

Lecture Two  
[Late Medieval Period, Frederick II, John Wyclif]

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Last Sunday evening we saw that at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the conditions were somewhat as follows. On the one hand the church and the nobility as rulers, the Pope at the head, the controller of both temporal and spiritual swords, the great vicar: regent of God upon Earth, empowered with a supernatural right to rule and control the affairs of men here and apparently hereafter. On the other hand, there was the vast multitude of serfs who had but little share in the honor and glory of fighting, and the dividing of spoils of battle for the glory of God and the degrading luxury of the church. These were the facts. The Pope ruled by Divine right and with the sanction of Christ, therefore, every good churchman would have said, things are all right. God is still at Rome.

But when such a situation presents itself there is always someone who can come to the front and cry, "I deny the facts."

Within these very institutions themselves there was developing a spirit which in its maturity was to cut to the very roots of the entire machine, and leave it standing as an empty shell at the milestone which marks the rise and supremacy of the modern world. When Pope Leo III placed the crown upon the head of Charlemagne on Christmas day in the year 800, he was transferring to Germany a power which in the course of a few hundred years was destined to bring about the destruction of the papacy.

This same Charlemagne had something of the modern world in him. He had felt the effects of that educational impetus which Greece gave to the modern world, and made some attempts at establishing a school for the pursuit of learning.

The crusades were in a way the result of this inquiring spirit which was working up a tremendous fermentation in the midst of these years which we call the dark ages. To conceive of this idea of sending an army to the East to wrest the Holy Sepulcher from the hands of the heathen was indeed the beginning of that great movement which has been characterized by Protestantism whose watchword is now as it always has been, "Back to Jesus."

It is a strange way that people have of thinking that the wagon pushes the horse. That great re-awakening of intellectual activity which was about to burst upon Europe, and usher in the new world was but a more complete, and more fully developed expression of that same spirit which led Charlemagne to found a school in the ninth century, and sent the thousands on their perilous journeys to the city of Jerusalem in the great crusades. In its later developments we shall see how this same spirit has been working the great reforms of the centuries. Tonight we shall deal with its flowering in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

When you see a man standing seemingly braced against a door, and at the same time loudly proclaiming that there is nothing behind the door that he does not want you to see, it arouses your suspicions. When you see a man like Pope Boniface VIII standing against the door which guards the secrets upon which his authority rests, and loudly proclaiming that "both swords, the spiritual and material are in the power the church; the one, indeed, to be wielded for the church, the other by the church; the one by the hand of the priest, the other by the hand of the kings and knight, but at the will and sufferance of the priest." You strongly suspect that some inerrant person has been bold enough "to deny the facts."

This is really what had happened, and in no small degree this habit of denying the facts of the Pope's authority was so in the atmosphere that Boniface VIII was led to make his famous announcement of 1302 as a protest against this inerrancy.

In the year 1076 occurred that dramatic scene at Canossa when Henry IV<sup>1</sup> stood in the bitter cold for three days outside the courtyard of the castle waiting for the great Pope Gregory VII to give him absolution, and remove the ban of excommunication. This apparently great victory for the papacy was not without its disadvantage as later events show. But from this event which is entirely in keeping with medieval life of obedience and submission to authority, I wish to pass to a series of events connected with the first man who could deny "the facts." This was Frederick II.

Frederick II, son of Henry VI was placed under the guardianship of Pope Innocent III by his mother just before her death. His education was carried on in Sicily, and nowhere in Europe could a youth of his age find a better atmosphere. "The beginnings of modern culture were just making themselves felt in the keenly intelligent populations of southern Europe. The literature of the troubadours, dealing as it did with the subjects of known life as appeared to the sole interest of religion, had found its way into Sicily." (Emerton<sup>2</sup>).

In this atmosphere the young prince was reared. Perhaps it was this influence, and perhaps it was his intimate relations with Pope Innocent III his guardian, and perhaps it was simply that he absorbed the spirit of the new life that was about him. Whatever may have been the cause, we see in Frederick II something of newness and freshness that has not appeared before.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry IV (1050-1106), King of Germany from 1054 until 1105, and the Holy Roman Emperor from 1084 until 1105. He was involved in the disputes with the Popes over the claim of European monarchs to control. Pope Gregory VII (1015-1085; Pope 1073-1085) held the position of the overarching power of the Papacy. In 1080 Clement III (1029-1100; Pope or "Antipope" 1080-1100) was elected Pope—or Antipope—in opposition to Pope Gregory and in opposition to this position concerning the European monarchs. Pope Gregory excommunicated Henry, and Henry took a penitential walk to Canossa in 1076 to seek there the Pope's absolution, in which he was successful. However, he continued to appoint high-ranking clerics and was again ex-communicated in 1080.

