

## **Module 301: Wyclif**

*Wyclif's Wicket* by John Wyclif. Introduced by Stephen Tomkins.  
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**“They say it is heresy to express the holy scripture in English.”**

### **Module Introduction.**

Wyclif lived over a century before Luther's Reformation, and wrote in fourteenth-century England. As the following extract shows, not all of Luther's ideas were original with him. Some had been taught long before, and in this module and the next, we will focus on two men in particular who anticipated some of Luther's ideas: John Wyclif and Jan Hus.

Wyclif was a lecturer at Oxford University. Disillusioned with the horrifying state of the papacy, its extravagant wealth and moral corruption, he came to reject the pope, declaring him to be Antichrist. In rejecting the hierarchy of the church to teach true Christian doctrine, he needed to provide an alternative authority. Wyclif's answer was the same as Luther's would be: we should read the Bible for ourselves, and therefore it should be translated into local languages.

But Wyclif's most controversial teaching was that the bread and wine at communion do not turn into the body and blood of Christ. The following writing is an abridged and modernized tract of Wyclif's called *the Wicket*, meaning a small gate, referring to the words of Jesus "Enter by the narrow gate. The gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it is hard, and there are few people who find it." In it, Wyclif defends two of his controversial teachings. First he briefly argues for the translation of the scriptures into English, then he goes into more detail to argue against the doctrine of transubstantiation. Wyclif was, he said, uncovering essential and life-giving truths, which would be unpopular and rejected by many.

Although he wrote lots of Latin theology, it was tracts like this, written in English that spread his ideas among the common people. His converts, called "Lollards," became a large movement, but were crushed by the King. They then disappeared into an underground movement, and threw their lot in with the

**Protestants when they came along. Some of Wyclif's teachings were even more influential through Bohemian reformers such as Jan Hus. For all the striking overlap between their ideas, Wyclif never taught justification by faith, and neither did Hus: that doctrine was for Luther to recover. See if that makes any difference to your understanding of what Wyclif says here.**

[God] shows everywhere that all men should repent, and because of this all the legalistic clerics which have been ever against God the Lord, both in the old law and the new, find it necessary to kill the prophets that speak to them the word of God. You see that they spared not the Son of God, when the earthly judge would have released him (Matt 27) and in the same way they treated the apostles and martyrs that have truly spoken the word of God to them.

And they say it is heresy to express the holy scripture in English, but in saying so they would condemn the Holy Ghost who gave tongues to Christ's apostles so they could speak the word of God in all languages that were ordained of God under heaven; as it is written, "And the Holy Ghost descended upon the heathen, as he did upon the apostles in Jerusalem" (Acts 11); or as it is written, "And Christ was so merciful as to send the Holy Ghost to the heathen men" (Joel 2); and he made them partakers of the blessed word (Acts 8, 10). Why then should it be taken away from us in this land considering that we are Christians? Consider whether it is not the same thing to deny Christ's words as heresy, as it is to make Christ an heretic; for if my word is a lie then I am a liar if I speak that word. Therefore if my words are heresy, then I am a heretic if I speak the words; therefore it is the same thing to condemn the word of God in any language as heresy, and God as an heretic, who spoke the word. For he and his word are one, and cannot be separated; and if his word is the life of the world, as it is written "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes out the mouth of God" (Matt 4); and if every word of God is the life of the soul of man, as St John says, "you have the anointing of the Holy Ghost, and have no

need of any man to teach you in all things which are his blessed word, in which is all wisdom and knowledge, and yet you are always to learn as well as we;" if these things are true, how may any Antichrist, despite the fear of God, take it away from us who are Christians, and thus allow the people to die of hunger in heresy and in the blasphemy of obeying a law made by men, that corrupts and slays the body, as David bears witness, when he speaks of the chair of pestilence.

And worst of all they make us believe a false law that they have made up regarding the sacred host, for the most false belief is taught about it. For where do you ever find that Christ, or any of his disciples or apostles, taught any man to worship it? Even in the Credo section of the mass [we find the opposite], for it says: I believe in one god only, our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, only begotten and born of the Father before all the world; he is God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten and not made, and of the same substance as the father, by whom are all things made. And Psalm ninety five implies that: The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Ghost is God. The Father is unmade [uncreated], the Son is unmade, the Holy Ghost is unmade. You, then, who are an earthly man, by what reasoning can you say that you create your Creator? How can the thing that is made say to the maker, "Why have you made me like this?" [If the scripture teaches that a person cannot even do that much] how can it turn again and make him that made it? Surely not.

Now answer me, you who say that every day you make out of bread the body and blood of the Lord, and the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, God and man: in truth you make statements greatly against reason, as is shown by those words that Christ spoke on the eve of his death (Matt 26): That Christ took bread and blessed it and brake it, and gave it to his disciples and apostles, and said "this is my body which shall be given to you." Now understand the words of

our Savior Christ, as he spoke them one after another - as Christ spoke them. For he took the bread and blessed, and yet what did he bless? The scripture does not say that Christ took the bread and blessed it, or that he blessed the bread which he had taken. Therefore it seem more that he blessed his disciples and apostles, whom he had ordained witnesses of his passion; and in them he left his blessed word which is the bread of life, as it is written: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt 4); also Christ says, "I am the bread of life that came down from heaven (John 6); and christ says also in John, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." Therefore it seems rather that he blessed his disciples, and also his apostles, in whom the bread of life was left more than in material bread... Furthermore, if they say that Christ made his body of bread, I ask, "With what words did he make it?" It was not with these words, "*Hoc est corpus meum*," (that is to say in English "This is my body"), for they are words of giving, and not of making, and he said them after he broke the bread; which he then divided among his disciples and apostles. Therefore if Christ had made his body out of that bread, [he] must have made it in his blessing, or else in giving of thanks, and not in the words of giving. For if Christ had spoken of the material bread that he had on his hands when he said, "*Hoc est corpus meum*," (this is my body,) it was already made, or else the word would have been a lie...

