

John Huss and the Origins of the Protestant Reformation

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Introduction

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century is closely associated with Martin Luther, the great German Augustinian monk, who on October 31, 1517, nailed 95 theses on the bulletin board of the castle church in Wittenberg to protest against the abuses of the indulgences and called for a debate. This event was seen by many as the spark that ignited this remarkable religious reformation. However, Matthew Spinka is more accurate when he says this event was not the beginning of the Reformation, but the result of a reform movement that began two centuries before and was particularly effective during the conciliar period.¹

During the prior two centuries before Luther called for a debate on the indulgence issue, and his eventual revolt against the church, there were many voices within the Roman Catholic Church who saw the deplorable conditions of the church and called for reform. Time and time again their voices were silenced. They were condemned as heretics and many were executed. But no sooner than their voices were silenced, others were raised up, calling for reformation. Most notable among these voices were the English philosopher/professor John Wycliffe at Oxford University in England, Girolamo Savonarola, the charismatic priest at Florence, Italy and

¹ For a description of highlights of this reformatory movement see Matthew Spinka, ed. and trans *John Huss at the Council of Constance* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), 3-86.

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John Huss, the scholar/preacher/professor at the University of Prague in Bohemia.

When we consider the long road of reform in the church, “the reformatory demands of John Huss should not be treated as a sporadic and isolated effort on the part of a single individual, but an integral part of an organized movement of which his very judges at the Council of Constance were outstanding representations. Huss’ work therefore may be regarded as a transitional stage from the earlier medieval period to the Reformation and thus provides a link between the old and the new reform movement.”²

“Yet if Huss was not the first of the new dispensation, he was the most influential, as he was the last of the forerunners of the Reformation. He was literally the morning star which led the way to the full daylight of evangelistic doctrine, which through the influence of Luther has spread over the whole world.”³

The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze how the reformation began by John Huss anticipated and even inspired the great Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. In John Huss’ native Bohemia, there were reformers who preceded him and laid the groundwork for the reform that he would spearhead. Among the most notable were: John Milicz of Kromeniz (1325-1374), Matthew of Janov (1355-1393) and Thomas of Stitne (1331-1409).

John Milicz is called by some the “Father of Czech Reform.” Not much is known of his early years. He became troubled by the avarice of his fellow church officials. After spending five and a half years in the chancery he was ordered to the priesthood and appointed canon of St. Vitus Cathedral, the highest position short of the prelacy available to any of the Prague clergy. Milicz gave up his position in the church and devoted himself to a life of poverty and preaching the gospel of Jesus. He had great zeal for the gospel and denounced superficial religiosity and external conformity. He preached three times a day, in Latin, German and Czech and soon large crowds of people flocked to hear him in his house called “The New Jerusalem.” Soon he had a devoted group of followers.⁴

² Matthew Spinka, *John Huss: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1968), 3.

³ Oscar Kuhns, *John Huss: The Witness*, LHD, 1907, 10.

⁴ Jennifer K. Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers), 251. It was called the “New Jerusalem” because of many different language groups that met at his house.

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One of Milicz's most remarkable achievements was the transformation of a brothel into a hospice for some two hundred converted prostitutes. Milicz was accused of acting as a superior to these women and was later charged with heresy. He went to Rome and was cleared and later to Avignon where he died before a verdict was reached. The reform work he established was taken over by the church and his pupils and friends were tried and expelled from Prague. Thus, Milicz's work appeared to have ended.⁵

But his work of reform would not die. It would be carried on by Matthew Janov who became an enthusiastic disciple of Milicz. After spending nine years at the University of Paris studying theology, he returned home to Prague, and devoted himself to the zealous study of the scriptures and preaching. He received a small income from his post as cathedral preacher and penitentiary. Like his mentor before him, Matthew embraced the life of apostolic poverty. He was a diligent student of the Bible and began preaching against the sins of the church, denouncing the Pope Clement VII as the antichrist.⁶

Janov did not, as his predecessors had done, limit himself to denouncing the glaring abuses of the clergy; he went further. He waged war not only on the Pharisees, who rigidly observe "the letter" but ignore "the spirit" of "the text"; who, as he himself explained, were more given to trust the intentions of men than to remain faithful to the truths of life and charity towards one's "neighbor," but he was also caustic with the "*book of ceremonies*" which is no longer a "means" but has become an "end" and stands in the way of direct communion of the soul with God. He denounced religious rituals as of secondary importance and asserted that the priest may actually be an unnecessary intermediary between man and his Maker.⁷ These ideas were already anticipating the Protestant principles of the priesthood of all believers.

Janov devoted time and energy in translating the Bible into Czech, so the laity could have access to the word of God. He along with two other reformers were called before a solemn assembly of the synod and forced to recant publicly. Janov had to withdraw his opposition to idolatrous

⁵ Spinka, 14-16; See also Herbert B. Workman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* 2 vols. (London: Charles Kelly, 1902), 2:102-105.

⁶ Spinka, 17, See also Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 15, 28.

⁷ Spinka, 18, Kaminsky, 192.

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eneration of images, relics and the saints and particularly to cease his advocacy of frequent communion. He was forbidden to preach half a year, to confession and to administer the Eucharist anywhere but his church.⁸

Janov instead now focused on his literary work with greater zeal, aiming primarily on the exposition of scriptural truth. He denounced the abuses in the churches and the overemphasis on external ritualism and ceremonialism of the church. His reform program may be summarized as “restitutionalism—the return by the church to teachings and practices of the gospel of Christ and his apostles as established in the primitive church.”⁹ This anticipated the reformation emphasis of the radical reformers.

