

John Wycliffe

Morningstar of the Reformation

The entrance of thy words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.
Psalm 119:130

Play can be used for Reformation Day (October 31)
(Elementary or middle school level)

Background Information

Englishman John Wycliffe entered the world of the Middle Ages, or the “Dark Ages” in Europe, in the 14th century, where the light of the gospel was not yet shining for the common man. Only the educated priests and other churchmen in the established church of the day, the Holy Roman Catholic church, were able to read at all, and the Scriptures were printed in Latin, the language of the educated. Only the church leaders were allowed to own Bibles and to interpret all Scripture for the common man, the peasants. This enabled great corruption of God’s Word and nearly total spiritual influence over the uneducated people. The time was ripe for a reformation of the Church with its abuses, and to liberate the people for Christian self-government. John Wycliffe was one of the first reformers on the horizon of the European Protestant Reformation and therefore earns the title of *Morningstar of the Reformation*. The Protestant Reformation was the dawn of Christian self-government when the Bible came into the hands of the common people.

Born in Yorkshire, England in 1330, John Wycliffe was probably educated by priests. He attended fine schools and at age fifteen went to Queens College at Oxford. He earned several degrees, was ordained by the established church, and filled many religious posts as rector and warden. In 1372 he received his Doctorate of Theology, and in 1374 Wycliffe became Rector at Lutterworth. Here he was criticized by the church officials for his controversial views of Scripture in his many published writings. In 1377 Pope Gregory XI issued five “bulls” against John Wycliffe and placed him under house arrest. Providentially, Wycliffe continued his writings, and in 1381 Wycliffe and his aides began translating the Bible of the day, the Latin Vulgate, into the English language. Wycliffe became increasingly alarmed at many deviations from sound Biblical doctrine:

1. The doctrine of transubstantiation replaced the understanding of the wine and bread as symbolic (I Cor. 11:24–26).
2. The Pope replaced Christ as head of the Church (Col. 1:18).
3. Priests replaced Christ as the mediator for believers (I Timothy 2:5).
4. The pope and priests held a monopoly on the interpretation of the Bible.
5. The only copies of the Bible were in the Latin language, therefore inaccessible to the common man.

John Wycliffe made it his goal to translate the Latin Vulgate into commonly spoken English so all people could read it for themselves and discover the truth and liberty of Christ! His followers were called Lollards, cynically named by the king as “idle babblers.” Yet these men taught the common people, the peasants, how to read, liberating them to begin reading and understanding the rich truths of Scripture for the first time in their lives!

John Wycliffe continued to write prolifically on Scriptural topics, but suffered two separate heart attacks, and died December 31, 1384. He was condemned as a heretic on 267 different counts, and his body's remains were exhumed and burned in 1428 by papal command. Yet, in God's Providential plan, as Wycliffe's ashes were scattered over the river Swift, they flowed out to the river Avon into the English Channel and out to the great Atlantic Ocean, symbolizing Wycliffe's reforming influence spanning the globe and spreading the glorious light of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who would open their hearts.

Props

- Necklace nametag for each character
- Wooden chair and small wooden table with a candle on it
- Old books and a black bound Bible labeled "Latin Vulgate"
- A wooden bench with kneeling pads representing an "altar" and two chairs behind it
- A hoe and a broom
- Any other props for a church setting, such as a "stained glass window" taped to the wall

Characters and Costumes

- **Narrator** in modern clothes
- **Mrs. Wycliffe** in long-sleeve long tunic dress tied at the waist with a fabric belt, and leather shoes
- **John Wycliffe** in knee-length tunic (large t-shirt) tied at the waist, breeches, and leather shoes; and later a black robe, belt, and black tam
- **Priest** in long black robe with belt (choir robes work well)
- **Pope Gregory XI** in white robe and miter (curved tall white head-covering)
- **Churchman** in black or brown robe with belt
- **Peasant man** in tattered, knee-length plain color tunic (large t-shirt) tied at the waist with a fabric belt, breeches, and leather shoes or boots
- **Peasant woman** in tattered, long, plain color long-sleeve tunic tied with a fabric belt, and leather shoes

Blocking

Place **Wycliffe's** table with candle and "Latin Vulgate" Bible, old books and chair in the corner down stage left with **Mrs. Wycliffe** and young **John Wycliffe** seated. **Wycliffe's** black robe is folded and placed on the floor behind his chair. A hoe and broom are on the floor stage left. The "altar" and two chairs are center stage with **Priest** and **Churchman** seated. All other characters are off stage.

Play: John Wycliffe—Morningstar of the Reformation

- Narrator:** *(Enters stage and addresses the audience)*
John Wycliffe was born in Yorkshire, England in 1330. He was able to attend fine schools and was probably educated by the Catholic priests.
- Mrs. Wycliffe:** Oh John, I am so thankful the Lord has provided excellent schools for you. Now I'm so excited that you're going to attend Queen's College at Oxford; and to think . . . you're only in your teens!

*(While **Narrator** speaks, **Wycliffe** puts on black robe and **Mrs. Wycliffe** exits the stage)*

Narrator: In 1374 he became the rector at Lutterworth and studied the Bible seriously.

