much real needed support. After the plague the best that could be said of them was, "they had become a nuisance to society."[32] By comparison, the regular clergy appeared industrious, hard-working shepherds to their flocks. The only interests the monks and friars seemed to have were the acquiring of greater wealth, or not caring for work, remaining inside their particular abbey.[33]

Perhaps the greatest cause for concern on the part of the regular clergy was the manner in which the friars conducted themselves because of their unique position. Since the friar could hear confession and

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[32] John Lord, Beacon Lights of History (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1921), III, 397.

[33] A reading of Piers Plowman, the works of Chaucer, and the Cloister and the Hearth (where the setting is not England but Holland and Italy) will indicate the corruptness of the friars most vividly.

preach,[34] he was not bound to a certain church or area. If a local priest prohibited the friar from using the church, a service was held outside. If the church confessional box was denied him, the friar heard confession under the arch of the blue heaven.[35] When the monk or friar became unpopular in one place he left the exasperated parish priest and flock to move on in hopes of finding greener pastures.[36] Either on the road or in the monasteries,[37] the friars did great harm to Christianity and to the Roman Catholic church.

Thus it can be seen that the conditions which prevailed in the English church following the plague were deplorable and of far reaching consequence. Not only had the economic situation tended to provide opportunity for the growth of many corrupt practices but the church, through depletion of its ranks and unwillingness or inability to purge itself, had become corrupted from top to bottom. Almost anyone who could read and write was accepted into the priesthood. And if not there, certainly into the monasteries as a monk or a friar.[38]

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[34]The pope had sanctioned this procedure.

[35]Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 139. "The friar had many advantages over the parish priest, sometimes he had greater learning, usually had brighter wit, always later news and more general knowledge of the worl outside the parish."

[36]Ibid., p. 127. "In this age it was the friar, not the parish priest who was singled out as having a lower standard than even laymen."

[37]J. Milton Smith, The Stars of the Reformation (London: S. W. Partridge and Company), p. 6. "Monasteries and nunneries, so far from being seminaries of learning and piety, were hotbeds of infidelity and vice. The abbots and friars, grown wealthy and indolent, lived on their ill-gotten gains like Eastern potentates. Their feasting, rioting, and sumptuous living shocked the whole country."

[38]It is not uncommon to read in literature, still extant, the complaints that priests hardly knew the Pater Noster, Creed, or Ten Commandments by heart. A. H. Hore, History of the Church of England (London: James Parker and Co., 1895), p. 185.

A final point to be considered is the influence of the Black Death on education. In part, this aspect has already been considered. For education, what there was in this period,[39] actually involved only a small section of the population. Apart from church-related schools and institutions, England had few schools. In fact, we are told, "For as yet there were no schools in existence to prepare youth for the universities, except the cloister and cathedral schools."[40] Even the universities were comparatively "young."[41]

By way of summary it might be said that the Black Death promoted social and moral corruption in this area on two counts. First of all it created an even more serious lack of education due to the loss of teachers and students, thereby lowering the standard of education of the people. And secondly, since many of the clergy formed the only remaining educated class, they felt compelled to fill the gaps left by lay officials. Such action further confused state-church interaction and produced detrimental results harmful to both church and state--a matter to be considered more fully in the next chapter. We know that the parliament of 1371 petitioned the king to exclude all ecclesiastical officials from the great offices of the state. Trevelyan undoubtedly expressed the viewpoints of many Englishmen at the time when he says, "The bishops were serving two masters - God and the world."[42] Many of

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[39]Allowing for the lack of information available on Wycliffe's birth date, the time when this was true might vary from 1320 - 1330.

[40]G. Lechler, John Wiclif and His English Precursors, translated by Peter Lorimer (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Co., 1881), p. 92.

[41]Ibid., p. 94.