Among the devoted followers of both Milicz and Janov was Thomas Stitne, a student of the University of Prague. His main contribution to the reform movement were his writings in the Czech language that made his work accessible to the common people.¹⁰ The desire by many of these Czech reformers to make the word of God available to the common people would become one of the great passions of the Protestant reformers. For example, Luther translated the Bible into German, Tyndale into English, and Lefevre into French. The work of these early Czech reformers would provide the blueprint and inspiration for the 16th century reformers.

Life of John Huss

John Huss (Jan Hus) is considered by many reformation scholars as a leading anticipatory reformer who would set the stage for the great Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. In many ways his work anticipated the work of some of the leading reformers of the 16th century, especially Martin Luther.

John Huss was born in 1373 in Husinez, a village in Southern Bohemia and died at the stake by burning on July 6, 1415 in Constance, Germany. His Czech name means goose. It was said that before his untimely death, a prophecy was proclaimed. “Let the goose be sacrificed, but one hundred years hence out of the ashes, there will arise a swan, who would uphold the

⁸ Spinka, 18. See also Christine C. Ames, *Medieval Heresies* (Cambridge: University Press, 2015), 296.

⁹ Spinka, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19-20; The trio Milic, Janov and Stitne were also sometimes referred to as the “Bohemian Brethren.” See George Wainwright, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 312.

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truth that he defended.”¹¹ Many believed that this referred to Martin Luther who would carry on the work of Huss and beyond.

Huss' youth was not that different from the young men of his time, that is to say frivolous and licentious. Surely, the following self-reproach which Huss made in one of his letters must refer to that period: “To have been overly fond of elegant clothes and gambling.” In his early youth he took part in, “roistering escapades, but as he learned the Sacred Scriptures he repented.”¹²

Not much is known of Huss' boyhood and university career. His father died when he was young and his mother took special care in his development, teaching him how to pray. His mother appears to have had a great impact on his later spiritual life.¹³ Huss studied in the department of Arts, Philosophy and Theology at the University of Prague. He obtained a BA degree in 1393, BD in 1394, and MA in 1396.¹⁴ He supported himself by singing in the church as Luther did over a hundred years later. During his early studies, Huss was far from ascetic. He admits to have fallen under the influence of his friends who spent their time on drinking and feasting. It was only after he graduated that he became ashamed of his earlier days and decided to dedicate his life to the study of the Scriptures.¹⁵

Sometime after his graduation, Huss was assigned to preach at the Chapel of Bethlehem, a sort of national sanctuary founded by a wealthy burgher of Prague and the knight John of Mulheim. The Chapel was capable of holding three thousand people, yet in spite of its size it was always overflowing. The preaching of Huss won the favor of the crowds and that of the Court, and in a particular manner Queen Sophia, wife of Wenceslaus,

¹¹ See also Benito Mussolini, *John Huss The Veracious*, (New York: Italian Book Company, 1932) 68. Benito Mussolini is best known as a despotic leader of Italy who participated in the rise of fascism during the World War II. However, before entering into fascist party, Mussolini was a scholar and writer, starting out as a socialist newspaperman. Mussolini published a book on Jan Hus in Italian in 1913, which was reprinted in English in 1929 and in 1932. Mussolini saw Hus as a socialist reformer.

Thomas A. Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 196-97.

¹² Mussolini 28.

¹³ Ota Pavlicek and Frantisek Smahel, *A Companion to Jan Hus* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 11.

¹⁴ David Schaff, *John Huss—His Life and Teachings After Five Hundred Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons 1915), 20.

¹⁵ Pavlicek and Smahel, 15.

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then king of the Bohemians. One scholar suggested that Huss was the queen's confessor.¹⁶

The sermons delivered by Huss at the Chapel of Bethlehem proposed to purify the Roman Church, which was at this time weathering a great crisis. The rivalry of the two Popes of Rome and Avignon and the scandals in its low ranks were fomenting heresy, and were stressing the need and the urge for radical reform.¹⁷

The Historical Context of John Huss' Life

An understanding of the historical church context in which Huss lived provides some clarity on the nature of the issues Huss faced. John Huss lived during one of the most tumultuous periods of medieval Christianity. Medieval Catholicism had recently ended the infamous period of the Babylonian captivity and entered in the period of the Papal Schism.

Between the years 1309-1378, the papacy resided at Avignon, France and came under the domination of the French monarchy. During those almost seventy years, all the popes and the majority of the cardinals in the Sacred College were French. It was such a period of venality and corruption that contemporaries called it the "Third Babylon" David Schaff writes: "Church offices were set for sale and lucrative livings were filled before their incumbents were dead, two or even three ecclesiastics paying for the right of succession and standing, as it were, in line until the living incumbents died, and the others, one by one, filled out their turns."¹⁸

The Papal Schism (1378-1417) followed the "Babylonian captivity." The church attempted to resolve the issue of who the real pope was and where he should reside, but they created a bigger problem. Pope Urban VI was elected in Rome but alienated many in the Roman curia who then returned to Avignon and elected Clement VII.¹⁹ There were now two popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon, hurling curses at each other.²⁰ "Europe

¹⁶ Francis Lützov, *The Life and Times of Master Jan Hus* (London: J. M. Dent, 1921), 77; Pavlicek and Smahel, 124.

¹⁷ Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 6.

¹⁸ Schaff, *John Huss—His Life and Teachings*, 16.

¹⁹ Clement VII is known in history as the first antipope and ruled from 1378 to 1398, a later pope with the same title as Clement VII residing in Rome would rule from 1523 to 1534.

