The Scripturalism of John Wyclif.

When one hears the term “Reformation,” it probably brings up the names of Luther, Zwingli, or perhaps Calvin. However, the seeds of the reformation were planted long before Luther brought them to fruition in the early 16th century. In the mid-14th century, John Wyclif taught, wrote, and preached doctrines that could have started the Reformation in England had that been God’s timing. Workman notes that, “If the details of the life of Wyclif are obscure, his influence is beyond dispute.”¹ Daniel Neal in his magnum opus on the history of the Puritans, refers to Wyclif as the “morning-star of the Reformation.”²

John Wyclif was born around 1324, in Yorkshire. He was a student of Bradwardine at Merton College, was a great student, and created a godly reputation for himself in the university. A plague fell on England, and Wyclif thought it was God’s judgment, that the last days were falling upon men. He cried out to the Lord and found solace in the Bible. He desired to make these same truths known to others, and in 1365, as warden of Canterbury College, began to set forth the doctrine of faith among the people. He was a profound theologian and had great insight into the Bible. He wrote and preached against the papacy, and contested, as a good politician, the papacy’s rights over the crown. Edward III made Wyclif one of his chaplains, and the papacy backed down in attempting to overthrow the crown of England due to these two powerful evangelicals at the helm.

Wyclif was presented with the rectory of Lutterworth, and from this time he became known as a solid academic scholar. He taught at Oxford and preached in his parish as a compassionate pastor. It wasn’t long until the papacy became alarmed at the significance of Wyclif. Wyclif was charged with heresy and was called to give testimony to these charges before the papal court. He was not condemned due to political moves, and was let go. However, Wyclif could not oppose his conscience, and ultimately set up the Lollards, the poor preachers, to take his English translation of the Bible to the people of England so they could hear and read the Bible in their own language.

As soon as the translation was completed, the copyists began making bibles based on Wyclif’s work. All of England, though, did not look favorably upon this translation. The monks hated it since it placed the Bible in the hands of people, some of whom were in fact more learned than they were. Now the people were able to discover the Bible for themselves. Wyclif also studied the Bible fervently after the translation was finished, and began to embark on a disagreement with the papacy due to his theological conviction about the Lord’s Supper. He wrote a book against transubstantiation and demonstrated from Scripture that it could not be the actual body and blood of Christ that is offered literally in the mass. When the papacy heard of this, they resolved to destroy Wyclif and began persecuting the Lollards who were roaming the countryside with their English bibles teaching the Word. Wyclif expected to be taken captive by Rome and tried as a
heretic. However, he fell ill with a stroke. Sometime later he was again inflicted with another stroke that claimed his life on December 29, 1384 while in church.  

This paper intends to show that Wyclif was the “pre-reformer” in terms of his view of the Bible. Wyclif was a Scripturalist; that is, in his philosophical and theological systems, Scripture is foundational. All thoughts are to be brought into captivity to the Word of God, which is the mind of Christ. Scripturalism teaches that all of our knowledge is to be derived from the Bible, which has a systematic monopoly on truth. While Wyclif was still a man of his times and should be placed and understood in the context of which he lived, he should still be considered one of the true forerunners of the Reformation with regards to his views on the Bible and its place in the life of a Christian and in the life, conduct, and organization of the Church.

Much of Wyclif’s thought on the Scriptures can be derived from his writings, especially from his work De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae, or On the Truth of Holy Scripture. This work, in addition to other works such as On the Pastoral Office and On the Eucharist, will be cited as they relate to Wyclif’s views of Scripture. When quoting Levy’s introduction I will use his name in the footnotes. However, when quoting Wyclif in his work (Levy’s translation), I will use the citation VSS in order to differentiate  

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3 This background material on the life of Wyclif was taken primarily from J.H. Merle D’Aubigne History of the Reformation of the 16th Century, G.R. Evans John Wyclif: Myth and Reality, John Foxe Book of Martyrs, and Herbert Workman John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church, 2 volumes.  
5 Evans, 118-119.  
between Levy and Wyclif. However, both citations are from the same work as cited in footnote 6.