[42]Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 110.

them played so great a role in politics and so little in ecclesiastical affairs that their dioceses were forgotten--only the secular offices which they held are recorded in history.[43]

In concluding this chapter, it is only fair to state that some of the moral and social corruption at this time, as in all times, must be traced to the perverseness of men. However, the historical evidence seems to necessitate the judgment that the Black Death was the direct cause of the corrupt conditions prevailing in the period immediately following the devastating plague.

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[43] Ibid., p. 106.

CHAPTER III

THE POLITICAL SITUATION BEFORE WYCLIFFE'S BREAK WITH THE CHURCH

In attempting to indicate certain political causes which may have influenced Wycliffe to break with the church, it is difficult to know where to begin. The picture is less than illuminating due to the ecclesiastical-political relationship. Such a situation confuses the picture because it prevents a thoroughly objective study in an area which should be considered on its own merits.

But a beginning can be made by simply acknowledging this church-state relationship. For whether or not we agree with the political set-up of the time, the fact is beyond dispute that church and state were two parts of a whole called government. It had been so for many years. As far as form is concerned, therefore, nothing is gained by considering the form, its advantages or disadvantages.

Of more value, perhaps, is to understand the historical setting and then determine how this affected Wycliffe, or vice-versa. The year 1371 might be considered a key year for it "marks the commencement of those political movements and party combinations which continued throughout the next fifteen years."[1] We shall, therefore, briefly note what preceded and followed 1371 as it affects this discussion.

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[1] G. E. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe (New York, Toronto, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras: Longmans, Green and Co., 1925), p. 5.

King Edward III (Nov. 1312 - June 1377)[2] was the ruling monarch at this time in England's history. After a long and rather successful reign the King was growing weaker and submitting to the influence of persons whose lives were dedicated towards attaining their own ends and not the glory of England.[3] What territory had been won and secured from France shortly after the middle of the fourteenth century,[4] by 1369 was being retaken again by France. In less than a decade most of it was swept away.

A number of reasons contibuted to this situation. King Henry of Castile and the French had united to oppose England. The "Black Prince,"[5] while an able military leader, had not received necessary men and supplies to garrison the territory which was under his charge. Instead, the English ministers had fined his high-spirited captains for irregularities. Added to this was the Prince's poor health which prevented him from discharging his duties as he was minded to do. An idea of England's national complexion begins to take shape.

In England itself, the King was no longer able to carry out efficiently administration matters nor decide questions of policy. Instead,

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[2] The Encyclopedia Americana, Edward III (New York, Chicago: Americana Corporation, 1953), IX, 703.

[3] Lord Latimer, Richard Stury, and Alice of Perrers were prominent in this group. John of Gaunt becomes increasingly important and of him we shall have more to say.

[4] The year 1360 is especially important (Treaty of Bretigny. See Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 2).

[5] The Encyclopedia Americana, Edward, Prince of Wales (New York, Chicago: Americana Corporation, 1953) IX, 706-708. The name was given to him after his death, probably because he wore black armor. He was the eldest son of Edward III.

fierce competitors arose among the great nobles to secure a larger share of influence in the government. Although the Duke of Lancaster and the Earls of Pembroke and Cambridge, since the war's outbreak, had been entrusted with the armies in France,

> . . . the ministry at Westminster was still composed, as it had been from time immemorial, of Bishops who were dependent solely on the King, and who were bound to the great lords by no ties of interest or party. William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, was Chancellor, and Thomas Brantingham, Bishop of Exeter, was Treasurer, of England. The Duke and the Earls were often consulted by them on matters of policy, so that the Chancellor and the Treasurer had not that monopoly of the royal confidence enjoyed by cabinet ministers today. But the persons who held these offices excluded the great lords not only from the ordinary administration, but from most of the patronage of the country, and it was for the purpose of securing those offices for their own adherents that a coterie of lords made use of Parliament in 1371.[6]