²⁰ For more information on the Papal schism of the 14th century see Joelle Rollo-Koster and Thomas M. Izbicki (eds.), *A Companion to the Great Western Schism (1378-1417)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

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was divided into two hostile camps: Germany, parts of Italy, Hungary, Bohemia, England and Poland, acknowledged Rome; France, Scotland, Spain Naples, Savoy followed Avignon. . . . In vain did devout Catholics congregations appeal for a council that would restore unity, feeling the schism to be intolerable. For them the dual papacy destroyed the meaning of Catholicism: Christendom no longer existed, but Antichrist rule.”²¹ “Candidates of Rome and Avignon fought each other for the benefices they had both bought. . . . Excommunication and interdict became common weapons. The one pope blessed those whom the other cursed. The whole Christian world found itself excommunicated and under interdict, each pope cursing his enemy and those who followed him. The struggle for power undermined faith, the very foundation of the medieval world. Every Catholic was blessed and cursed simultaneously. As the princes switched their allegiances from one pope to the other, the blessing of Rome and the curse of Avignon could be exchanged for the curse of Rome and the blessings of Avignon. Yet no one could decide which pope was definitely the right one.”²²

At the University of Prague where Huss was a student, loyalty was to the pope in Rome. It was within this spiritual morass and moral confusion that the young John Huss lived. It is no wonder that later in his life he would question the legitimacy and authority of the papacy.

Intersection of Nationalism and Religious Reform

The political and religious circumstances of Bohemia presented a startling intersection between nationalism and religious reform, which would later find its historical parallel in Luther’s Germany. In Bohemia, the religious reform took on a national character because of the history of conflict against the Germans who dominated Bohemian life and were major guardians of church traditions and authority. The most licentious and moral profligate among the Bohemian clergy were prelates of German nationality. Ironically, it was a German speaking Austrian by the name of Conrad Waldhausen (1320-1369) who would emerge as the first major reformer. He would greatly influence the three major Czech reformers—Milicz, Janov and

²¹ Spinka, 37.

²² Spinka, 39.

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Stitne, mentioned earlier, who each had a profound impact on John Huss.²³ Threatened and persecuted, Waldhausen remained faithful to the Church, but he denounced those prelates who showed their unfitness for their mission by their profligate and corrupt behavior.²⁴

The increasing animosity between the papacy and Bohemia evolved into a conflict that took on a nationalistic profile, particularly when the pope issued his interdict against the city of Prague. The papal interdict prohibited the majority of the Sacraments, church bells no longer rang, and the dead were interred without the benefits of the last rites. These events were seen as hostility against the Bohemian people and resulted in arousing their the sense of national pride.

“Huss,” says 19th century historian Henry Milman, “was now no isolated teacher, no mere follower of a condemned English heretic; he was even more than the head of a sect; he almost represented a kingdom—no doubt much more than the half of Bohemia. King Wenzel and his Queen were on his side, at least as against the clergy.”²⁵ Like Luther’s, Huss’ words were half battles. His books on the abominations of monks and the members of Antichrist, directed against the hierarchy, were sledge-hammer blows that were felt throughout Europe.²⁶

Yet Huss was no chauvinistic nationalist. On one occasion he said, “I prefer a good German to a bad Czech” which meant that for the sake of justice he strove for national freedom but regarded it as a means to a supra national justice order.²⁷

This was the first national revolution against the Church of Rome, a hundred years before the Reformation had showed that for the sake of religion a whole people might rise in revolt.²⁸

Huss grew up among Czech peasants who consciously and bitterly saw their rights being curtailed by the ever-stronger nobility, the German kings, and the rapacious church, which they also called the German church. They

²³ Mussolini, 20; Gerhart Hoffmeister, *The Renaissance and Reformation in Germany* (New York: Ungar, 1977), 21.

²⁴ Mussolini, 22.

²⁵ Henry H. Milman, *History of Latin Christianity*, 9 vols. (London: John Murray, 1872), 8:242.

²⁶ William H. Withrow, *Beacon Lights of the Reformation* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1899), 44.

²⁷ Paul Roubiczeh and Joseph Kalmer, *Warrior of God: The Life and Death of John Hus* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1947), 4.

²⁸ Roubiczeh and Kalmer, 5.

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enviously watched the German colonists and citizens who with self-government and their rights grew richer and richer. There was an atmosphere of social and national tension among the Czechs.²⁹

One writer described the conditions this way; "Religious conflict, reinforced by social factors, broke out and as the socially and religiously discontented in Bohemia were almost exclusively Czechs, it gained an irresistible momentum. The part played by national feeling made this revolt unique. For the first time in modern history a united nation was to rise in arms. It was fighting for its faith, but national feeling, particularly strong for social reasons, was also engaged. For the first time the overwhelming and fateful strength of national feeling was revealed. John Hus personifies the fusion of these three compelling forces."³⁰

He continued, "The religious problems in Bohemia too, coincided with the social and national ones. The state taxation, which cripples the people, is dwarfed by the exactions of the Church. The poor people, the Czechs, are again the victims. And the rich, powerful Germans, who must lose power by any change, strive against a reformation of the Church, which they rule; they oppose such an innovation as sermons in Czech. But above all, and this is more important than any social or national consideration, the people, devout and God-fearing, find themselves thrown back on the instrumentality of a Church who uses a language they do not understand, whose morals they must despise, and whose demands for money they cannot satisfy. The Church, whose service the people need, no longer opens the way for them but bars it and brings it into doubt and contempt. It destroys the people's link with the God they cannot do without. With their last strength the people try to satisfy the demands the Church makes upon them, but in vain. The man who will point out to the people the immediate way to God without this mediation of the Church will be the liberator of the nation."³¹

The extent of Huss' influence and how it intersected with the state was also revealed by the willingness of many of the nobles of Bohemia to appeal to King Sigismund for the release of Huss while he was incarcerated at Constance. A petition dated May 8, 1415, signed by eight Moravian noblemen and other noblemen addressed to Sigismund and interceded for

²⁹ Roubiczeh and Kalmer, 5.

