

The History of the Reformation...



HOW
CHRIST
RESTORED
THE GOSPEL
TO HIS
CHURCH

De Haeretico Comburendo... The Lollards

We started our study together on the History of the Reformation just four weeks ago and since that time we have briefly surveyed three important epochs in the history of the church and three larger than life, heroic characters.

Now, my purpose has been fairly simple up to this point. I simply wanted you to see that while we commemorate Luther's nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg as the start of the Reformation...it was not, in fact, the starting point at all.

Oh, it was a wonderfully important event. It was a remarkable breakthrough to be sure. But it was not a breakthrough that came out of the blue. Many good men had fought spiritual darkness and graft before Luther. Many good men had read and preached the Bible before Luther. Many good men had articulated the idea of the sufficiency of faith in Christ before Luther. Nevertheless, it pleased God to use Luther to bring to fruition what other men had only dreamed about. Now, what that means...what that means practically...what it means on the simplest level...is

that Luther was not the architect of the Reformation. I don't even think we can say that he was a knowing or willing accomplice to the Reformation. I think what he was...was an instrument in the hands of Almighty God. He was a little like a match used to light a fire that someone else had been preparing for a long time. That is why I used that wonderful quote in our first lesson from Roland Bainton's book on Luther, *Here I Stand*. Bainton writes:

...Luther was like a man climbing a winding staircase in the darkness of the steeple of an ancient cathedral. In the blackness he reached out to steady himself, and his hand landed hold of a rope. *As he put his weight on the rope, he was startled to hear the clanging of the steeple bell...a clanging which woke up the whole world.*¹

I love that and I think it gets it just about right. And it was pretty much the view held by Luther himself. He once said in one of his table talks:

God knows, I never thought of going so far as I did. I intended only to attack indulgences. If anybody had said to me when I was at the Diet of Worms, "**In a few years you'll have a wife and your own household,**" I wouldn't have believed it.²

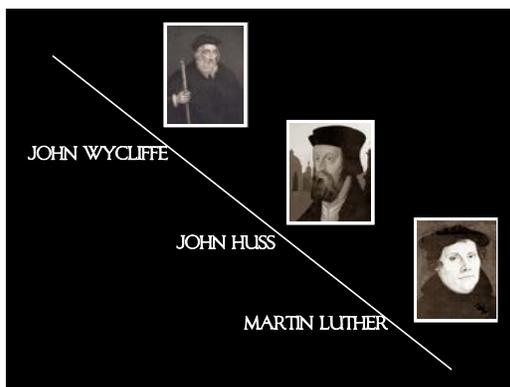
I love that. Obviously Luther was an unmarried priest at the time. Now don't get me wrong I am not trying to minimize Luther's importance or contribution.

He was a remarkable man. I think...he is just about the most remarkable man in all of church history after Augustine. I actually prefer him to all other men after the close of the New Testament but Luther is not my Master. He may be one of my teachers, and he is an excellent teacher, but he's not my Master. He was just a servant...just an instrument in the hands of the Lord Jesus to work His good and perfect will.

Now because of that, and because October 31 is celebrated by the Reformed Church as Reformation Day, I started with Luther and instead of going forwards...I went backwards.

I did that because I wanted you to see that Luther was not the first or only person to confront the Roman Church for its errors. He was not the first or only person to confront the Roman Church for its abuses. I wanted you to see that other men, other good men, driven to act through the Holy Spirit's application of the Word of God to their consciences confronted the church about its abuses and errors without fear and without regard for their own safety and standing.

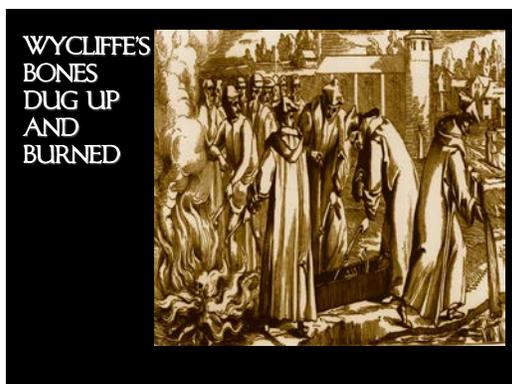
That is why when Luther came along people called him the Saxon Huss. He reminded them of John Huss who had lived 102 years before. His insistence upon the authority of Scripture reminded them of Huss. His insistence that indulgences were vile and wicked reminded them of Huss. His trial before the Diet of Worms even reminded them of Huss.