When, then, the Parliament and House of Commons met in 1371, they called to account the incompetent ministers and their mismanagement of the last two years--with special reference to the war. Although the two bodies censured the Bishops for different reasons, the hostility was clearly evident. Partly, it was resentment against the Bishops' limited knowledge and energy to conduct a war. Partly, it was dislike of the church's privileged position. So ingrained had this dislike of church and clergymen become that a request was presented to the King by Lords and Commons, together, that all clergy be excluded from civil service. Although the petition was rejected, the King did permit Bishops holding higher offices to be removed. This in turn, provided the means by which John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, assumed a

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[6] Trevelyan, on. cit., p. 4.

commanding role in the affairs of England and became the recognized leader of the party opposed to the Bishops and their position in government.

Besides all this, attacks were made against the enormous church endowments which paid so little towards the heavy expenses of the war. Accordingly, measures were passed which taxed heavily the ecclesiastical property. It was assumed that there were forty thousand parishes in England who could share equally an assigned tax burden. Only after Parliament broke up was the error discovered-- nine thousand parishes were all that actually existed in England!

One important point must be remembered as the meaning of these proceedings are considered:

> We see the beginning of that organized political movement for disendowment of the church and abolition of her privileges which was the one point of sympathy between the House of Commons and the Duke of Lancaster and formed the chief connection of Wycliffe with political parties.[7]

Due to inferior maritime power, lack of men and money, costly defeats --such as the battle of Rochelle in 1732, and gross corruption in the military and civil services, not to mention the strife between the various "parties" in England who were jockeying for positions of power, England--by 1374--had only a few small fortresses remaining in France. The same year found John of Gaunt returning and staying in England.

The picture as it developed from this point on remained essentially the same. On the one hand there were the Bishops and clerical party, led by Courtenay, striving to regain what they had lost. Opposed to

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[7] Ibid., p. 6.

them stood John of Gaunt and his friends, a small but well organized group (John's brother, the Black Prince, opposed him but he lay dying).

> Next to him (the Black Prince), his brother John of Gaunt was by far the greatest subject in the land. By a fortunate accumulation of title and estates, he stood in rank and wealth far above the other nobles. His superiority over them all was recognized by the title of Duke, then borne by no other Englishman save the Prince of Wales (The Black Prince). But the personal influence John of Gaunt had over the king was the chief reason for his complete supremacy in England, a supremacy which as long as Edward lived was broken only during the session of the Good Parliament.[8]

Before discussing Wycliffe and his position we shall show that the party lines rather clearly defined by 1374 held true to form at the Good Parliament in 1376--a year before Wycliffe was tried for heresy. I believe that an understanding of this session of the Parliament will also show Wycliffe as receiving support not because he was in essential agreement with one side or the other but because Wycliffe's program could be used to advantage by the anti-Bishop party.[9]

Without a doubt, the only reason the Good Parliament came into being was because of an empty exchequer. Certain it is that John of Gaunt and "his" Privy Council had no desire to summon Parliament. Before taxes could be imposed, however, such action was necessary. And new taxes were needed if the exchequer was to be replenished.

Of the two hundred borough-members and seventy-four knights of the shires who made up the House of Commons, only the seventy-four knights

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[8] Ibid., p. 9.

[9] "The powerful John of Gaunt, completely self-seeking, was prepared to champion Wyclif since the latter's advocacy of the intervention of the civil arm to remove unworthy clergy from their benefices gave him support in his ambition to replace ecclesiastics whom he could not control by men who were his creatures." Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christianity (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953), p. 663.

had real political power and initiative--the chronicles always spoke of the Lower House as the 'knights'. This is not to say that the House of Commons was a battleground of parties; it was itself a party. There were many good reasons why they should be a party:

> The upper middle classes who sent them to Westminster were at this time struggling for existence against economic distress, which they attributed partly to oppression and misgovernment by the nobles, partly to the rebellious attitude of the peasants, partly to the privilege and extortion of an overgrown church.[10]

In this period they had pushed for a clean-up in the central Government--asking that public money be spent for public purposes, desired that local order be kept, and demanded that the war be efficiently conducted. Thus they stood opposed to John of Gaunt and his friends. But they did agree with him in his desire to reform and tax the Church. In the Good Parliament, after acting with the Bishops against John of Gaunt for two months, they petitioned against ecclesiastical abuses.