³⁰ Roubiczeh and Kalmer, 40.

³¹ Spinka, 39; Roubiczeh and Kalmer, 39.

the release of Huss. They affirmed that he was a good man and faithful and an honest preacher and minister of the Holy Scriptures. Another appeal dated May 12 and signed this time by two hundred and fifty Moravian and Bohemian nobles addressed to Sigismund reminding him of his safe keeping pledge to Huss. They also affirmed the honesty and faithfulness of Huss.³² In still another appeal signed by other Bohemian nobles “an urgent appeal was made to the Bohemian and Moravian nobles at Constance to be insistent in interceding with the king not to permit the iniquity being perpetrated upon Huss to continue.”³³

Schaff described these appeals as representing the views of the Bohemian people. Huss’ character was vouched for and also his fidelity in preaching the gospel. His arrest was regarded as a criminal injustice and violation of solemn pledges. Huss’ treatment was regarded as an insult to the Bohemian people.³⁴ Huss was the people’s champion against injustice constantly being inflicted on them, he was their holy warrior against corruption, vanity, and a decadent church. He embodied their dreams, hopes and visions of an independent nation. For many Huss represented the Bohemian nation.

This nationalistic identification would reoccur again during the period of Luther’s reformation, giving essential fuel to the reformation in Germany. So the intersection between national politics and religion empowering Protestant reformation had its major antecedents in the experience of Huss in Bohemia.

Influence of John Wycliffe–Warrior of God

John Wycliffe (1331–1384) was an English Scholastic philosopher, theologian translator, reformer, and university professor at Oxford in England.³⁵ Wycliffe downplayed the importance of the church sacraments as the only way to salvation; insisting that holiness of an individual was more important than official office; insisting that a truly pious person was morally, and thus ecclesiastically, superior to a wicked ordained cleric.

³² Thomas Fudge, *The Trial of Jan Hus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 262.

³³ Schaff, *John Huss–His Life and Teachings*, 198, 199.

³⁴ Schaff, *John Huss–His Life and Teachings*, 199.

³⁵ For a recent biography see: Andrew Larsen, “John Wyclif c. 1331-1384” in Ian Christopher Levy (ed.), *A Companion to John Wyclif: Late Medieval Theologian* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1-61.

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Wycliffe particularly criticized the orders of friars and monks, as being repugnant to scripture, challenging the privileged status of the clergy and the exorbitant luxury and pomp of the churches and their ceremonies.³⁶

The influence of John Wycliffe on John Huss was profound. The late 14th century witnessed a strong bond between Bohemia and England. In 1381, princess Anne of Luxemburg (1366-1394), sister of Wenceslas IV, king of Bohemia (1361-1419), was given in marriage to King Richard II of England (1367-1400). She was a pious believer and took with her to London the Gospels in Latin, German, and Czech. She also facilitated contact between the universities of Oxford and Prague, which enabled the writings of Wycliffe to reach Prague. Other students from Bohemia also brought Wycliffe's books back to Bohemia.³⁷

A personal friend of Jan Huss, himself a renown Bohemian reformer, Jerome of Prague, studied in England for a short time and brought back from Oxford copies of Wycliffe's work.³⁸ He praised and lauded Wycliffe's work without mentioning the fact that Wycliffe was already considered a notorious heretic and that his followers were being exterminated by fire and sword. Jerome got Huss to read Wycliffe and initially Huss gave only a passing glance and begged his friend to dump the books in the Vltava River.³⁹

However, after a more careful examination, Huss completed the copy of five of Wycliffe's treatise in 1398 and used them as the basis for his lectures. These writings began to awaken in Huss a fire and a bolder zeal for reformation. One writer noted that he could not conceal his joy and wrote in the margin, "Dear Wycliffe God grant you eternal bliss," . . . he continued, "Wycliffe you will turn many a head."⁴⁰

³⁶ For Wycliffe's view of sacraments see Stephen Penn, "Wyclif and the Sacraments" in Levy, *A Companion to John Wyclif*, 199-291. Wycliffe was also an early advocate for translation of the Bible into the common language. He completed his translation directly from the Vulgate into vernacular English in the year 1382, now known as Wycliffe's Bible.

³⁷ Roubicez and Kalmer, 54; For a further study on connection between England and Bohemia see Alfred Thomas, *A Blessed Shore: England and Bohemia from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 98-119.

³⁸ See Michael Van Dussen, *From England to Bohemia: Heresy and Communication in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: University Press, 2012), 69; For a biography of Jerome of Prague see David S. Schaff, *Jerome of Prague and the Five Hundred Anniversary of his Death* (Andover, MA: W. F. Draper, 1916).

³⁹ Roubicez and Kalmer, 74.

⁴⁰ Roubicez and Kalmer, 65.