And if you make the body of the Lord in those words "This is my body," you yourself must be the person of Christ, or else there is a false god; for if it be is your body as your [words literally] say, then it is the body of a false knave, or of a drunken man, or of a thief, or of a lecher or [an individual] full of other sins, and then [you have produced] an unclean body for any man to worship as God! For even if Christ had made his body of material bread at the Last Supper in the said words, (which I know are not words of making), what earthly man has power to do as he did? For in all holy

scripture, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of the Apocalypse, there are no words written about the making of Christ's body; but this is written: that Christ was the Son of the Father, and that he was conceived of the Holy Ghost, and that he took flesh and blood from the virgin Mary, and that he was dead, and that he rose again from death on the third day, and that he ascended to heaven truly God and man, and that we should believe in all scriptures that are written about him, and that he is to come to judge the living and the dead, and that the same Christ Jesus, King and Savior, was at the beginning with the Father and the Holy Ghost, making all things out of nothing, both heaven and earth, and all things that are in them; working by word of his virtue, for he said "Be it done," and it was done (Gen 1), whose works no earthly man can fully comprehend or reproduce. And yet the words by which these things were made are written in the beginning of Genesis, just as God spoke them; and if you cannot make the material world that he made, although you have the word by which he made it, how can you make him that made the works? You have no words of authority or power imparted to you on earth by which you can do this, but you have pretended to have this ability according to your false errors...

First you take the host of bread, or a piece of bread, and make it [into Christ] as you say, and the innocent people worship it. And then you take to yourself the chalice, and likewise make, I meant to say - the blood in it, and then they worship it also. But if it is, as I am sure, that the flesh and blood of Christ ascended, then you are false harlots to God and to us. Where do you find that Christ or any of his disciples ever taught any man to worship this bread or wine? If they did not mention it, what shall we say of the apostles who were with Christ so much, and who were called by the Holy Ghost; but forgot to put it in the creed when they made it—the creed which Christians believe? Or we can admit they knew no such God [as the bread in the mass], for they believe in no more gods but in him that was

at the beginning, and who made out of nothing all things visible and invisible (Heb 1, Ps 102) which Lord took on himself flesh and blood, being in the virgin—that God. But you have many false ways, to mislead the innocent people with tricks of the fiend...

Now therefore we pray earnestly to God, that this evil time may be shortened for the elect, as he has promised in his blessed gospel (Matt 24) and that the large and broad way that leads to perdition may be closed up, and the straight and narrow way that leads to bliss may be thrown open by the holy scriptures, that we may know what is the will of God, to serve him in truth and holiness in the fear of God, that we may find through him a way of bliss everlasting. So be it.

**Discussion starters:**

1. What arguments does Wyclif make for translating the Bible? Are they convincing? What other arguments might he have used, and what arguments might his opponents have replied with?

2. Wyclif wrote that those who teach that the bread turns into the literal body of Christ are antichrists, or “ones against Christ.” Is this fair?

3. “You have the anointing of the Holy Ghost, and have no need for any man to teach you in all things.” Now that we have the Scriptures in English do we need no teacher? Or did Wyclif mean something else?

4. What arguments does Wyclif make against transubstantiation? How might his opponents have replied?

5. “And thou then that art an earthly man, by what reason can you say that you create your Creator?” How is it that, according to Wyclif, priests are claiming to “create their Creator”? How might they defend themselves against this

accusation?

6. What different interpretations of the words of the Last Supper does Wyclif consider? What is his own interpretation, and how does he argue for it? Which is right, if any of them? How would you interpret Jesus' words?

7. Why does Wyclif bring up the words that God spoke in Genesis 1? Is it a strong argument?

8. Why do you think Wyclif came out against the common teaching on the mass when most scholars had accepted it for centuries? Do you think his complaint about "innocent" people *worshipping* the host was a strong cause of his uneasiness? [historical note: throughout church history a few scholars had argued against transubstantiation; however, in 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, about a century before Wyclif was born, the Roman Church officially declared that the bread and wine are "transubstantiated."]

9. Most Protestants say that the mass is in error because Christ cannot be sacrificed again (Hebrews 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18, Hebrews 7:27). Why might Wyclif have failed to use this argument?

10. Wyclif argues that Christ's flesh and blood body ascended into heaven and no longer appears on earth [presumably until the second coming]. Why does he bring this up? Is it a good argument? Is there any way in which Christ is on earth today? Does this help or hinder Wyclif's position?

11. Does it matter how we understand what happens at communion?

### **Bible Verses:**

**Acts 2:1-12**

**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

**1 Corinthians 10:15-17**  
**John 6:47-60**