Unlike the House of Commons, the House of Lords was a battleground of parties. At this time the Nobles all opposed the Duke because he had excluded them from power and profits of office. They were not opposed to John on principle for he later secured their support or neutrality. The Bishops were irreconcilably opposed to John. They were determined to retain or get as much as they could for the church, in addition to regaining the right to administer the great offices of state that had been lost in 1371 when lay ministers took over.

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[10] Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 15.

At length the request for a grant of taxes was asked. Before permission was granted, John of Gaunt's influence had definitely been reduced, even if only for a short time. The Privy Councillors were impeached -- Richard Lyons and Lord Latimer, as well as their subordinates. Alice of Perrers was banished from the Court. No longer were women to appear there in support of causes. Upon the death of the Black Prince, the Good Parliament assured succession of Richard II by compelling the King to produce him in Parliament and acknowledge him as heir. And finally, counsellors were chosen for Edward, by whose advice he was to act. None of them were friends of John.

John of Gaunt, himself the real target of the Good Parliament, was not directly condemned. He was too powerful and too wealthy. Had the actions of the Good Parliament been carried through, however, his power would have come to an end. But the great mass of petitions sent to the King were refused or left without reply and within six months John and his friends had returned to power.

On the other side, the Good Parliament presented lengthy memorials directed against the encroachments of the Roman See. A considerable portion of the complaint was directed against the Papal Collector or Receiver who collected and sent great sums of money to Rome. Since he was a foreigner, a petition was drawn up to prohibit his residence in England. At the same time it was requested that no Englishman should become a Receiver in behalf of others who reside in Rome.

> Representations were made that the country was groaning under the taxation of Rome, the sum paid to Rome amounting to five times that paid in taxes to the Crown. As to ecclesiastical offices, it was pointed out that unworthy men were promoted, while the pious and dutiful were left in

> semi-starvation. The introduction of foreigners into Church offices was also laid stress upon, foreign cardinals being made deans and archdeacons in order to draw English revenues, - these revenues going abroad to Roman coffers.
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> Twenty thousand pounds a year was stated as the sum which the Roman agent received of Peter's Pence in the London office and sent to Rome, he himself residing in the capitol in affluence. Every new incumbent had to pay first-fruits to this official, who lived in London in an office "like a Customs-house of a priest." What was true of the common priest was also true of the bisop, who had to hand over to the Pope the first year's revenue of his See, and thus by an evident trick it was easy to translate several bishops in the course of a year and thus secure the first fruits of each See.to Rome; while the scandal of money-raising actually reached the height of fleecing the English clergy of money with which to procure the ransom of soldiers taken prisoners in the French wars.[11]

To these requests and petitions the King replied also. He stated that he had enacted some laws that would remedy the evils. Besides this he was in communication with the Papal See hoping to effect some new understanding that might solve these problems. "But Edward III, the conqueror of Cressy and Poiters, was now old and feeble, and unable to face these weighty matters."[12] So the Parliament of 1377 took up where the Good Parliament had stopped. That the motives of the men who guided the 1377 Parliament were not exactly the same as those taking part in the Good Parliament is another matter.

And in all of these important decisions, what was the role of John Wycliffe? Neither Wycliffe nor the chronicles of the time answer the question directly. The judgment of historians that "the Good Parliament of 1376, to whose deliberation Wycliffe contributed by voice and pen,

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[11] J. C. Carrick, Wycliffe and the Lollards (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), pp. 100-101.