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As the teachings of Wycliffe penetrated into Bohemia, especially the University of Prague, and although most felt the need for reform, two opposing camps emerged. The conservatives, cautious and vacillating party composed mainly of Germans. On the other side stood the Wycliffites as they were called, consisting mainly of Czechs.⁴¹

Although in many ways, Wycliffe served as a spiritual and theological mentor for many Czech reformers, Huss was not quite as radical. “He did not fiercely attack the adoration of saints, nor the medieval church service . . . In the sacrament of communion he only fought against the abuses within the church and not against the doctrine.” Perhaps he was aware of the charges of heresies against Wycliffe.⁴²

Huss and Wycliffe, later on along with Luther, were not calling for any new doctrine, but for what they believed was a restoration of pure Christianity as taught in the Bible. Although at first, theological and devotional, the Bohemian reformation swiftly turned into a social revolution. As Huss began to see more clearly the errors of the church, the gap between the Bohemian reformers and the establishment became so wide that their views became irreconcilable.

Nature of the Reformation

John Huss along with his Czech reforming colleagues had one great desire in their reformation efforts—to return the Church to the primitive piety of the apostolic age. He defined it as “restitutionalism”—the return to the teachings and practices of the gospel of Christ, and his apostles as exhibited in the primitive church.⁴³

While the magisterial reformers like Luther, Calvin and Zwingli—spoke of returning the Church to its primitive roots, their reform was nowhere near as radical and they chose a more moderate course. It would be the radical reformers like the Anabaptists who would advocate a more drastic reform. These radical reformers were in some ways theologically more in line with some of the ideas of the Hussite reformation. The radicals of the 16th century understood their reform not simply the renovation and repairing of the old system. For them restitutionalism was the tearing down of the old

⁴¹ Roubiczek and Kalmer, 74. The leader of Czech Wycliffites was the master at the Prague University Stanislav of Znojmo. (See Kaminsky, *A History of Hussite Revolution*, 58-61.)

⁴² Roubiczek and Kalmer, 60.

⁴³ Spinka, *John Hus*, 19.

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and the building of a new structure. I am not sure that Huss and his colleagues intended to go that far, but they would provide the theological pattern or model for the radicals of the 16th century.

Use of Local Language

Using the local language in the area of worship and word, John Huss along with other Czech reformers who preceded him made this one of the most important goals in their reform efforts. They understood the power of language in persuasion and they wanted to make the religious experience more available to the common man. On the other hand, the Roman church deliberately stifled the use of the local language, so they could control the worship process and place an emphasis on the Latin-speaking priests and clergy.

The Bethlehem's chapel to which Huss was assigned as a preacher was founded with the avowed purpose of preaching in the Czech language. It was consciously intended by its founder as the continuation of Milicz's Jerusalem, particularly of that part of the former foundation, which was to serve for the training of preachers imbued with the ideals and spirit of Milicz.⁴⁴ It was named Bethlehem (house of bread) because its chief function was to feed the people with the bread of life, the word of God.⁴⁵ It is in this public space that Huss was able to preach freely and shared his revolutionary religious ideas with the people.

There was only one other place where the people could hear the word of God in Czech. Those Czech preachers who wanted to preach in Czech had to do so in homes or other hiding places. The church authorities opposed those activities and those who participated in them preached at the peril of their lives.⁴⁶

Huss contributed his most prominent service to the reform movement through his preaching. He preached twice on Sundays and it is estimated that during his twelve years of ministry at Bethlehem he preached 3,500 sermons, not counting the sermons he preached in other places. His preaching established him as the leading voice of the reform movement.

⁴⁴ Mussolini, 49; For connection between John Huss and John Milicz see Peter Moree, *Preaching in Fourteenth-Century Bohemia: The Life and Ideas of Milicius de Chremsir* (Herspice, Czech Republic: EMAN, 1999), 203-54. See also Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, 9-14.

⁴⁵ Mussolini, 48; Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 6, 12-15.

⁴⁶ Mussolini, 50.

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The Czech populace of Prague soon thronged the chapel, both the artisans and the lower classes and also the representatives of the educated and even noble classes from among the royal entourage among them Queen Sophia herself. The university masters and students also attended the services in large numbers.⁴⁷

It was during those years as preacher at Bethlehem chapel that Huss developed a deep study and love for the scriptures. He read Wycliffe's treatise on the Truth of the Holy Scriptures and later on wrote a similar work enlarging and expanding Wycliffe's ideas. Huss' ideas on scripture would be one of his most important contributions in identifying him as a true forerunner of Luther and the Protestant Reformation. In that treatise, Huss asserted that every Christian is bound to believe the truth that the Holy Ghost has laid down in scriptures. He claimed that the church, whether through its synods, councils, and teachings of the Fathers, must only be believed if they are in harmony with the scriptures. He further proclaimed that the Bible alone should be the source of truth and rule of faith and conduct. No obedience to the church is obligatory that is not distinctly based on the scriptures. Huss' views on scripture would form the basis of one of the foundational teachings of the Protestant Reformation, (*Sola Scriptura*). It was his view on the ultimate authority of scripture that ultimately led to his demise.⁴⁸ "In view of these positions on the supreme authority of the Scripture and the right of individual judgment, Bishop Hefele rightly declares that Huss was fully out of accord with the Catholic Church and a true precursor of the Reformation."⁴⁹

Another doctrine for which Huss could be called a true forerunner of the Protestant reformation was his views on the church. One scholar described Huss' conflict with leaders of the church not a mere academic conflict, but a struggle for the very existence of the Roman church. Huss raised his voice against the core ideas of the medieval church; papal succession through Peter, the establishment of the church on Peter, the delegation of temporal and spiritual authority of the pope as, God's vice-regent on the earth, approaching God only through the priest, no salvation outside the visible church, and salvation through the sacraments. He

⁴⁷ Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 59.

⁴⁸ Oscar Kuhns, *Jon Huss; The Witness* (Cincinnati, OH: Jennings and Graham, 1907), 83.

⁴⁹ <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1995>, 8.