Ultimately Clement III crowned Henry Holy Roman Emperor in 1084.

<sup>2</sup> Ephraim Emerton (1851-1935), author of *Mediaeval Europe (814-1300)*. Boston: Ginn & Co., 1895. This quote is from page 323.

Innocent III was dead.<sup>3</sup> Honorius III retained his place in St. Peter's chair, but a few short months.<sup>4</sup> Gregory IX, Pope from 1227-1241,<sup>5</sup> was of such a metal as to test the real worth of Frederick. Frederick was busily engaged in bringing together the elements of the Empire. The Papacy feared the outcome of this movement, and gained the promise of Frederick for a 5<sup>th</sup> crusade. This promise had been of long standing and Frederick had delayed for one reason or another until shortly after the accession of Gregory IX. The Pope excommunicated him for not going on the crusade. Little attention was paid to this action, and in due time, when Frederick had completed his plans at home, he set out on the crusade. He did this without making peace with the Pope, and thus in defiance of the Pope. Having been anathematized for not going, he was now doubly anathematized for going. He paid little or no attention to the Pope, but continued on his own way. Prof. Emerton says,

According to the traditions of the crusading period, the business of the crusader was to fight the infidel; no matter where or how or at what sacrifice of the real interests of Christendom, fight he must. Frederick on the other hand was man enough to see that fighting was not likely to do more for Christianity in the East than it already had done, namely to waste thousands of lives, and millions of treasure in the fruitless struggle, and so he made a peace, the most advantageous act for Christian interests that had yet taken place in the course of the crusades. Here was another cause for papal wrath; the man who treated with the infidel must be a sort of infidel himself. So Frederick was anathematized for this, and was forced to justify himself again in the eyes of Europe, by declaring his innocence

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Innocent III, born Lotario del Conti di Segni (1160-1216), was head of the Catholic Church from 1198 until his death in 1216.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Honorius III, born Cencio Savelli, (1148-1227), was head of the Catholic Church from 1216 until his death in 1227.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Gregory IX, born Ugolino dei Conti di Segni, (c. 1145-1241), was head of the Catholic Church from 1227 until his death in 1241.

of all infidelity and heresy. Not he, so he declared, but the Pope was the real heretic. (Emerton, Med. Europe, p. 346).

So you see we are dealing with a new kind of a man in Frederick II. He apparently did not care a whit for the excommunications of Gregory IX, and dared to face the wrath of the rule of the material and spiritual sword. He was a man who could and did "deny the facts" of the Papacy. I said that he denied "the facts," as the young debater said when his fine theory and mass of oratory had been laid low by a few cold facts. In point of truth the Papacy and all medieval life, the Empire, the philosophy, theology and all the rest were built upon a theory. This theory they recognized as true, and tried to make facts conform to it. Now just what Frederick did was this. The theory are thus and so, according to theory the Emperor is controlled by the Pope, but as a matter of actual fact, I, Frederick II by virtue of my ability, am in control. These are the facts, and your theory can do what it pleases with them. You see this is the gem of modern life. Make our theories out of facts, and not facts out of theories. Frederick II makes the appearance of commonsense as a fact of life.

Here and there all over Europe there were evidences of this new life. Dante was half old, and half new. Part of his writings were in Latin, part in Italian. The Waldenses heretics,<sup>6</sup> who without any great organization, but by simple living tried to enter into the spirit of the early apostolic church, denied the authority of the Church, and based their denials upon the Bible itself. I might speak of the Free States of Southern France, and the rise of the middle class, or the increasing evidence of a national consciousness, but instead I am going to turn to the events of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in England for here we get a vivid picture of what was happening and what was about to happen all over Europe.

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<sup>6</sup> The Waldenses were a movement that started in the late twelfth century; their founding is attributed to Peter Waldo (c. 1140-c. 1205), a wealthy merchant from Lyon who gave away his property around 1173, preaching apostolic poverty as the way to perfection. The teaching of this group came into conflict with the Catholic Church and by 1215 they were declared heretical.

I pass now to speak of one of the great ones of history, who felt and gave expression to the new life that was making itself felt. This man is John Wyclif, born about 1320, and died 1384, Dec. 31<sup>st</sup>.

Of the uncertainties of his early life we care but little. He entered into the advantages of comfortable circumstances. Attended lectures at Oxford, Balliol College, where many of the heretics have received their training. His position in the reforms of the 14<sup>th</sup> century reminds one often of the position which Count Tolstoi [sic] occupies in Russia. He was of the nobility, yet he was the champion of reform regardless of class. His final doctrines were the product of his life-long experience, and in marked contrast to his attitude in his early life, towards these momentous problems.