[12] Ibid., p. 101.

gave emphatic expression to the public complaints against the hierarchy"[13] and that at this Parliament "Wycliffe's views found abundant expression from its members,"[14] is quite possibly correct. The difficulty in asserting that he was a member of Parliament is the lack of direct historical support. In view of all these facts, but bearing in mind the absence of certain necessary data from which a positive conclusion might be drawn, the most honest attempt to arrive at a fair solution can, perhaps, be found in the words of Lechler:

> The question arises, what share Wiclif had in the efforts of the Good Parliament to secure the rightful succession to the throne, and to purge the court as well as the administration of unworthy elements. Assuming that he was a member of that Parliament, and co-operated influentially in its ecclesiastico-political proceedings he could not have remained entirely without a share in its endeavours to secure the succession to the throne, and to reform the Court and the Government. He must have taken his place either on one side or the other. It is true that we hear nothing definite from himself upon the subject, nor very express testimony concerning it from any other quarter. But we may be sure at least of as much as this, that in no case can he have played a prominent part in the effort to drive the favourites of the Duke of Lancaster from the court, and from all influence in state affairs, for otherwise the Duke would certainly not have lent him his powerful protection only half-a-year later (on 19th February 1377). But on the other hand, it scarcely admits of being supposed that Wiclif would join the party of Lord Latimer and his colleagues especially as in this business the interests at stake were of that moral and legal character for which, in accord with his whole tone of thought, he must always cherish a warm sympathy. These considerations taken together lead me to the opinion that Wiclif did not indeed oppose himself to the majority of the Parliament who laboured to effect a purification of the Court and Government, but neither did he take any prominent part in the discussion of this subject;

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[13] Schaff, History of the Christian Church - the Middle Ages, "John Wyclif" (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), VI, 317.

[14] Carrick, op. cit., p. 100.

> and this all the less, that as a general rule, he was accustomed and called upon to take a personally active share only in matters of a mixed ecclesiastical and political character.[15]

In attempting to bring together the various factors which had a determining influence on the life of Wycliffe from 1366 to 1376--the year of the Good Parliament, certain distinct impressions stand out on the historical record. However, it must be admitted, these indications are all part of a general picture and in certain areas positive historic evidence is not available.

By way of summary it can be noted that so far as is known, Wycliffe

> . . . confined himself, until 1366, to his duties in Oxford and his parish work. In that year he appears as one of the king's chaplains and as opposed to the papal supremacy in the ecclesiastical affairs of the realm. The parliament of the same year refused Urban V's demand for the payment of the tribute, promised by King John. . . . Wycliffe, if not a member of this body, was certainly an adviser to it.[16]

Schaff, in the foregoing reference, admits, however, that though Lechler advances this view, "Loserth, who is followed by Rashdall, brings considerations against it, and places Wycliffe's first appearance as a political reformer in 1376."[17]

In this national affair of highest importance in which Wycliffe may or may not have had a direct part there remains a polemical tract by Wycliffe that is usually ascribed to this period. It is to be noted that the writing centered about the question of political right, entirely in the sense of the Declaration of Parliament.

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[15] G. Lechler, John Wiclif and His English Precursors, translated by Peter Lorimer (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Co., 1881), pp. 175-176.

[16] Schaff, op. cit., 316.

[17] Ibid., 316 (contained in footnote one).

> A considerable portion of this tract, which is of the highest interest, was included by Lewis in the Appendix to his Hist. of Wiclif, No. 30. The text is unfortunately in a very imperfect condition, owing, in part at least, to the state of the MS. from which it was derived. But that the tract may have been written very soon after the May Parliament of 1366, and perhaps still earlier in that year rather than in 1367, is the impression which it leaves upon me as strongly as upon the editors of the Wiclif Bible, vol. I., p. vii. note 10, and Prof. Shirley, Fasc. Ziz. XVII., note 3.[18]