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insisted that the popes and the cardinals do not constitute the church, papal decrees are not always to be obeyed; the Roman Catholic Church is not the Catholic apostolic church.⁵⁰ Huss affirmed that Christ alone was the foundation and sole head of the church. Huss followed Augustine's exposition and concluded that the "rock" in Matthew 16:18 upon which the church was built on Christ, not Peter.⁵¹ Huss repudiated the claim that Constantine gifted the Church with temporal authority. Three decades before Lorenzo Valla in Italy proved the Donation of Constantine to be a forgery,⁵² some Bohemian reformers preached that the Donation was "the work of the devil."⁵³

Huss teachings shook the very foundations of the medieval church organizational structure. Huss taught that every nation should have their own independent church, total equality between clergy and laity, temporal princes should defy the laws of the church to protect God's servants, clergy should focus on preaching and dispensing the sacraments. Many of these revolutionary ideas would be in harmony with the Protestant reformers and find their full development and maturity later on. Huss may have differed from the magisterial reformers concerning the nature of grace, faith and works but in his views on the scriptures and the church, he clearly anticipated the Magisterials.⁵⁴

Pavlicek and Smahel write: "Huss denied the necessity of auricular confession. He deplored the adoration of images as idolatry, he demolished papal infallibility, he stormed against the ceremonial which tended more to screen the substance, and he denounced ecclesiastical Phariseism which was satisfied with keeping up appearances."⁵⁵

Huss was not only an eloquent preacher, but also devoted pastor. He had a profound care and compassion for those under his care, like the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4, 5 Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 30-36.

⁵¹ Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 45.

⁵² Lorenzo Valla, *De Falso Credita et Ementita Constantini Donatione Declamatio*. The essay began circulating in 1440, but was heavily rejected by the Church. It was not formally published until 1517. See *On the donation of Constantine* translated by G. W. Bowersock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁵³ See Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 163, footnote 167.

⁵⁴ Kuhns, 84-86.

⁵⁵ Ota Pavlicek and František Šmahel, *A Companion to Jan Hus*, 368.

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Apostle Paul. Some of his letters revealed the tender compassion of Huss even as he was facing death.⁵⁶

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Corruption in the Church and Among the Clergy

One writer described that the mercenary pursuits of the ecclesiastical hierarchy knew neither limits nor obstacles. Offices were bought and sold for what they would bring. With money one could even attain to mount to Peter’s seat.⁵⁸ The barter of offices within the ecclesiastical hierarchy was one of the mainsprings of income to the Roman Curia. Huss here continued the work of Wycliffe and Pierre D’Ailly (1351-1420), advocating for the change on the highest levels of this simoniac society.⁵⁹

The monasteries, originally intended by their founders as sheltered retreats for men of tried virtues, had become the hideouts of all sorts of parasites who worshiped the Lord after a fashion of their own, through voluptuous delights and vicious pleasures.⁶⁰ The people, who shouldered at the cost of their toil and blood the grand stand of that ecclesiastical and civil society, were plunged in shocking ignorance and most abject poverty by monks and laymen alike. The least thought or threat of revolt was crushed under the fear of persecution and massacre.

The Reforms set forth by John Huss in many and various ways anticipated the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century in both practice and doctrine. John Huss along with his Czech predecessors all experienced a profound spiritual encounter that transformed their lives before they

⁵⁶ See Herbert B. Workman (ed.), *Letters of Jan Hus, with introduction and explanatory notes* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 87-88.

⁵⁷ Pavlicek and Šmahel, *A Companion to Jan Hus*, 368.

⁵⁸ For the definition and origins of medieval simony see Joseph H. Lynch, *Simoniacal Entry into Religious Life from 1000 to 1260: A Social Economic and Legal Study* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1976).

⁵⁹ For Wycliffe’s tract denouncing Simony, which was essentially reproduced by Huss, see Terrence A. McVeigh (ed.), *On Simony* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1992), 5. See also Louis B. Pascoe, *Church and Reform: Bishops, Theologians, and Canon Layers in the Thought of Pierre d’Ailly (1351-1420)* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 107.

⁶⁰ Mussolini, 14.

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became reformers. It stands to reason that a deep spiritual revolution must take place in the life of one before he can take up the work of reform. This reality would later be experienced by almost all the major reformers of the 16th century. Huss' life was marked by poverty, humiliation, and self-sacrifice. He denounced the corruption of the church and the venality of its leaders, and felt that the Church had lost its spiritual direction.

Sale of Indulgences

Some of the conditions and circumstances that gave rise to the Lutheran reformation of the 16th century were present during the time of John Huss. One of these situations was the selling of indulgences. The blasphemous sale of remission of sins past and permission for sins in the future, which a century later awoke the indignation of Luther, also aroused the abhorrence of Huss. Indulgences played a significant role in religious life in Prague. Huss boldly denounced the impiety of the "sin-mongers."⁶¹ The opposition to indulgences called for action in Rome and in March 1412 a Papal bull was read on the streets of Prague confirming the sale of indulgences. While Huss was content to merely preach against the bull, Huss' student, Jerome, organized a student demonstration on the main square where the crowd burned all the indulgence documents, including the papal bull.⁶²

This attitude towards the papal decree was later brought as the main charge against Jerome and Huss. "Dear master," said the Town Council to Jerome, "we are astonished at your lighting up a fire, in which you run the risk of being burned yourself." But the heroic soul heeded not the prophetic words. He went everywhere preaching with tongue and pen against the doctrine of indulgences, the worship of images, the corruption of the clergy. "They who cease to preach," he said, "will be reputed traitors in the day of judgment."⁶³ Huss' attack against the indulgence campaign would be an important turning point for him, because it marked the beginning of the loss of support from the king.

