

BEING A PASTOR:
PASTORAL TREATISES
OF JOHN WYCLIFFE

Translated and Edited by Benjamin L. Fischer

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ISBN: 1-949716-05-8

ISBN-13: 978-1-949716-05-4

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Cover design by Rachel Rosales, Orange Peel Design

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INTRODUCTION TO JOHN WYCLIFFE AND HIS CONTEXT FOR PASTORAL REFORM

Benjamin L. Fischer

MANY Christians raised in Protestant traditions have heard the name John Wycliffe, or Wyclif (there was no standard spelling in the fourteenth century), chiefly for inspiring the first full translation of the Bible into English. Far fewer have learned about his prominence in fourteenth-century theological and political debates, the nature of which contributed to the course of reformation in the Western church. Certainly, Martin Luther has cast a large shadow on the preceding centuries and the more halting efforts at reformation within the church that came before him. But to borrow the well-worn image, if Luther saw farther, it is because he stood on the shoulders of giants—among whom was John Wycliffe. The precise lines of influence between Wycliffe and the sixteenth-century Reformers have been much debated, but what is certain is that he attempted to spark a reform movement of life and doctrine within the English Church based on the authority of the Bible and its accessibility to all ranks of society. Even a light acquaintance with the writings of Wycliffe and his followers, a few of which are contained in this book, shows the thoroughly evangelical nature of his thought and why he can be understood as

adhering to the same Augustinian realist tradition of biblical theology that guided the Reformers.

Wycliffe's Context

Wycliffe was born around 1327 in Yorkshire and came of age in one of the most tumultuous periods on historical record. Every facet of society considered stable in 1300 had largely been reconstructed a hundred years later. From 1325 to 1350, Europe saw unprecedented economic, social, political, and religious disruption. Every structure was undermined by an unrelenting series of disasters, including flooding and famine; the onset of the Hundred Years' War between England and France; the so-called Babylonian Captivity in which a French-dominated papacy was established in Avignon, France; earthquakes and volcanic activity that produced a significant temperature drop; and, finally, the decimation of the Black Plague from 1347–50. Historians estimate that approximately half the population of Europe died in the middle decades of the fourteenth century. In one year, 1348–49, England lost such lights as the mystic hermit Richard Rolle, the leading Nominalist scholars William Ockham and Robert Holcot, as well as three successive archbishops of Canterbury within nine months of each other. Wherever the plague hit, from China to Scotland, people spent a year burying the dead and just trying to survive.

The English church was not intellectually or spiritually prepared for such disaster. If anything, it had been left vulnerable by the ascendance of philosophical skepticism in the universities. Most historians recognize that moving into the fourteenth century in Europe, a general consensus had developed around the theological approach of Thomas Aquinas. Principally in his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas had asserted the unity of Truth and Knowledge. The rediscovery of Aristotle through the work of Islamic scholars had given a stimulus to the potential of Reason to arrive at Truth. No matter where insight came from, if it were true, then it would be an aid to faith and could be reconciled with faith. Dante's *Divine*

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Comedy, written in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, registers this unity of faith and reason through his cosmic journey to the beatific vision, guided first by Virgil (embodied Reason) until he crosses the boundaries of Paradise and into pure faith. Along with Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Thomas's *Summa*, the medieval scientific model of the universe likewise synthesized Aristotelian cosmology and Germanic folklore with the Bible and Church Fathers. Everything could fit.¹ In terms of authority for Christian thought, the turn into the fourteenth century was the triumph of Reason being worked out by common grace.

But everything didn't fit. The reluctance to assert that Aristotle (and Reason) was simply wrong about something, or that the Fathers were often in direct contradiction with one another, was bound to produce a reaction. In the first quarter of the fourteenth century, revisions came from the Franciscans in Oxford and the University of Paris. First, in the philosophy of Duns Scotus, and with increasing logical consistency from William Ockham and his followers, the knowability of God was doubted. Reason simply could not plumb the divine depths or reach the divine heights.

As the arguments developed, only what God has willed and continues to will was deemed the realm of theology proper. On one hand was the *potentia ordinata*, the ordained or enacted will of God, which was evident through the Scriptures, the Church Fathers, and the doctrinal decisions of councils and popes. It was the active force of God's decrees, to which He had voluntarily committed like a contract. On the other hand, God's actions were not necessary, not determined by any inherent necessity. He could have done otherwise than He did and does. Nothing, not even another quality of God, could be conceived as affecting God's will. This absolutely free will of God to act howsoever it pleases

¹ C. S. Lewis's "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages," in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Canto Classics, 2013), 41–63, is a condensed presentation of this medieval model, more thoroughly offered in *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Canto Classics, 2016).