Wycliffe, in the opening paragraphs of this writing, assures his readers

> . . . that he, as a humble and obedient son of the Church of Rome, would put forward no assertion which could sound as an injustice against that Church, or which could give any reasonable offence to a pious ear.[19]

This is but one more indication, then, of Wycliff's relation to the political scene in this period and his increasing involvement and concern. Whether his formal expression is dated early or late, history rather definitely shows that by 1376 he not only personally believed reform was necessary but was making a conscious effort to see that reform measures should receive the attention of church and state. All of his activities, including his literary efforts, seem to be connected with some aspect of the political situation. Thus, even as late as 1376, there is no historical support to indicate that Wycliffe's growing awareness of the need for reform can be traced to conflicting doctrinal viewpoints between himself and the Roman Catholic Church as such. On the contrary, his writings and his activities up to this point have all dealt in the political realm and not in the doctrinal area at all.

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[18] Lechler, op. cit., p. 177.

[19] Ibid., p. 145.

CHAPTER IV

DOCTRINAL IMPLICATIONS

Development of doctrinal reasons which might have essentially influenced Wycliffe to break with the Church must of necessity constitute a short chapter in comparison to the three preceding chapters. The explanation, the writer feels, is a simple one. Up to the very time when Wycliffe was summoned to appear before the Convocation--the clerical parliament[1]--history does not reveal that Wycliffe expressed himself orally or in writing concerning matters of doctrine, at least not in a way that indicated he was at variance with the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, only after the issuance of the five Bulls against him and his appearance before the prelates at Lambeth can we begin to consider his doctrinal declarations. Schaff rightly remarks, "with the year 1378 Wyclif's distinctive career as a doctrinal reformer opens."[2]

Considering, for example, the year 1377 we note that "we find nowhere any documentary information as to what doctrines of Wiclif were meant to be submitted to investigation before that tribunal"[3] (the

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[1] Parliament opened January 27, 1377. The convocation held sessions beginning February 3. It was February 19 when Wycliffe and John of Gaunt appeared before the assembliéd Prelates in St. Paul's. It should be noted that Wycliffe was summoned to appear before another spiritual tribunal but there is much obscurity with respect to its purpose and results.

[2] Schaff, History of the Christian Church - the Middle Ages, "John Wyclif" (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949, VI, 318.

[3] G. Lechler, John Wiclif and His English Precursors, translated by Peter Lorimer (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Co., 1881), p. 183.

Convocation). But we do know "the prelates were embittered against the Duke of Lancaster, who was labouring with all his might to put an end to their political influence."[4] It seems both fair and valid to conclude that even the initial action on the part of the Church was inaugurated not because of doctrine but because Wycliffe happened to hold views championed by John of Gaunt. The church desired to maintain all the possessions and privileges they had ever held. When these were threatened, she was compelled to act.

Even the actions of John of Gaunt point up the fact that Wycliffe's appearance before the Convocation was not the result of doctrinal entanglements. Such is Lechler's judgment:

> In view of the fact that political rather than ecclesiastical motives had to do with the citation of Wiclif, the Duke considered it his imperative duty to afford him his powerful protection.[5]

Contrast this determined stand to the position which John of Gaunt maintained after Wycliffe had broken with the Roman Church concerning specific doctrinal issues. Latourette summarizes John's position most clearly: "John of Gaunt, far from model in his morals, prided himself on his orthodoxy and was alienated by Wyclif's attack on transubstantiation."[6]

These considerations would seem to justify the contention that no doctrinal reasons can be advanced which initially caused Wycliffe to break with the church because none were there to influence him. In

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[4] Ibid., p. 183.

[5] Ibid., p. 183.

[6] Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christianity (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953), p. 665.

other words, it was only after the church had forced Wycliffe into an awkward position that he began to investigate and discover its doctrinal errors.