But it was the same for Huss. When he came along he reminded the people of his day of Wycliffe. That is why they called him a Wycliffite. He reminded them of Wycliffe and Wycliffe's fearlessness and what we saw in studying Huss is that he

had, in fact, had been deeply affected by Wycliffe's writings and by Wycliffe's sermons.

You see, even the uneducated masses of that day knew enough history to connect the dots. Oh, they got their history from men who subverted the truth and tarred these men's characters and reputations with vicious slanders. Still, they knew Wycliffe had been excommunicated after his death. They knew his bones had been dug up and burned and scattered on the River Swift. They knew that Huss had been burned alive and his ashes scattered to the four winds and they expected the same thing, the exact same thing, to happen to Luther.

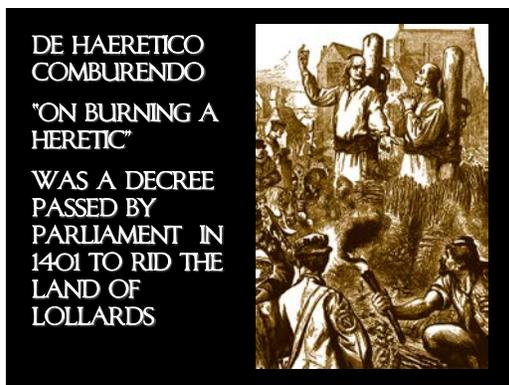


But it didn't...and the reason it didn't was not because Luther was better or more able or even luckier than the men who went before him. It didn't happen because the hand of our great Triune God stayed the hand of Satan and out of kindness and compassion restored the truth of the gospel to common men. God preserved him.

Oh brothers and sisters, you can see that, can't you? You can see that God worked in history to preserve his life.

You see our God is God and is worthy to be praised and when you study these men and the events of our great Reformation heritage, peace ought to flood over your anxious hearts and convince you that our God is faithfully superintending all things to His glory and that the great need of our hour is not cultural approval...what do we care whether our culture likes us or not...our need is faithfulness...faithfulness and courage.

It ought, also, to convince you that timing is in God's hands...that our safety is in God's hands. It ought to convince you that while we may dwell and labor in obscurity...nothing done for God is done in secret and no acts of faithfulness or of courage are obscure to him. That is true for the great and famous men of the faith like Luther, Huss and Wycliffe but it is just as true for less famous men like William Sawtree or John Badby or John Oldcastle. Because of that, our subject this morning centers on the decree of parliament known as "**De Haeretico Comburendo**" which translated into English it means, "**On Burning A Heretic.**"



I want to speak to you on this particular decree and how it led to a number of lesser known men and women giving their lives to the cause of truth prior to the time of Luther and the Reformation. I also want to address the manner of how

their faithfulness pushed along events and prepared the world for Luther and for the Reformation and for the recovery of the gospel.

Now to accomplish that, I am going to tell you three stories about three heroic men and women. But my purpose is not just to familiarize you with the names and deaths of a few martyrs...even though these martyrs were extraordinary individuals. I am not even trying to evoke in you a sense of admiration regarding their courage or faithfulness. That may happen. In fact, I hope it happens. Still that is not my purpose. My purpose is to show you that the seeds of the Reformation were already planted in the hearts and minds of the common people and priests of Wycliffe's and Huss' day. It inspired priests and tailors and even the nobility.

Now for our purpose this morning, we are going to focus on the Lollards. But we could just as easily focus on the Waldenses or the Huguenots of France or the Moravians of Bohemia. But the Lollards are easier because we were introduced to them last week in our study of Wycliffe. These other groups were like the Lollards and they were often confused with the Lollards because they shared a common opposition to Rome and a common love for the Bible.

