

Wycliff: On the Pastoral Office

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Late fourteenth century reformer John Wycliff¹ has been described by many as “the Morning Star of the Reformation.” This portrayal of Wycliff germinates from his conviction in the supreme authority of Scripture, and his well known opposition to many teachings of the organized church; teachings he held were contrary to the Word of God. Wycliff played many roles during his life: Oxford professor, political emissary, Bible translator, and parish pastor. In each of these roles he wrote extensively, demonstrating independent and innovative thought, typically grounding his views on Biblical exposition. Sometime² before finishing his life as pastor of the Lutterworth parish, Wycliff composed a short work entitled “On the Pastoral Office;” expressing disapproval with current ecclesiastical behavior and reflecting on the duties and lifestyle of a faithful parish minister.

John Wycliff wrote this tract in the late medieval era, the birthing period of the Renaissance, a time characterized by much change on both secular and ecclesiastical fronts. The Renaissance not only involved a rebirth of knowledge, but also of the classical spirit, promoting a rationalistic outlook on life. Along with rationalistic perspectives and thought patterns of the classical world, came a new humanistic orientation. This individualistic spirit was buoyed by new wealth, renewed interest in

¹ His name is spelled various ways by different historians: Wycliff, Wyclif, or Wickliffe

² Most likely the tract “On the Pastoral Office” was written prior to 1378; Wycliff is believed to have taken the Lutterworth parish around 1380.

literature, education and art; resulting in a focus on existence in this world instead of preparation for the next.

Running concurrent with this secularization was declining feudalism and the increasing power of national monarchs. Strong monarchs rose, and people developed a sense of nationality, becoming progressively more loyal to their rulers. As nationalism was on the rise, England and France were engaged in the “Hundred Years War,” with both monarchs becoming increasingly jealous of the power and wealth the church brandished within their borders. Supranational loyalty enjoyed by the church began to suffer, as the interests of both the people and their leaders changed direction.

The church itself was also in a period of transition. Centralized power was diminished by the papal crises of the day. For most of John Wycliff’s life the papal office was located in Avignon France, displaced from its traditional home in Rome. Fueled by nationalism, the controversy surrounding this dislocation weakened the papal office as a whole, with proponents wrangling for power. This conflict set the table for the papal schism of 1378 which further reduced the prestige and credibility of the church. It was during these times of upheaval in both the secular and ecclesiastical arenas that John Wycliff inked “On the Pastoral Office.”

In this treatise Wycliff divides his writing into two parts, each concentrating on a specific area of concern pertaining to “the status of pastor.” In part one Wycliff speaks to the holiness of the pastor; with part two addressing the wholesomeness of his teaching. Throughout the document Wycliff contrasts proper pastoral behavior with the failed deeds of the “four sects.”³ While anticipating and refuting potential objections, Wycliff

³ Bishops, Monks, Canons, and Friars

tutors both pastors and parishioners with specific instructions, recommending action regarding the office of pastor.

Part one begins interestingly with a combination of a charge to all Christians and an opening salvo against the four sects. In these initial lines Wycliff immediately defines the proponents and opponents he will speak to throughout the document. The reformer was a champion of the “people,” ardently opposed to the ecclesiastical hierarchy which he accused of feeding on their generosity. In the first part of this work, Wycliff’s principle indictments of the four sects are their desire for worldly wealth, and their excessive accumulation beyond basic needs. Exemplary of this behavior are gluttonous feasts entertaining secular lords, as well as the acquisition of hunting dogs, fat horses and other ornaments at the expense of the poor. Wycliff exposes the root of this behavior as the sin of pride, scornfully rebuking these dreadful vicars, labeling them as “antichrists.”

In contrast to this iniquity Wycliff calls the pastor to a life of holiness. While introducing the virtues of faith, hope, and charity as a part of this model, John Wycliff emphasizes frugal behavior primarily. Clergy are called to control their desires and limit themselves to their basic needs. They are to live exclusively upon the support furnished by their parishioners with any excess being provided back to the ministry. Wycliff supports his contention by referring to the examples of Paul and Jesus Christ. Like Jesus Christ, pastors should both live sparingly and provide “spiritual alms” in return for the gifts they are supported by. In the event pastors are deficient in their duties, parishioners are encouraged to withdraw their “alms” and to not even attend their ministrations. Worshippers are commanded to tithe, but are instructed not to participate in supporting a wayward or overindulgent vicar.

After expounding on the behavior of the pastor, Wycliff continues by reflecting on the function of the pastor. He introduces this second portion of the pamphlet stating, “the first condition of the pastor is to cleanse his own spring, that it may not infect the Word of God.” He then proposes the pastor to have a threefold office: to feed the sheep, to purge the flock of diseased sheep, and to defend the sheep. While personal example is important, all three of these tasks occur through what Wycliff terms the “highest service,” preaching of the Word. Wycliff again uses Christ as an example, setting up the hierarchy that preaching the Word is preeminent followed by hearing it and finally keeping it in our deeds. The supreme task of the pastor is to feed his flock spiritually, taking precedence “to an infinite degree” over other pastoral concerns, namely the administration of the sacraments and prayer. After providing this instruction Wycliff persists to deride his opponents; particularly the friars who he accuses of not preaching the entire gospel, pursuing temporal gain, and hiding in their cloisters. Returning to his proponents, John Wycliff advises that educated pastors should not be appointed but in fact elected by their flock, again supporting the active participation of the parishioner.

“On the Pastoral Office” is one of numerous writings by John Wycliff which earned him the designation “the Morning Star of the Reformation.” In this document we read ideas which are relatively palatable to our modern ecclesiastical tastes. Who would not want a pastor who pursues his calling irrespective of financial gain? Or a vicar who lives an exemplary life while emphasizing the importance of his preaching? Yet in his day these notions were revolutionary and radical, perhaps too radical to be absorbed by the populace. In a time in which the common people did not have access to Scripture, and had very limited exposure to preaching beyond their own parish, how were they to

evaluate whether their pastor was preaching the truth? Wycliff who called for his pastors to be educated may have been inviting disaster by asking for them to be evaluated by the uneducated.⁴ Wycliff also generalizes regarding the four sects, stereotyping them all and not allowing for the possibility that some might in fact be living holy lives and teaching wholesome sermons.

Despite these criticisms, Wycliff's encouragement of the "power of the parishioner" is commendable. His desire to see the common people served rather than fleeced by the church hierarchy is evident. Later in his life he would be involved in the production of the first English translation of Bible, again displaying his commitment to the everyday person. Even though he lived in changing times, this document demonstrates the willingness on his part to confront political forces who controlled his earthly destiny; true to form a confrontation not intended for his own devices but on behalf of the parishioners. These disagreements with his political foes would not come without cost; although he died as an orthodox member, he would later be declared a heretic, his grave and remains defiled, temporarily shamed, but to reemerge in history as "the Morning Star the Reformation."

⁴ While this may be true regarding the quality of preaching, certainly parishioners would be able to evaluate whether their gifts were being squandered on overindulgence.