Such an admission takes nothing away from the work and achievement of John Wycliffe but for this study it does eliminate doctrine as the initial cause for Wycliffe's break with Mother Church. That doctrine came to play an important part in Wycliffe's reform efforts--perhaps the most prominent part--is a matter of record. A progressive development can be traced.

> In point of time, the first stage reaches down to the outbreak of the Papal Schism in 1378; the second stage embraces the years from 1378 to 1381; and the third extends from thence to his death in 1384. In substance the successive stages may be clearly and briefly discriminated thus - first, the recognition within certain limits of the Papal primacy; next, emancipation from the primacy in principle; finally, the most divided opposition to it.[7]

Had Wycliffe lived longer and delved farther into theology there is no imagining where his findings might eventually have led him. It is interesting to speculate whether or not he might have attained the theological maturity and robustness which enabled Luther to provide the sound leadership essential to a successful Reformation. In the short time Wycliffe pursued his quest for doctrinal understanding and direction he developed many emphasies that became keystones of the Reformation movement.

Perhaps Wycliffe's first and most radical departure from Roman doctrine is to be seen in his concept of the Lord's Supper. Smith's

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[7]Lechler, op. cit., p. 346. For an elaboration of this devlopment see pp. 346-350.

statement may not be completely correct when he says, "save transubstantiation, he scrupled at none of the mysteries of Catholicism,"[8] but certain it is that Wycliffe rejected transubstantiation. "The Wicket" and certain treatises in his "Sum of Theology," among others, are devoted to a discussion of this particular doctrine.

Even more famous, perhaps, is "Of the Truth of Holy Scripture" (this too, is a part of the "Sum of Theology" which comprises fifteen books containing Wycliffe's theology).[9] Holy Scripture for Wycliffe was the final and highest authority. Beyond Scripture he could not and would not submit.

Additional works treated the Church and Church administration, immorality of the priests and monks, the Pope as Antichrist and other strictly doctrinal subjects. The works and subjects here named serve merely to indicate the theological scope of Wycliffe's doctrinal interest and the real center of his later Reformation. His insights may not have been those of a Luther[10] and yet they were the beginnings of a theology that could not be found in the medieval and scholastic formulations of the Roman Catholic Church.

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[8] Preserved Smith, The Age of the Reformation (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), p. 37.

[9] Schaff, op. cit., 325-349 discusses Wycliffe's doctrinal writings at length. A division of his writings as well as excerpts can profitably be studied in Lechler, op. cit., pp. 485-551.

[10] "(Luther's) doctrine of justification by faith only, with its radical transformation of the sacramental system, cannot be found in these his predecessors, and this was a difference of vast importance." Smith, op. cit., p. 41.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This much, at least, can be concluded from a study of the initial cause for Wycliffe's break with the Church. History does not indicate that doctrinal considerations influenced Wycliffe's break with the Roman Catholic Church--certainly not initially. His earliest writings, De Dominio Divino and De Civili Dominio, along with De Juramento Arnaldi and the tract of 1366 (or 1376), dealt with political concerns and not doctrinal ones. Only after he was charged with heresy and condemned by the Church, in the last years of his life, did he attack the Church's doctrinal position.

Furthermore, his interest in government and activities on behalf of the King or at the sessions of Parliament were politically inspired, and not motivated, so far as can be shown, from some theological conviction expressive of a conflict with Roman doctrine.

Of the two remaining possibilities set forth in this thesis, neither conclusion, alone, can be proposed and dogmatically set down as the only correct one. Probably it is closer to the truth to admit that both the political cause and the moral cause contributed to Wycliffe's initial break with the Church.

The Black Death nurtured evils that brought about moral corruption of large proportions not only in the secular field but also in the church. These influences may be termed "indirect influences" but they were there and they were great. Such abuses Wycliffe attacked, and rightly so. Initially, however, he assailed only the corruptions of a

system (which, until separated from that system, he accepted as right and true) and not the entire system, root and branch, as Luther and Calvin were to do.

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