Wycliffe: As rector at Lutterworth, I am going to seriously search the Holy Scriptures. I want to lead my congregation in all the truths of the Holy Scripture. *(Begins to study his books and the Bible at his desk)*

*(Peasants enter stage and kneel at the “altar” to receive the Eucharist. **Priest** stands in front of them.)*

Priest: Now we will partake in the Holy Eucharist. Receive the bread—the very body of Jesus. This becomes his flesh. Receive the wine—this becomes the very blood of Jesus.

*(Peasants leave the “altar” and walk over to stage left. **Peasant man** picks up hoe and **Peasant woman** sweeps with a broom)*

Wycliffe: Oh, no; the teaching about the Eucharist is not true! In I Corinthians 11:24–26 it says, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” The bread is not the actual body of Christ; it is a symbol only, by which we remember His saving act on the cross.

Pope: *(Pope enters elegantly, walks over to a **Peasant**, and speaks slowly and royally, laying his hands upon the **Peasant**)* Bless you my child. I, Pope Gregory XI, as Head of Christ’s Church, give you my holy blessing. *(Pope walks off to stage right)*

(Wycliffe stands, walks to stage right of center stage and addresses audience)

Wycliffe: That is wrong too! Jesus Christ is the head of the Church, not the Pope! Colossians 1:18 says the people are the body of Christ and Jesus is the head of His Church. Scripture says Jesus is the only head!

Churchman: *(Gets up from his chair and looks toward **Wycliffe**)* You better watch yourself, John Wycliffe! You are saying heretical things against the Church. Keep quiet! *(Sits down again.)*

Priest: *(Stands at his chair and looks toward working **Peasants**)* Come to me and confess your sins, and I will tell the Master, and I will forgive you.

Wycliffe: *(Addresses the audience)* It is not Scriptural to confess to the priest instead of to Jesus. According to the Holy Scriptures in John 14:6, Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. We can pray to God ourselves through the one and only Mediator, Jesus Christ, as the Bible says in I Timothy 2:5. Oh, there is such a need for each person to know what the Bible says! Every man must be able to read and understand for himself—not rely on the priests’ understanding.

Churchman: *(Looks at **Wycliffe** and then addresses the **Peasants**)* Heretic! Don’t listen to him, good people; he is wrong. The Holy Church is right. The Holy Church knows everything about the Scriptures and life!

Priest: *(Addresses the **Peasants**)* Yes, ask us whenever you have a question about your faith in God. The average person cannot hope to understand these deep truths; you need a priest to interpret these things for you. *(Sits down again.)*

(Wycliffe walks over to his chair and table and sits down.)

Narrator: In the private hours in his own home, Wycliffe studies the Bible and reasons:

Wycliffe: I am discovering in the Bible that salvation is through Christ alone. Only Jesus can forgive sins and fit man for heaven.

Pope: *(Walks onstage, to far stage left, opens his arms wide, and addresses the audience and the **Peasants**)*
Come join me on a holy pilgrimage to become more like Christ! Be released from your sins!
Come to Mass every day and buy indulgences from the church so your sins will be forgiven immediately; then you will have a place in heaven. Pay the priests your money and you will be forgiven of all your sins! Come!

*(Peasants drop their hoe and broom to follow the **Pope** as he slowly walks to far stage right.)*

Wycliffe: *(Stands up in alarm)* No! No! You do not need to go on a pilgrimage to become holy, and you do not need to attend Mass everyday to get to heaven. Indulgences will never forgive your sins! You are saved only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, according to Ephesians 2:8 and Titus 3:5. But how will you ever know these things unless you can read the Word of God yourselves!

(Peasants walk back to their hoe and broom.)

(Wycliffe holds up his Bible) I must translate the Holy Scriptures from the Latin Vulgate into English so that all the English people can read and learn about God for themselves. *(Sits down at desk again)*

Narrator: John Wycliffe sets to work with some trusted friends to translate the existing Bible of the day, the Latin Vulgate, into English that every one may be able to read it. *(Opens the Bible and pretends to write).*

Pope: *(Looks over at Wycliffe in fearful alarm)* Heresy! Heresy! John Wycliffe must be silenced! I issue five papal bulls against John Wycliffe for preaching such heresy and lies about the one true Church.

Narrator: But John Wycliffe did not stop, and his translation of the Bible into English was now available to the common people. His followers, called Lollards, were denounced as “idle babblers” by the king. Yet these loyal followers of John Wycliffe first taught the peasants how to read and then introduced the liberating Word of God to them.

Peasant man: Now I can read the Holy Scriptures for myself for the first time!

Peasant woman: And I can begin to understand the truths of the Bible through the Holy Spirit!

Narrator: John Wycliffe continued to work on the translation of the Holy Bible and wrote many more things about the truths of the Scriptures to expose the corruptions of the Roman church. He died in 1384, but his influence in the early years of the Protestant Reformation inspired many more reformers and earned him the title, “*Morningstar of the Reformation.*”

Sources

“John Wycliffe”, Christian History Magazine, Volume II, Number 2

John Wycliffe Medieval “Protestant”. (2008, August 8). Retrieved from <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/131christians/moversandshakers/wycliffe.html>