Workman states that *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (VSS) was written in the Spring of 1378, and it seems that there is no mention or any reference of later Papal Bulls against Wyclif. That there is not a single allusion to any prohibition of vernacular Scriptures or to the persecution of the Lollards shows that VSS was written before Wyclif had begun to either send out his poor-preachers or to translate the Bible.\(^8\) With regard to VSS, Levy states that it represents an effort to recover what was lost, the recognition of the “inherent perfection and veracity of the Sacred Page which serves as the model for daily conduct, discourse, and worship, thereby forming the foundation upon which Christiandom itself is to be ordered.”\(^9\) Wyclif therefore attempted to set down what he believed about the Scriptures. Wyclif advanced the position so characteristic of the later reformers of distinguishing between the Bible and the teaching of the church and its doctors. Wyclif’s insistence on the supreme authority of the Scripture was not less than that of Martin Luther, so much so that it won Wyclif the title of “Doctor Evangelicus.”\(^10\)

The basic outline of VSS is as follows:

- Chapters 1 – 8: Absolute Veracity of Scripture.
- Chapters 9 – 15: The Authority of Scripture.
- Chapters 16 – 19: Scripture’s divine origin.
- Chapters 20 – 32: The superior nature of Scripture, consisting of

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\(^8\) Workman, II:4-5.  
\(^9\) Levy, 2.  
\(^10\) Workman, II: 149-150.
Scripture is superior to all human writings.

All Christians have the right to read the Scriptues.

The Bible is the only foundation for the organization of human life, secular and ecclesiastical.\textsuperscript{11}

In the first section of VSS, Wyclif addresses the veracity of Scripture, and takes issue with those who would deny the truth of Scripture because of language difficulties. It is in this section that Wyclif defends the “literal” interpretation of Scripture, meaning the sense of which the author intended. Wyclif’s adamant proclamation of the veracity of the Scriptures was in response to his fellow schoolmen who were, it seems from the VSS, calling into question the very truthfulness of the Bible and of God. Some used strictly literal grammatical constructions that were technically correct, but created unnecessarily contradictions and unusual interpretations. Of great concern, therefore, were the rules of proper and improper supposition, namely, “the difference between the strictly literal meaning of the words on one hand, and their figurative or metaphorical meaning on the other.”\textsuperscript{12}

Why is all of this important? Wyclif argues right up front that “Scripture is the foundation of every Catholic opinion, and within it resides the very salvation of the faithful.”\textsuperscript{13} Typical of Wyclif’s assertions on the importance of Scripture include: “All law, all philosophy, all logic, and all ethics are in Holy Scripture;”\textsuperscript{14} and “... the whole law of Christ is the one, perfect, word proceeding from the mouth of God, whose

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Levy, 30, and Evans, 121.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Levy, 10.
\item \textsuperscript{13} VSS, 41.
\end{itemize}
individual parts fit together to create the entire authority and efficacy of Christ’s law.…“ Stacy notes that Wyclif writes many times that to ignore the Scriptures is to ignore Christ, and that faith depends on the Scriptures. Therefore it is pretty clear that a proper understanding of Scriptures by everyone, laymen and priests alike, was essential to the proper foundation of a Christian life and a person’s very salvation. Reading and understanding Scripture as it was meant to be understood by God and his prophets and apostles was critical.

Wyclif argues before he wrote the VSS, in a debate between himself and Oxford schoolman John Kenningham, that Scripture is true according to its literal sense (de virtute sermonis), which he equates with the intended sense of the divine author. However, it was in VSS where he sets down his formulation of the veracity of Scripture, and the need for interpretation based on the rules of language and the intention of the author rather than a strict literal interpretation of the words themselves. In order to interpret correctly, though, the interpreter must be a Christian led by the Holy Spirit. Reading of Scripture is no mere academic exercise, but is a task which requires the entire human mind, the whole life of the believer. The reader must purify his heart. It takes a virtuous character to understand the Bible, writes Wyclif, because its mysteries are hidden from the proud and the unbeliever. If the Christian hopes to understand Scripture, the he must conform himself to Christ, and only then will the mysteries to understanding Scripture be unlocked by Christ.