⁶¹ Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 25. In 1394 Hus was attracted by the attack on indulgences by Jan Stekna, (Fudge, 6).

⁶² Frantisek Smahel, *Die Präger Universität im Mittelalter: Gessammelte Aufsätze* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 268.

⁶³ William Withrow, H. *Beacon Lights of the Reformation* (1898) (Reprint. London: Forgotten Books, 2013), 43.

Perversion of the Gospel

Huss, like the reformers of the 16th century, spoke much about the perversion of the gospel by the church and the need to teach and preach the true gospel. What was this gospel that needed to be preached? It was primarily the message of justification by faith, which would later become one of the central pillars of the Protestant Reformation—*sola fide*. This gospel was presented as a counterweight to the pernicious doctrine of salvation by works that manifested itself in myriads of forms in medieval Catholicism. Although the views of Huss and Luther on the matter of Justification were not entirely similar, yet they both made this doctrine the central teaching of their reforms. They both recognized that bad theology leads to erroneous practice, so they both focused on correcting what they perceived to be false and erroneous teachings of the gospel.

Huss' theology was strongly centered on Christ and His love for fallen humanity. For Huss, Christ' main purpose is to heal and restore humanity from sin. Huss believed that infant baptism takes away the initial sin. However, the man's depraved nature leads him to continue to consent to sinful desires.⁶⁴

How does one respond to God, if a soul is so depraved in sin that it cannot help but fall? Huss believed that while one part of human mind yearns for depravity there is yet one part of the mind, which desires righteousness. Only divine grace can enable the man to respond to the call of God. However, the individual can reject the call of God. There is no concept of irresistible grace in Huss. The word "predestination" does not appear in corpus of Huss' writings or in the writings of any Czech reformer.⁶⁵ The mystery why some accept God's grace and some don't lays in the individual choice—the mystery of iniquity.⁶⁶

Huss claimed that God made his channels of grace sufficiently available for humans to develop faith and to obtain salvation. For Huss, the Holy Communion and the Holy Scriptures were these "channels" of grace by

⁶⁴ Sermon for Advent III in *Magistri Iohannis Hus Opera Omnia* 22 vols. edited by Aneska Schmidtova (Prague: Academia scientiarum bohemo-slovaca, 1971), 7:39.

⁶⁵ Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 41.

⁶⁶ John Huss, *Super IV Sententiarum* edited by Vaclav Flajshans, 3 vols. (Prague: Bursik and Vilimek, (1904-1907), 1: 167-168, 177, 344, 623. See also his sermon "Spiritum Nolite Extinguere" in *Iohannes Hus Positiones* edited by Aneska Schmidtova (Prague: Statni Pedagogicki Nakladitevstvi, 1958), 141-143.

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which the individual is *strengthened* to respond to the call of God.⁶⁷ The sacraments, just like the Scriptures, are the *channels* of prevenient grace that lead a person towards personal and earnest confession and repentance. Taking sacraments or uttering the words of repentance—even on one's deathbed—was not in itself enough for salvation. The sacraments merely enable the person to receive a true repentance. The disposition of the heart saves the individual.⁶⁸

The divine means of grace (scripture and sacraments) enable the individual to obtain faith necessary for repentance. The faith comes from hearing the word of God, claimed Huss, citing Apostle Paul.⁶⁹ A soul awakens under such influence of divine grace and has a *choice* whether to accept God's call or not. If the individual yields to the call of God, the penitent becomes filled with the Holy Spirit and with love for God.⁷⁰ Individual response to the grace of God is what is needed.⁷¹

Only such individuals can be filled with the Holy Spirit and perform the good works. Stimulated by grace and faith a believer grows in obedience to Christ. Huss held with the Apostle James that a true faith always bears good fruit and a faith without evidence of good works of charity is not a true faith.⁷² Fudge summarizes Huss' view on works: "Hus stressed the value of works. . . however, Hus emphasized that only God could provide the ability to live in righteousness, otherwise it might be assumed that humans could perform sufficiently so as to merit salvation on their own terms, an idea Hus deplored."⁷³

⁶⁷ Huss, *Super IV Sententiarum*, 19. See also "Sermon for Easter" in *Opera Omnia* 7:180-181; See also sermon "Dixit Martha at Jesum" in *Positiones*, 171.

⁶⁸ Huss, *Super IV Sententiarum*, 598-601.

⁶⁹ Huss, *Super IV Sententiarum*, 452-454. See also "Sermon for Epiphany" in *Opera Omnia* 7:74-75.

⁷⁰ Hus, "Advent Sermon" in *Opera Omnia* 7:66; See also Fudge. 42-43.

⁷¹ Hus, "Sermon before the Synod"(1407) in Matthias F. Illyricus, *Historia et Monumenta Ioannis Hus etque Hieronymi Pragensis* 2 vols (Nürnberg: Montanus et Neuberus, 1715), 2:52.

⁷² Hus, *Commentary on James* in Illyricus, *Historia et Monumenta* 2:204-208; see also *Super IV Sententiarum*, 6, 45-65 and 453-455.

⁷³ Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 44, commenting on Hus, *Historia et Monumenta* 2:202-203 and 194-195.

Use of Pictures to Teach Truth

The 16th century reformers, especially those in Germany, made much use of pictures to transmit their messages to the population that was for the most part illiterate. This strategy of using pictures was first employed by the reformers in Bohemia. Behind the famous Bethlehem chapel where Huss served as rector was a residential quarters for poor students with an extensive hospice called Margaret College. The chapel was decorated with several pictures decorated in groups of two. In one picture was the Pope sitting in resplendent attire atop a large horse. The opposite picture showed Jesus carrying a cross.