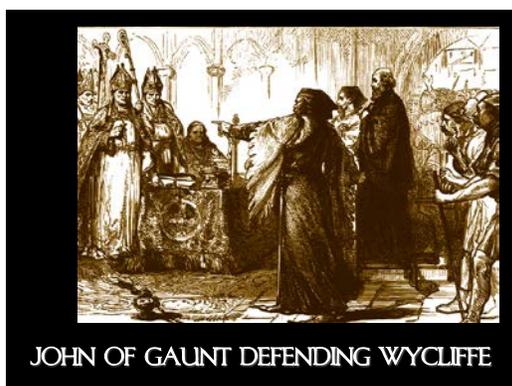
Now, before we do that let's review for a moment or two for those of you who were not here last week. Near the end his life, after having finished his translation of the Bible, John Wycliffe sent out preachers to proclaim the Word of God in English on the highways and byways of England. The year would have been somewhere between 1382 and 1384. These men called themselves the "**poor priests**" and fashioned themselves, as we saw last week, after the work and ministry of the mendicant friars.³ The principal difference between Wycliffe's

“**poor preachers**” and the mendicants was that the “**poor preachers**” actually preached the Bible...preached the Bible in the English dialect of the day...and were in truth and not just in appearance truly poor. The reason these “**poor preachers**” were poor is that they refused to receive money for their preaching and were content to live in poverty and wander about the countryside preaching wherever they could muster an audience. They were willing to take bread and shelter when it was offered but that was all.

These men, these “**poor preachers**”, came to be known as “**Lollards**”. Now as I mentioned last week, nailing down the derivation of the term “**Lollard**” is tricky. It may have come out of Holland and may have been a derivative of the Dutch word “**lullen**” which we know in English through the word “**lullaby**.” If that is the case the term probably meant something wonderfully sweet like “**singers**” and may have been a reference to the Lollards tendency to be psalm-singers.⁴ On the other hand, the term may have been based upon the Latin word “**lolium**” which meant “**tare**” or “**weed**.” If that were the case it would have not been a compliment. If the word “**lolium**” really was the root of the word “**Lollard**” it would have been a reference to the heretical nature or teaching of the Lollards. No matter how the term was originally intended, in Wycliffe’s day it was almost certainly meant to be a slanderous or pejorative term like the term “**Methodist**” later on in the Great Awakening.⁵ Now it is entirely possible that the term “**Lollard**” existed years before Wycliffe. But whether it did or not, after Wycliffe the term “**Lollard**” meant a follower of Wycliffe.⁶

Now I mentioned last week that during Wycliffe’s life he was protected by the Earl of Lancaster, John of Gaunt. You will remember the wonderful scene, I hope,

where John of Gaunt had to fight his way out of St. Paul's Cathedral in London to keep Wycliffe from being arrested. It is a wonderful scene in history. They went into St. Paul's for a hearing and had to fight their way out of the cathedral. But you will also remember that even John of Gaunt abandoned Wycliffe after Wycliffe began to preach against the doctrine of transubstantiation.



I mentioned that for several reasons but the principal reason is that John of Gaunt's sons eventually became English kings and as kings they became the principal persecutors of the Lollards. Their names were Henry IV and Henry V. Henry the IV was John of Gaunt's son and Henry V was his grandson. The fact that they became the principal persecutors of the Lollards is a remarkable irony of history. Their father and grandfather had been Wycliffe's most able defender and they were the Lollard's most able enemies.

Now prior to Henry the IV deposing his cousin Richard II in 1399 and taking the throne for himself the cause of the Lollards had advanced enormously. D'Aubigne writes:

The townsfolk crowded around these humble preachers; the soldiers listened to them, armed with sword and buckler to defend them; the nobility took down the

images from their baronial chapels; and even the royal family was partly won over to the Reformation.⁷

David Schaaf quotes in his *History of the Christian Church* a contemporary historian of the time of Wycliffe:

...of any two men one meets on the roads of England, one of the two is sure to be a Lollard.⁸

The Lollards were, in fact, greatly loved by the people of England. And in that affection they found the courage to be loud and continuous in their criticism of Rome. They hung placards in St. Paul's Cathedral and in Westminster Abbey protesting the abuses of the priest and friars.⁹ They even petitioned Parliament to undertake a general reform. Their petition, which came to be known as the Twelve Conclusions, asked parliament to:

"abolish celibacy, transubstantiation, prayers for the dead, offerings to images, auricular confession, war, the arts unnecessary to life, the practice of blessing oil, salt, wax, incense, stones, mitres, and pilgrims' staffs. All these things, they said, pertain to necromancy and not to theology."¹⁰

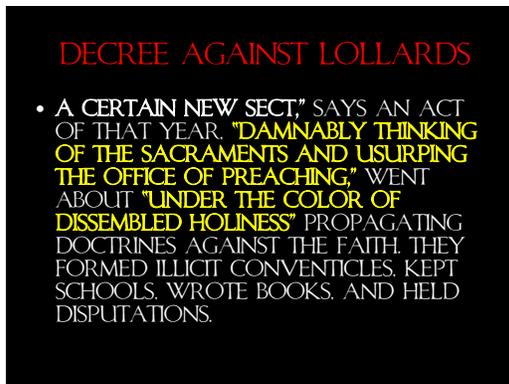
When they sent their petition, they guaranteed, with certainty, the beginning of their own persecution.

That persecution began when Henry IV became king. Now, as I mentioned earlier Henry IV deposed his cousin, Richard II and assumed the throne of England in 1399. In 1401, at the insistence of the Bishop of London and the Archbishop of Canterbury he asked parliament for and received a decree to go after the Lollards.

Merle D'Aubigne the wonderful, reformed church historian, writes that when the Archbishop of Canterbury placed the crown on Henry IV's head he whispered into his ear, **"To consolidate you throne, conciliate the clergy and sacrifice the Lollards."**¹¹

D'Aubigne goes on to add that Henry responded to the Archbishop by saying, **"I will be the protector of the church."**

Now the way he did that was by appealing to Parliament to issue a decree against the Lollards. One historian summarizes I like this:



...the appeal was not made in vain. **"A certain new sect,"** says an Act of that year, **"damnably thinking of the sacraments and usurping the office of preaching,"** went about **"under the color of dissembled holiness"** propagating doctrines against the faith. They formed illicit conventicles, kept schools, wrote books, and held disputations. The wicked preachers seduced the people into sedition and the bishops could not correct them because they went from diocese to diocese evading every summon and despising the censures of the Church. The bishops were accordingly given the power to arrest and imprison offenders till they purged themselves, and if canonically convicted, to keep them in prison. Finally if a man refused to abjure, or relapsed after abjuration...the sheriff of the county or municipal authorities of the place...*were*...to receive the culprit, and, after promulgation of the sentence, have him burned **"in a high place"** before the people.¹²

That was the decree and it passed. Now up until 1401, no person had ever been burned at the stake in England for heresy. England, of all of the countries of Europe, was the slowest and most hesitant to torch its citizens. Other men had been beheaded. Other men had died in squalor in prison but as far as history let's us know no man had ever died at the stake for heresy until 1401.¹³

The first man to die in the persecution died a few days before the decree was passed by Parliament. It was almost as if he was burned in anticipation of the decree making such terrible atrocities legal. The man had once been a priest at St. Osyth's in London. His name was William Sawtree.

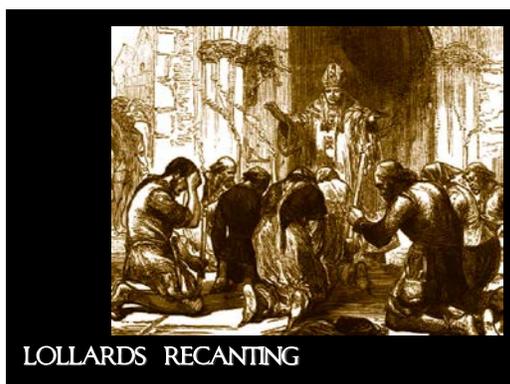
One Historian writes that on Saturday, February 12, 1401 Sawtree:

...was summoned to appear before the archbishop of Canterbury, and accused of holding heretical opinions. The principal articles against him were, that he had said, **"He would not worship the cross on which Christ suffered, but only Christ that suffered upon the cross; that every priest and deacon is more bound to preach the word of God than to say particular services at the canonical hours and that after the pronouncing of the sacramental words of the body of Christ, the bread remained of the same nature that it was before, neither doth it cease to be bread."**¹⁴

That's it. That is his heresy. Let me repeat it, **"I will not worship the cross but the Christ that died upon it. Priests ought to preach the Word of God rather than memorized prayers and the bread remains bread even after being consecrated."**

Sawtree was then imprisoned for two weeks and given two opportunities to recant. He refused and on March 2, 1401 he was dragged in St. Paul's where his head shaved. He was then stripped of his priestly office and burned at the stake as a layman.