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15 VSS, 171.
16 Stacy, 80.
17 Levy 11, and Evans, 121.
In Part One on the Veracity of Scripture (see outline above), Wyclif walks his readers through Scriptures’ use of metaphorical language, the logic of Scripture, the intended literal sense, reading Scripture in its totality, and the nature of heresy and the weapons of heavenly logic. Wyclif was still a man of his times, but there is much to learn from this section as he was planting the seeds for the reformation doctrine of sola scriptura and the historical-grammatical method of interpretation. Wyclif explains that the Scriptures must be read according to their intended literal sense, and not a strictly literal sense. When Christ says he is the door in John 10:7, he does not mean that he is a literal door, but has some characteristics of a door in the proper context of the passage. Wyclif states that “There are many such sayings in Scripture where the equivocation of terms can be observed.” He continues by writing that anyone who is unwilling to learn and understand the grammar belonging to some parts of Scripture will remain ignorant of the mysteries of Scripture, but will also “end up entangling himself in a great number of improprieties.”

A few pages later, Wyclif uses the example of Rev 5:5, And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals,” and 1 Peter 5:8, Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. While both of these two verses use the term lion to describe both Jesus and the Devil, Wyclif shows that there is no contradiction in Scripture when it “says that Christ is a lion, and the other, that the devil is likewise a lion.”

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19 VSS, 46-47.
20 VSS, 47-48.
Wyclif then considers the nature of the beast, the lion, and whether there can be some resemblance to Christ discovered.\textsuperscript{21}

Wyclif notes that when one understands how Scripture uses “equivocations,” or figurative and metaphorical language, then one will discover that there are no contradictions in Scripture. He writes that when he comes across what appears to be a contradiction in Scripture, he immediately recognizes that it is intended to educate the reader in the ways of “equivocation” and that we should adapt our speech to that place and time.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, He explains that the Scriptures are using figures of speech, and the reader needs to look closer at the context, time, and place of the passage in order to determine its meaning. He does warn he reader that one must study Scriptures to understand its language and context, and that the “Christian should not employ equivocations unless they are firmly grounded in Scripture.”\textsuperscript{23} Wyclif explains that he now by God’s grace recognizes that the literal sense (\textit{de virtute sermonis}) is the divinely intended sense, one which utilizes equivocal speech and thereby avoids all contradiction.

This is a very important point in Wyclif’s doctrine of Scripture. If Scripture were false, or contradictory, this would have to reflect on its divine author, thus turning God into a liar for having ordained Scripture which has for all of these years deceived the church.\textsuperscript{24} One must never lose sight of the fact that, for Wyclif, nothing less is at stake than the believer’s ability to trust in God, and nothing can be allowed to cast doubt upon the truthfulness of the Holy Spirit and the words of the Savior in Scripture.

\textsuperscript{21} VSS, 51-53.
\textsuperscript{22} VSS, 55.
\textsuperscript{23} VSS, 58.
\textsuperscript{24} VSS, 251.
Wyclif’s view of Scripture also impacted his view of church tradition. Levy notes that for Wyclif, a human tradition was any teaching that was not grounded in Scripture, itself the sole source of truth. “Restoring scripture to its rightful place and recovering its proper interpretation rests at the heart of Wyclif’s call to Church reform.”25 In the later sections of VSS, Wyclif turns his attention to the rising tide of papal decrees and other human traditions that seem to be putting themselves in the place of Scripture as the unique authority in the Church. It appears that Wyclif did not put tradition against Scripture as such, because throughout VSS he constantly appeals to Augustine and some other church fathers almost as much as he appeals to Scripture. However, while Wyclif was not opposed to Church law as such, he was fiercely opposed to the notion that it should have equality or superiority to Scripture.26 Stacy again reiterates that Wyclif’s view of the all-sufficiency of Scripture sharply distinguished him from the medieval schoolmen who recognized little if any difference between Scripture and tradition. This position was a revolutionary one, for it meant that God’s law must take precedence over the decrees and pronouncements from the Catholic Church as the competent and proper authority for Christian truth and practice.27 This view would naturally play out in a number of Wyclif’s writings and doctrines later, especially with regards to the papacy, dominion, and the Eucharist.

