

## Who Was John Wycliffe? Morning Star of the Reformation

[John Wycliffe \(1328-1384\)](#)



was an outstanding Oxford scholar, professor and theologian who lived in England in the 1300's. He is often referred to as the "[Morning Star of the Reformation](#)" as he promoted teaching that paved the way for church reform in Europe which began when [Martin Luther](#) (1483-1546), a German priest and professor of theology at [Wittenberg](#) posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517.

He was in his 40's when he began studying theology. He insisted on a common-sense, literal interpretation of scripture instead of complicated methods which no ordinary person could understand. His views were very unpopular with the established church, especially when he began teaching that leaders should rule for the benefit of the people, not themselves.

He was persecuted and imprisoned for a time. Students who supported his views were expelled. He eventually left Oxford and spent the rest of his life preaching, translating the Bible into English and distributing hand-written copies of the Scriptures all over England. Many European students at Oxford were influenced by him and took his ideas back home, where they influenced men like [John Hus](#) and [Martin Luther](#).

He produced the [first hand-written English language Bible manuscripts](#) in 1380's AD. Wycliffe was well-known throughout Europe for his opposition to the teaching of the organized Church, which he believed to be contrary to the Bible. With the help of his followers, called the [Lollards](#), and his assistant [John Purvey](#), and many other faithful scribes, Wycliffe produced dozens of English language manuscript copies of the scriptures. They were translated out of the Latin Vulgate, which was the only source text available to Wycliffe. The Pope was so infuriated by his teachings and his translation of the Bible into English, that 44 years after Wycliffe had died, he ordered the bones to be dug-up, crushed, and scattered in the river!

On 4 May 1415The [Council of Constance](#) declared Wycliffe a heretic and under the ban of the Roman Catholic Church. It was decreed that his books be burned and his remains be exhumed. The exhumation was carried out in 1428 when, at the command of [Pope Martin V](#), his remains were dug up, burned, and the ashes cast into the River Swift, which flows through Lutterworth. This is the most final of all posthumous attacks on John Wycliffe, but previous attempts had been made before the Council of Constance. The Anti-Wycliffite Statute of 1401 extended persecution to Wycliffe's remaining followers. The "Constitutions of Oxford" of 1408 aimed to reclaim authority in all ecclesiastical matters, specifically naming John Wycliffe in a ban on certain writings, and noting that translation of Scripture into English by unlicensed laity is a crime punishable by charges of heresy.

John Wycliffe was not part of a particular denomination, but furthered the cause of the whole Christian Church. He was a man of courage, integrity and wisdom with a brilliant mind, and he lived and taught according to the plain truth of the Bible. He was influential in theology, politics and civil life in his generation and for centuries afterward.



William Wordsworth 1770-1850

### "Wycliffe"

Williams Wordsworth

*Wycliffe is disinhumed,  
Yea, his dry bones to ashes are consumed  
And flung into the brook that travels near;  
Forthwith that ancient Voice which streams can hear  
Thus speaks (that Voice which walks upon the wind,  
Though seldom heard by busy human kind):  
As thou these ashes, little Brook! wilt bear  
Into the Avon—Avon to the tide  
Of Severn—Severn to the narrow seas—  
Into main ocean they,—this deed accurst,  
An emblem yields to friends and enemies,  
How the bold Teacher's Doctrine sanctified  
By truth, shall spread throughout the world dispersed*