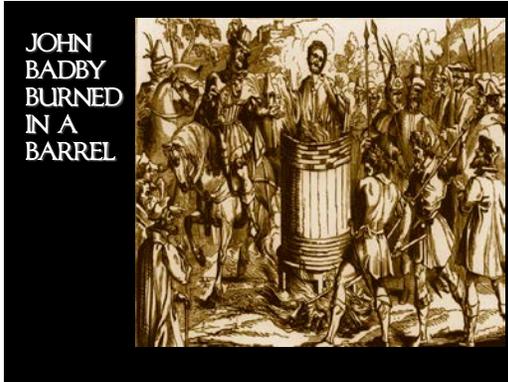
The immediate impact upon the Lollards was devastating. Quite a few Lollards recanted of their heretical views including two of the men that had helped John Wycliffe translate the Bible into English.¹⁵ One of the men became a prominent bishop known for his harsh dealings with Lollards.¹⁶ Quite a few men abjured or recanted under pressure only to reaffirm their previous heresy when the pressure let up.



Such was not the case, however, with John Badby...a poor tailor. J.A. Wylie writes that Badby was arrested on March 1, 1409 for saying publicly that he thought after the words of consecration the hallowed bread still remained bread. Two weeks after his arrest, Badby was led out to Smithfield to be burned alive.

Allow me to just read to you.

A few hours only elapsed till the fire was lighted. Sentence was passed upon him in the forenoon: on the afternoon of the same day, the king's writ, ordering the execution, arrived. Badby was hurried to Smithfield, **"and there,"** says Fox, **"being put in an empty barrel, he was bound with iron chains fastened to a stake, having dry wood put about him."**



They did that of course to prolong his torture.

As he was standing in the barrel, Prince Henry, the king's eldest son, appeared at the outskirts of the crowd. Touched with pity for the man whom he saw in this dreadful position, he drew near and began to address him, exhorting him to forsake these **"dangerous labyrinths of opinion"** and save his life. The prince and the man in the barrel were conversing together when the crowd opened and the procession of the Sacrament, with twelve torches burning before it, passed in and halted at the stake. The priest of St. Bartholomew, coming forward, requested Badby to speak his last word.

They offered him a piece of consecrated bread and asked what he saw and Badby said...

...**"it was hallowed bread, not God's body."** The priests withdrew, the line of their retreat through the dense crowd being marked by their blazing torches, and the Host borne aloft underneath a silken canopy. The torch was now brought. Soon the sharp flames began to prey upon the limbs of the martyr. A quick cry escaped him in his agony, **"Mercy, mercy, mercy!"** But his prayer was addressed to God, not to his persecutors. However, the prince, who still lingered near the scene of the tragedy, was recalled by this wail from the stake. He commanded the officers to extinguish the fires. The executioners obeyed. Addressing the half-scorched man, he said that if he would recant his errors and return to the bosom of the Church, he would not only save him from the fire, but would give him pension for the rest of his life.

But the man said, **"I only see bread."**

So they placed him back in the barrel and re-stoked the flames.

“Thus,” says Fox, “did this valiant champion of Christ, neglecting the prince’s fair words... not without a great and most cruel battle, but with much greater triumph of victory... perfect his testimony and martyrdom in the fire.”¹⁷

Burned to death in a wooden barrel because he saw bread where there was bread.

My favorite character of all of the Lollards, however, is Sir John Oldcastle but before we look at him I want you to understand the progression. The first man we looked at was a priest...not a rich man but well educated...most likely very well educated. The second man was John Badby, an uneducated, peasant tailor. But the man that we are going to look at now is Sir John Oldcastle, a member of the nobility.