Him, they called the *potentia absoluta*. Since God's will is under no necessity or constraint, consistency is not an essential quality in God.

Once establishing the unknowability of God and what we might call a low ceiling of what can be thought about God and His ways, Ockham followed this logic to question what can be known with certainty, even within the ordained will of God. He divided attaining knowledge into two types: intuitive and abstract. Intuitive referred to senses or experience. We can know things—but only very few things—directly, and only as long as the thing being known is directly present. Once immediate experience and the object of knowledge is gone, we have entered abstract knowing. Today we might call it imagining. This abstract knowing is the arranging of ideas and concepts in our minds, which might or might not correspond to real things. In other words, we are naming things and assigning our own meaning to them, but those ideas or names do not reflect reality. This was why adherents of this philosophy were called Nominalists (after *nomen*, meaning name), as opposed to Realists.

In practice, then, there were two kinds of truth: (1) what could be immediately verified by experience, and (2) a doubtful truth, which speculation could produce but could never verify, and which could be only probable. According to this logic of knowing, the unknowability of God's *potentia absoluta* began to be applied to the realm of His *potentia ordinata*, His ordained will. His absolute power was so free that nothing was beyond possibility, such that He could invert the meaning of justice, mercy, and goodness. The uncertainty and unknowability of His nature entered the realm of what He had done and can do. In the words of historian Gordon Leff, “[God] became synonymous with uncertainty, no longer the measure of all things.”²

² Gordon Leff, “The Fourteenth Century and the Decline of Scholasticism,” *Past and Present* no. 9 (1956): 34.

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Although Ockham himself proved surprisingly conservative in his ethical and political writings, apparently backing away from some of the implications of his metaphysics, some of his disciples proved more radical, asserting the irrelevance of grace under God's *potentia absoluta*. God might consider an evil act, good. "God's omnipotence was used to free man from God's own ordinances." As Leff assesses, "the skeptics...in their rejection of grace, denied the inherent efficacy [of grace] and its constant role in salvation. Consequently, all standards and values went by the board; good and evil were not necessarily mutually exclusive; and salvation itself ceased to bear a direct relation to grace."³

Finally, in consonance with this unknowability of God and the philosophical foundation of experience alone as trustworthy, the Franciscans of Oxford and Paris championed an affective piety disconnected from ideas, as well as from Scripture. Since only direct experience could be a trustworthy guide to truth or to encountering God, then sacramental devotion was the means God had provided by His ordained will. The doctrine of transubstantiation, which had been given full expression by Thomas Aquinas just the century before, contributed to the experiential piety around the Eucharist. Understood as God present according to His will, and the only promised way He could be trustworthily experienced, consecrated bread was adored, treasured, and carried in procession. Bread was reserved in chapels of adoration, kept under lock and key for fear of abuses by witches.

Two other forms of devotion received major stimulation in this period: devotion to Mary and mysticism. With God pushed beyond the realm of thought and reason, the seemingly more accessible Mary and other saints could be approached through images. In this period she became the knowable "mediatrix." Qualities of God no longer deemed accessible were thus applied to her in popular devotion. She became the distributor of grace. Fourteenth century manuals of devotion call her "Queen of

³ Leff, "The Decline of Scholasticism," 35.

heaven,” “Ruler of the world,” and “Queen of mercies.” The single most popular manual addressed her as “the expiator of all the sins I have committed” and “my only hope”; she was enthroned in heaven above all saints and the hierarchy of angels. She was exalted higher than the heavens, having all the world under her feet.⁴ The glory of God could not be reasoned about, but Mary could. What devotion to Mary sought, as with sacramental devotion, was experiential encounter with heavenly otherness.

This drive also gave prominent stimulus to mysticism. Parallel developments occurred in both the East and West in the fourteenth century. In the East, Gregory Palamas, and in the West, teachers of the *devotio moderna*, leaned into the unknowability of God. Reasoning along similar lines, mystics of both East and West concluded that if the substance of God is “altogether incomprehensible and incommunicable to all beings,” then only the light of God given by contemplation could grant knowledge of Him—a gift in response to accepting humility.⁵ In short, God could be known experientially, not intellectually, through a personal revelation of His glory. The negation of ideas was the doorway to this holy experience.

In outline, then, the fourteenth century saw the rise of theological skepticism about knowing God intellectually, along with lost confidence about knowing eternal truth. Values and morals based on God’s self-revelation through Scripture were called into question because they could not be relied upon as continually binding. Experience, therefore, was elevated as the only way to partake of the divine nature or to have an authentic religious life.

⁴ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *History of the Development of Christian Doctrine, Volume 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 39–41.

⁵ Gregory Palamas, *Against Akindynus* 3.18.5, qtd. in Jaroslav Pelikan, *History of the Development of Christian Doctrine, Volume 2: The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 269.