I wish to speak of two or three incidents in his life as showing the tendencies of the time, and his particular position. The relations between the Papacy and the English Government had been at high tension for years. The residence of the Papacy at Avignon which began as far back as 1309 had tended to create the suspicion of French alliance. The taxes and tithes paid to the Papacy were begrudgingly carried across the channel. In 1366 the payment of 1,000 marks which had been promised by John was refused. In 1377 the question was raised as to whether or not the payment of Peter's pence should continue. Into this movement against the Church John Wyclif entered. In 1374 he was sent as one of six commissioners to treat with commissioners of the Pope upon the points of difference. Just what the events of this conference were have never been fully disclosed.<sup>7</sup> But the events of the next few years show the action of Wyclif.

In 1376 his direct attacks on the pretensions of the Papacy caused a great stir in England and brought down upon

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<sup>7</sup> On the reverse side of one of the sheets of this manuscript the following sentence is written and crossed out, "Already a Lecturer of Divinity at Oxford, and Chaplain to the King, he was sent probably in 1374 as one of six commissioners to meet and confer with delegates from the Pope."

him the wrath of his fellow laborers in the Church. The English hierarchy under the leadership of Arch Bishop of Canterbury summoned him to appear at St. Paul's London to answer charges of heresy. This convocation was disturbed by riot, and ended without action. While this represented the attitude of the English hierarchy, the Pope's reply to Wyclif's activities was manifested by the 5 Papal Bulls of 1377 condemning him as a heretic and commanding him to appear before the Pope within three months. As a result of this action Wyclif felt the pressure of authority on all sides, and was forced to the logical conclusion of his positions. In reply to the charges he again asserts the truths of his positions. In this document he says,

To begin with I make my public profession, as I have often done elsewhere, professing and claiming with my whole heart to be, by the grace of God, a sound Christian, and that so far as I am able, whilst there is breath in my body, I speak forth and defend the law of Christ. Furthermore, if, by ignorance or any other cause, I fall short in this, I beseech my God for pardon. ... I desire to state in writing my conviction in regard to that whereof I have been accused, which I will defend even to the death, and I hold that all Christians ought to do, and in particular the Roman Pontiff, and the other priests of the Church." (Cited in Lewis Sergeant's *John Wyclif*, p. 186).<sup>8</sup>

The great Schism in the Papacy and the political situation in England prevented the complete execution of the Bulls, and Wyclif remained at large. As a matter of fact the events of the ten years of Wyclif's life in public affairs forced him to the conclusion that to bring about the reforms which everyone saw were needed, he must depend upon forces outside the established order. This is a general principle of all great reform. He saw that no great reform could be accomplished except through the influence of laymen. He had come to a point where he saw the necessity of recognizing the facts of life, and making theories that recognize facts. In regard to the Papal

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis Sergeant (1841-1902), *John Wyclif, Last of the School Men and First of the English Reformed*, 1893.

claims to supernatural authority he said, "The right to govern depends on good government; there is no moral constraint to pay tax or tithe to bad rulers, either in the church or in the state; it is permitted to put an end to tyranny, to punish or depose unjust rulers, and to resume the wealth which the clergy have divested from the poor."

Left now without the machinery of [the] Church to support him, he turned to the most natural method of reform imaginable. He gathered about him those who believed in his doctrines and sent them out preaching upon their own responsibility, commending themselves unto the people by the purity of their personality, and their appeal to truth. Right here in these poor priests of Wyclif's we find the beginning of the Protestant movement. Our attentions will be called to them again. It is sufficient to say that here is the leaven of a great movement. The authority of the Church had been denied, and these poor priest went about among the people preaching and teaching in the open air, relying upon their own spirituality and reason for the appeal of their gospel.

The authority of the Church denied, Wyclif fell back more and more upon the study of the Bible, and the origins of Christianity. During the Middle Ages the Church alone had access to the Bible. Seeing the necessity of a wider knowledge of the Bible he prepared an English translation of the book in 1382. This was widely spread among the people and prepared the way for the great reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is no reason to believe that Wyclif regarded the Bible as a particular authority, but his translation of it rested upon the idea of publicity to use a modern word, as such as to say, "The claims to authority assert that the authority rests upon the Bible. Come and examine that book for yourself." One writer says, speaking [of] Wyclif's *Triialogues*,

Written near the end of his life, the gist of what Wyclif has to say on every point is practically this: that where the Church and the Bible do not agree, we must prefer the Bible; that where authority and conscience appear to be rival guides, we shall be much safer in following conscience; that where the letter and the spirit



seem to be in conflict, the spirit is above the letter." (Note, p. 385, Sergeant's *John Wyclif*)