The second picture shows the Emperor Constantine and Ludwig greeting the Pope in the city of Rome, a palace, the state with all its glory and power. Then Constantine places a crown on his head, clothes him in purple and then helps him up on his horse. The opposite picture showed Jesus before Pilate being abused and a crown of thorns placed on his head. In a third picture the Pope is depicted as sitting on his horse and his feet being kissed, in contrast Christ is kneeling down, washing the disciples feet. The people noted the contrast and concluded that the pompous pontiff must indeed be “the one who acts contrary to Christ,” or shortly—the antichrist.⁷⁴

Huss also used similar motifs in his sermons, condemning the pride of the Papacy and denouncing the veneration of the Pope as blasphemy.⁷⁵

The Council of Constance 1415

This Council was called to deal with three major issues:

1. To put an end to the papal schism that had torn the church apart for 36 years.
2. Reform the state of religion, which had suffered great because of the chronic strife and schism.
3. To suppress heresy.⁷⁶

John Huss was invited to appear before the Council and under the safe-conduct issued by Emperor Sigismund of Germany he journeyed to

⁷⁴ Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 65.

⁷⁵ Huss, *Postill in Opera Omnia 2*: 68, 178-179, 326.

⁷⁶ Edward Peters, *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 286-289; See also Philip Stump, *The Reforms of the Council of Constance (1414–1418)*. (New York: Brill, 1994).

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Constance. On his arrival he was greeted graciously by Pope John XXIII. "Pope John XXIII, who was trembling for fear of his own safety, received him graciously. He solemnly declared: "Though John Huss had killed my own brother he should be safe."⁷⁷

John XXIII had two rival Popes to contend with—Gregory XII and Benedict XIII. (They were all three subsequently deposed by the council, and Martin V. elected in their place). To prevent or postpone his own deposition, Pope John entered upon the persecution and suppression of heresy, an object, which he felt would unite, for the time at least, all the rival factions of the council.⁷⁸

The enemies of Huss had preceded him and placed charges of heresies against him. Summoned before the Pope and Cardinals he demanded to be arraigned before the entire council, nevertheless he complied saying, "I shall put my trust in our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and shall be more happy to die for his glory than to live denying the truth."⁷⁹

In spite of the emperor's safe conduct, Huss was arrested and put in a dungeon described by the author in the following way, "In this loathsome vault—its walls reeking with damp, and so dark that only for a short time each day was he able to read by the feeble light struggling through an aperture in the roof—for well nigh eight weary months, with irons on his legs, and fastened by a chain to the wall, the valiant confessor languished, and only escaped from its endurance through the door of martyrdom."⁸⁰

Enduring Influence of John Huss

Augustine, Bernard, Luther and others, exercised their influence by their lives and unity. Huss chiefly by his time in prison and the flames. Paul's death was an incident in his career. In dying Huss accomplished more than he did by living.⁸¹

Schaff asserts that there were three great institutions of medieval Catholics in the papal monarchy, the church, and the Inquisition. John Huss belonged to a group of individuals in five different groups that belonged to

⁷⁷ Herbert Workman (ed.), *The Letters of John Hus*, 157.

⁷⁸ Joelle Rollo-Koster and Thomas M. Izbicki (eds.), *A Companion to the Great Western Schism (1378-1417)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 241-244.

⁷⁹ Withrow, *Beacon Lights of the Reformation*, 47.

⁸⁰ Withrow, *Beacon Lights of the Reformation*, 47.

⁸¹ David Schaff, *John Huss, His Life, Teaching and Death after Five Hundred Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 2.

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one of them. He attacked all three of these institutions. Huss was essentially following a movement which recognized the supreme authority of scripture and the right of conscience.⁸²

Wycliffe and Huss were considered the arch heretics of this period who opposed these three medieval constructions. They contested the proposition that what the visible church teaches must be believed because the church teaches it. They turned away from an infallible pope and an infallible visible church to the living Christ who rules personally in the hearts of believers and the scripture. They questioned and denied the church's right to punish heretics with physical punishment. In one sense Huss was setting in motion the idea of religious freedom that would become a hallmark of modern Protestant Christianity.⁸³

Conclusion

Was Jan Hus a forerunner of the Protestant reformation, did he anticipate the reformation—absolutely. Through his teachings on the supreme authority of scriptures he challenged and defied the then unchallenged authority of the papacy and the church by providing an alternative authority. This position would become one of the central foundational teachings of the 16th century reformers. Huss also, like the Protestant reformers, recognized the need to release the scriptures from the control of the scholars, the church, and the language of Latin by making the scriptures available to the people in their own language. This was then reinforced by his exposition of those scriptures in the Czech language.

Huss' boldness as a reformer was even more evident in his redefinition of the church. Building on his major reform of making the scriptures his supreme authority, (although he did not completely disregard all that he had been taught about the church), he discarded much of what the scholars and the church taught about what or who is the church. Going directly to the scriptures, he sought to define the church based on the teachings of the Gospel and the Epistles. His biblical exposition on the nature of the church was in direct contradiction with many of the prevailing views. His views shook the very foundation upon which the Catholic Church was established. His adversaries rightly recognized that the teachings of Huss endangered the very existence of the church. Huss himself did not grasp the far-reaching

⁸² Withrow, *Beacon Lights of the Reformation*, 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9.

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implications of his teachings, but the Protestant reformers would carry out Huss' teachings to their logical conclusion. John Huss had a profound and far reaching influence on the Protestant reformation that few scholars would deny.

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