ON THE PASTORAL OFFICE (*DE OFFICIO PASTORALI*, 1377)¹

1 - God's Offices for Cleansing His Church

THERE are two offices responsible for purging the church of iniquity. The first office falls to the king, knights, and other lords, who should use force to defend the law of Christ within its bounds. They derive their lordship and hold this service from Christ; therefore, they should be wary that they do not transgress in their responsibility to this Lord. For, if they abdicate their service through inattention or through sloth, God will not forget this trespass but will punish it in his time. Through God's chastisements, authorities are changed, at one time increasing and another time destroyed.

The other office for purging the church falls to the priests, whom Christ has ordained to widely proclaim his law to lords and commoners, to guide them in what they should do and to stand for God's law even to death if need be. In this way, these Christian knights fight by means of patience and suffering. And thus, the purpose of this treatise is to explain briefly about this office of a spiritual shepherd.

¹ Based on Ashburnham MS MM, as edited by F. D. Matthew, in *The English Works of Wyclif* (London: Early English Text Society, 1880), and with reference to Gotthard V. Lechler's *Johannis de Wiclif Tractatus de Officio Pasorali* (1863).

There are two things that fall to the office of the shepherd: holiness of life and sound teaching. A pastor should preach the ever-fresh truths of God's Word to the people, for then he leads his sheep well in good pastures, whose nurture will never fade.² Because his holiness of life teaches common men by way of clear example, it is essential for this shepherd and his flock that he live in holiness. To this point, the holy doctors of the Church say that the life of the shepherd is a book to the common people, and a guiding mark by which they should steer. Since Christ is the best shepherd, who cannot fail in his office, no Christian should imitate his priest except insofar as he imitates Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). Thus, a pastor ought to exceed his flock in virtues just as a shepherd leads his sheep, for he should be so established in virtue and in the imitation of the Chief Shepherd that neither covetousness, nor pride, nor fear of death should make him falter.

This office of a shepherd is the highest that Christ has given to any man; therefore, they must learn the art of love, and to love Christ above all others. In this case, a man loves Christ by keeping his commands faithfully. Otherwise, he is not worthy to have such a master, as the gospel says (Matt. 10:37). Thus, a shepherd must know faith, hope, and love. For if he should fail in any one of these, he fails to teach his flock well, nor does he lay down his life for the sheep against the wolf, as his duty demands (John 10:11–12).

² Throughout the text, I have substituted "God's Word" for Wycliffe's phrase, "God's law," because the common Protestant use of "God's Word" is the closest dynamic equivalent. When Wycliffe uses "God's law," he is referring to the Bible in its entirety as it communicates the absolute and eternal will of God, His wisdom, and His ways. The concept refers both to the whole counsel of Scripture and to the Truth of God that inhabits the entire Bible. See Introduction for a further explanation of this idea.

2 - All Christians Must Imitate Christ

Since a priest must be an instrument between God and the people, teaching the people the will of God, it is known by reason that when he errs in his office he sins more than other men; thus, Judas Iscariot sinned more than other common men. It is known according to our faith that a man ought not sin though he should gain the whole world, no matter how light the sin might seem (Matt. 16:26, Luke 9:25). Otherwise, we would have to say that a man sinned well in order to gain so much through a slight sin. Thus, a man must not sin even if he felt like God urged him, for God may not bid sin, since he himself cannot sin. And since it is necessarily sin to fail in imitating Christ, a man must not turn from this pursuit though he seem to be urged by God or any of his creatures (Gal. 1:8–9). Common sense tells us that it must necessarily be sin to fail in being Christ's disciple, despite the many excuses often given.

Because imitating Christ in his virtues is so purely good that no evil might be part of it, and it is so light a duty that no one is excused by appeals to any other authority (Matt. 11:29–30), Christ chose such a life to teach men to follow him, and no man may come to heaven unless he follow Christ in some way. Thus, all sin of mankind stands in a failure to follow Christ. Since every Christian has power from God to follow after Christ, he greatly misuses his power who does not use it to follow after his Lord.

Here men should beware of the Enemy, that they do not become blinded by him in order to excuse themselves, saying, "Who can be equal with Christ?" suggesting that to appeal to Christ's words is but folly. This is the most unsophisticated argument that ever came out of the Enemy's lies, for of course men must not desire to be equal with Christ, nor run on ahead of him as Peter desired (Matt. 16:21–23), but men must follow after Christ, whether closely or at a distance; otherwise, they go amiss. And this may each man do, whether he follow near or far.