Of the relation of Wyclif to the Peasant's Revolt or Wat Tyler's Rebellion, we will speak next Sunday evening. Cut off from all active associations with the world, he retired to Lutterworth, and from this spot still continued his assaults upon existing conditions. In 1384 he was cited to Rome by [the] Pope. Being unable to go, he sent a reply to the Pope, of which the English translation is as follows:

I joyfully admit myself bound to tell to all true men the belief that I hold, and especially to the Pope, for I suppose that if my faith be rightful, and given of God, the Pope will gladly confirm it, and if my faith be error, the Pope will wisely amend it. I suppose, moreover, that the Gospel of Christ is the heart of the body of God's law, for I believe that Jesus Christ, that gave in his own person his Gospel, is very God, and very man, and by this heart passes all other laws. Above this, I suppose that the Pope is most obliged to the keeping of the Gospel among all men that live here; for the Pope is the highest vicar that Christ has here on earth. For the superiority of Christ's vicar is not measured by worldly superiority, but by this, that this vicar follows Christ more closely by virtuous living; for the Gospel teaches that this is the sentence of Christ.

This document of which I have quoted a part was the last address of John Wyclif to the Papacy. With the keenness of a jurist he allows the claims of the Papacy to stand, but with what acumen he says that this superiority rests not upon any supernatural powers of the Pope, or the apostolic succession, or the two swords, but by this, that he follows more closely virtuous living. It is the authority of virtuous living of the inner spiritual reality of a man's life. This reply of Wyclif was as keen a two-edged sword which at one thrust could destroy the claims of the Papacy to temporal control, the claims of the Papacy to spiritual control, if these claims rested upon aught else than fine virtuous living.

On Dec. 31<sup>st</sup> 1384, Wyclif died, and one would suppose that the dead might be left in peace, but not such a one as he. Too closely had he read the spirit of his time and entered into the meaning of the seething unrest, with too great an insight had he given unto many, the bread of life, for which they longed and which the priestly powers had withheld, for the established orders to let him rest in peace after death.

In 1397 a Synod condemned 18 of Wyclif's conclusions. In 1409 his books were burned at Carfax. In 1410 a Papal Bull against Wycliffism in Bohemia was issued, and 200 copies of his works publicly burned. In 1413 Wyclif's books were burned by the order of the Council of Rome.

Finally in 1428, Bishop Flemming, by order of [the] Pope, exhumed and burned Wyclif's bones, and scattered the ashes upon the river Swift.<sup>9</sup>

Thus after almost a thousand years, if you date from the conversion of Constantine, after 1100 years of burial and slow expansion beneath the surface of the Middle Ages, we find a man who is again revealing the spirit of the early apostolic church. Upon no other ground does he stand than the ground of simple truth and virtuous living. Let the truth speak for itself and let the life bear witness to the truth.

In concluding this lecture, I wish to speak of authority, to ask the question which the people of the fourteenth century asked, and which is still pressing for solution. The events of this lecture collect themselves about the interests of the religious life. For several hundred years the habit had been growing upon the Christian Church of assuming that the authority with which the Pope, as Christ's vicar upon earth, spoke had a peculiar value in worldly as well as spiritual wisdom. That the office conferred upon the hitherto fallible and erring man a

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<sup>9</sup> The Wellcome Collection holds a fine woodcut depicting the exhumation, burning and dispersing of Wyclif's bones. See <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/she64urs> or <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/14835/exhumation-of-john-wycliffe/>.

power, and a wisdom which forever transformed him into an infallible and divinely inspired man, whose function it was to be ruler of God upon earth by divine right. In his hands rested the physical intellectual and moral well-being of the people both here and hereafter, for what was done here should be sealed in heaven. To this authority men must submit.

It will be necessary to inquire into the validity of this claim which the men of the fourteenth century doubted and which has been doubted ever since by an ever increasing number of men, and discover upon what it rests, and to follow out the line of retreat which the Church has followed since the days of the beginning of the modern world, and to discover what substitutes the Church has seen fit to erect in place of the authority of the Church and its Pope. This will lead us to consider the authority of the Bible, of experience, and Jesus, and try to answer the question as to what real authority is, and who has the right to exercise it.

Next Sunday evening we will proceed to consider the immediate results of this new movement of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the attempts of the serfs to better themselves and free themselves from their degradation and misery.

"The consecrated host which we see on the alter is neither Christ nor any part of him, but the effectual sign of him."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Wyclif, from *De Eucharista*.