I am simply going to read from D’Aubigne’s *History of the English Reformation*.

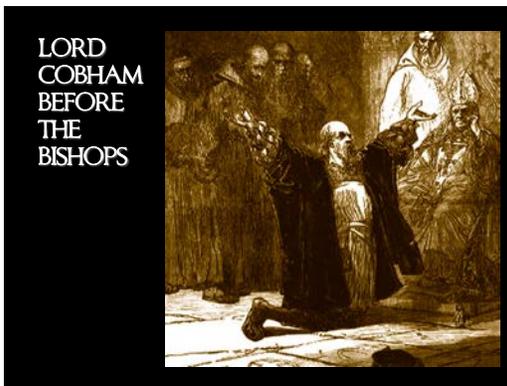
In the beginning of the fifteenth century Cowling Castle it was inhabited by Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, a man in high favor with the king. The **“poor priests”** used thronged to Cowling in quest of Wickliffe’s writings, of which Cobham had caused numerous copies to be made, and which they were circulated through the dioceses of Canterbury, Rochester, London, and Hertford. Cobham attended to the *Lollard’s* preaching, and if any enemies ventured to interrupt them, he threatened them with his sword. **“I would sooner risk my life,”** said he, **“than submit to such unjust decrees as dishonor the everlasting Testament.”**

Of course, what he meant by that was the Bible.

The king would not permit the clergy to lay hands of his favorite.

But Henry V having succeeded his father in 1413, and passed from the houses of ill-fame he had hitherto frequented, to the foot of the altars and the head of the armies, the archbishop immediately denounced *Lord* Cobham to him, and he was

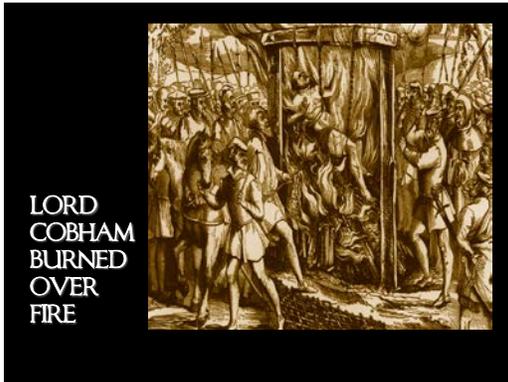
summoned to appear before the king. Sir John had understood Wickliffe's doctrine, and experienced in his own person the beauty of the Word of God. **"As touching the pope and his spirituality,"** he said to the king, **"I owe them neither suit nor service, forasmuch as I know him by the Scriptures not to be the *head of the church*."** Henry thrust aside Cobham's hand as he presented his confession of faith: **"I will not receive this paper, lay it before your judges."** When he saw his profession refused, Cobham had recourse to the only arm which he knew... The differences which we now settle by pamphlets were then very commonly settled by the sword: — **"I offer in defense of my faith to fight for life or death with any man living, Christian or pagan, always excluding your majesty."**



Cobham was led to the Tower. On the 23rd September 1413, he was taken before the ecclesiastical tribunal then sitting at St. Paul's. **"We must believe,"** said the priest to him, **"what the holy church of Rome teaches, without demanding Christ's authority."** — **"Believe!"** shouted the priests, **"believe, believe, believe!"** — **"I am willing to believe all that God desires,"** said Sir John; **"but that the pope should have authority to teach what is contrary to Scripture — that I can never believe."** He was led back to the Tower.

On Monday, 25th September, a crowd of priests, canons, friars, clerks, and indulgence-sellers, thronged the large hall of the Dominican convent, and attacked Lord Cobham with abusive language. These insults, and importance of the moment for the Reformation of England, the catastrophe that must needs close the scene: all agitated his soul to its very depths. When the archbishop called upon him to confess his offense, he fell on his knees, and lifting up his hands to heaven, *said:* **"I confess to Thee, O God! and acknowledge that in my frail youth I seriously offended Thee by my pride, anger, intemperance, and impurity: for these offenses I implore thy mercy!"** Then *looking at the priest* said: **"I ask not your absolution: it is God's only that I need."**

The clergy did not despair, they kept trying to reduce this high-spirited old man: they knew that spiritual strength is not always connected with bodily vigor, and so they hoped to vanquish by their constant berating. **“Sir John,”** said the primate at last, **“you have said some very strange things: we have spent much time in endeavors to convince you, but all to no effect. The day passeth away: you must either submit yourself to the ordinance of the church.....”** Cobham interrupted — **“I will none otherwise believe than what I have told you. Do with me what you will.”** — **“Well then, we must needs do the law,”** the archbishop made answer.