And yet, some do run on ahead of Christ, and some go contrary to him in their own way. Whether for pride or covetousness, those who put themselves before Christ claim for themselves a hidden power, even if this power is not grounded in Christ, which senior clergy often do today in certain absolutions and claims of spiritual privileges.³ Other men put themselves ahead of Christ by claiming that they have been moved by compassion to stir someone towards some kind of action, and yet the action is against God's will. In such a way it appears that Peter was moved to hinder Christ from dying for men, and as a result Peter was called Satan and was ordered to get behind Christ (Matt. 16:23). For opposing the salvation that Christ had revealed, it is without doubt that Peter would have been damned if he had not repented for his sin. Those who have the power of Christ and sufficient understanding to act in accordance with God's revealed will and yet forebear to do it, doing the contrary, thereby oppose Christ according to his authority as God and as ruler of man.

Since God is the primary mover of all righteous action, many men sin against Christ by omitting obedience to his will, and they find themselves compelled in directions contrary to him. In this way men of these new monastic orders run contrary to Christ as his adversaries, ceasing to do what Christ commands and performing invented commandments under their own power.

3 – The Priest Must Be Content

Priests ought to adopt the model of Christ for a golden rule, which Paul gives to Timothy, and in him to all Christian priests: “having food, and wherewith to be covered, with these two we are content,” and perform the work that priests ought to do (1 Tim. 6:8). For each priest ought to pursue Christ in accordance with the power that Christ has given him. And to the end that he may not

³ When Wycliffe and his followers use the critique “not grounded in Christ,” they refer to church practices that cannot be defended from Scripture or are contrary to apostolic practice.

sin in this new pursuit and may follow Christ nimbly and not hinder himself, he must know that sin does not excuse him from this path. Christ lived an ordinary life that each Christian may follow, although none of us may live it equally with Christ, as he must go before us in his godhead. Each Christian may therefore run fast and yet always find Christ out ahead of him. Whether he be poor or rich, foolish or sensible, he may not fail in the good will to continue following after Christ. Each Christian must do this, whether sheep or shepherd, but if one takes up the role of a shepherd, he must walk with an earnest pursuit.

Until the church of Rome was established, this rule that Paul gives guided apostles and priests to follow the poverty of Christ in the gospels, concluding that anything a priest has beyond his basic needs is receiving his reward here and not in heaven (Matt. 6:1–21). Paul understands simple food, meat, and drink as appropriate for more effectively performing the service of God, but not as a priest's personal pleasures, making their bodies undisciplined, or bringing them honor for having exceeding vigor. And only two kinds of covering are necessary for a priest to perform his office: the covering of sensible clothes and the covering of a reasonable house.

Now you pastors beware in these matters that the common sins of priests in these two areas do not encourage the sin of spending too much on either food or clothing, since we should be pilgrims here and row wisely in this boat to heaven. If we travel with too much food and clothing, we burden ourselves with things other than fruit. Priests must, therefore, be careful that desire for more than the simple pattern of Christ does not hinder them from holding Paul's rule, for then they sin with avarice.

Priests tend to be tempted by three enemies to break the Apostle's rule: by the world, the flesh, and the pride of the devil. The priest who feeds himself to please the desires of his flesh passes beyond reason in his expenditure, which can lead to a priest's stealing. A priest sins by means of the world when he passes the rule of simplicity by too much pomp or in too costly

living, claiming that the world compels him. He sins by the temptation of the devil when by pride or seeking worldly worship he covets more than reasonable honor due to his office. Consequently, honest poverty is the best, most sure, and easiest way for a priest, and for this reason Christ held out this model between begging and worldly riches.

There are generally three excuses offered for the sin of priests. Some say that in order to maintain dignity in the world they are allowed to neglect this rule of Paul; thus, they desire worldly honor more than the honor of heaven in the state of bliss that comes from holding God's principles. Where could we find more human folly? The second excuse for sin is a suggestion that priests must receive bodily service from congregants in order to continually help their extended family. But this speaks an open blasphemy that Christ lacked understanding in this matter, since he made no use of it in word or deed. For spiritual alms [like that spiritual bread] is much better than dealing in the dirt of this world. The third excuse for priests' sin is that they must be permitted to gather goods for times of sickness, retirement in old age, or in some cases to help them in times of need. This trust in the help of worldly filth is against the knowledge of Christ, and it halts trust in God Almighty that comes by treasuring his commandments.

4 – Antichrist's Argument from Secular Authority

The spirit of Antichrist argues against the Word of God, saying that by this same scriptural logic secular lords ought to consider themselves satisfied with their food and shelter. If they were to do so, our enemies argue, how could they maintain sufficient authority and financial resource to support the realm?

Men have heard many such ape-like arguments against Christ, as an ape would argue thus: "a man's eye is in his head as a clever and unconcealed provision, and by the same logic ought his foot be in his head." This enemy must learn argumentation and