Arundel stood up; all the priests and people rose with him and uncovered their heads. Then holding the sentence of death in his hand, he read it with a loud clear voice. **“It is well,”** said Sir John; **“though you condemn my body, you can do no harm to my soul, not as long as I enjoy the grace of God.”** He was again led back to the Tower, whence he escaped one night, and took refuge in Wales. He was retaken in December 1417, where he was carried to London and there suspended by chains over a slow fire, and cruelly burned to death.¹⁸

Now the reason I wanted to tell you those stories is that the thing you need to see about the Reformation is that it was not limited to a few great reformers. It was about plain people: a priest, a tailor, a nobleman. They were men whose lives were affected by the Word of God. In 1483, two women were even burned at the stake for refusing to give up the authority of Scripture. In the years between 1400 and 1517 approximately 250 Lollards are on record as having been burnt at the stake and they were just common people...just everyday people like you and me and

here's the point. If we are faithful to the Word of God...if we are faithful to the gospel...we are important and we are champions for Christ.

But to be faithful to the gospel we have to know the gospel and love the gospel. We need to be faithful as we proclaim it to our friends and that people that come our way. Brothers and sisters, that is the history of the Lollards and it helped to set the scene for Luther when he came along and nailed the 95 theses to the door at Wittenberg. You see it took great reformers and it took unknown people, all instruments in God's mighty hand, to prepare the way for Luther and the Reformation.

Let's pray.

¹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), 83.

² Martin Luther, *Vol. 54: Luther's Works, Vol. 54 : Table Talk*, edited by J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1967), 160.

³ Mendicant friars were secular priests who made their living begging for bread and money.

⁴ J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England Vol. 1*, (Edinburgh,: Banner of Truth, 1962; reprinted in 1985), 94.

⁵ David S. Schaaf, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 4: The Middle Ages A.D. 1294-1517* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1910), 350.

⁶ Winston S. Churchill, *The Birth of Britain*, Vol. 1 from the Series, *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1956), 376.

⁷ D'Aubigne, 101.

⁸ Schaaf, 351. The quote is taken from Knighton, II, 191.

⁹ D'Aubigne, 102.

¹⁰ D'Aubigne, 101.

¹¹ D'Aubigne, 102-3.

¹² James Gairdner, *Lollardy and the Reformation in England: An Historical Survey, Volume 1* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1908), 47. Slightly edited by me.

¹³ Anonymous, *The Lollards; or Some Account of the Witnesses to the Truth in Great Britain from A.D. 1400 to A.D. 1546*, (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1880), 11.

¹⁴ Anonymous, *The Lollards; or Some Account of the Witnesses to the Truth in Great Britain from A.D. 1400 to A.D. 1546*, (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1880), 12.

¹⁵ Gairdner, 52. One of the two men was John Purvey, one of Wycliffe's closest friends and probably the translator of Wycliffe's second translation. He later came bac to the faith and was imprisoned.

¹⁶ Schaaf, 352. He writes: "The most prominent personages connected with the earliest period of Wycliffism, Philip Repyngdon, John Ashton, Nicolas Hereford and John Purvey, all recanted. The last three and Wycliffe are associated by Knighton as the four arch-heretics. Repyngdon, who had boldly declared himself at Oxford for Wyclif and his view of the sacrament, made a full recantation, 1382. Subsequently he was in high favor, became chancellor of Oxford, bishop of Lincoln and a cardinal, 1408. He showed the ardor of his zeal by treating with severity the sect whose views lie had once espoused."

¹⁷ J.A. Wylie, *History of the Reformation Vol. 1*, Book 7, chapter 1.

¹⁸ D'Aubigne, 104-5..