Another aspect of his view of Scripture that played itself out in his desire to translate the Scriptures in the vulgar tongue (English) for the people was his thought that the meaning of Scripture is plain even to the simple and uneducated. He certainly

25 Levy, 19.
26 VSS, 211.
27 Stacy, 81.
believed that serious study on the part of the reader to learn Scripture and compare it with other parts of Scripture were invaluable to interpreting the Bible. However, Stacy quotes Wyclif, stating, “So the learner of Scripture does not acquire the wealth of wisdom unless with contrition he becomes humble.”\(^\text{28}\) A good life was the best guide to the knowledge of the Bible. Anyone could read and understand the message of salvation, God’s law, and other aspects of Scripture. The Bible should not simply remain in the hands of the elite, but should be placed in the hands and hearts and minds of the people to read and study for themselves. This view of Scripture led to Wyclif’s efforts in translating the Bible in English, preaching, and his sending out the poor preachers.

Workman quotes Wyclif as stating, “The New Testament is full of authority, and open to the understanding of simple men, as to the points that be most needful to salvation.” He also quotes Wyclif who, when asked by a correspondent what state of life was most fitting for the man who wished to love God, stated, “God hath ordained state of priests, state of knights, and state of commons, but in every state, it helpeth Christian men to study the Gospel in that tongue in which they know best Christ’s sentence.” He also stated that, “No man was so rude a scholar but that he might learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity.”\(^\text{29}\) Wyclif’s attitude regarding the Bible clearly impacted his decision to move forward with his efforts to make it available in the tongue of the common people. No one was beyond reading and understanding the Bible, which would bring the message of salvation for all people, regardless of their class or education level.

\(^{28}\) Stacy, 82, and Levy, 19.
\(^{29}\) Workman, II:151.
To summarize Wyclif’s basic doctrine of Scripture as revealed in VSS, there are three basic tenants that come to the forefront. One is the idea that Scripture alone is sufficient for man’s salvation, faith, and life. This doctrine is not the well-developed Reformation doctrine *sola Scriptura*, but Wyclif’s Scripturalism does have the germination of this doctrine. He is very clear that Scripture alone is sufficient. Secondly, Wyclif added a new doctrine, that every man had the right, even the duty, whether priest or layman, to examine, study, and learn the Scriptures for themselves. In this doctrine Wyclif broke with his fellow schoolmen and the priests of his day. Thirdly, Wyclif, in a most basic form, was developing the doctrine of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation used in the Reformation all the way through today. While he was still a creature of his times (He held to a four-fold sense of Scripture to some extent), he stressed the proper interpretation according to the literal sense of the author’s intent. It was in these three doctrines that Wyclif can be considered a forerunner for the evangelical view of Scripture and a pre-reformer.

How did Wyclif’s views on Scripture affect his ministry and his views on other elements of the Christian faith? In order to answer this question, several areas will be examined in order to see Wyclif’s reformational views. Translation of the Bible and study in the vernacular tongue has been examined briefly above. This paper will also look at Wyclif’s view of preaching, Wyclif’s view of the church and ministry, and his view of the Eucharist. In all of these areas did Wyclif’s view of Scripture impact his understanding and practice of them.
Stacy writes, “The most powerful ally to acceptance of the Bible as the supreme authority and to its understanding was preaching, and to this Wyclif gave considerable importance.” Wyclif spends some pages in describing the necessity of preaching in VSS. He writes, “It seems fitting that in keeping with the dignity of the word of God it must be lovingly communicated to one’s brethren.” Wyclif writes that Holy Scripture must be treated with the utmost reverence, and never disfigured by false reference. In fact, Wyclif believes that in some respects, preaching is a more solemn act than the Lord’s Supper, because many people receive the Word of God whereas only one person received Christ in the sacrament. Preaching, then, is an act whereby the pastor proclaims God’s Word, and in doing so, he should take care that he does so with reverence, accuracy, and in a manner fitting for God and for Christ’s Church. Sermons based on traditions or any topic other than the Word of God do an injustice to preaching. Preachers today should take this to heart. Preaching is essentially God’s truth, and as such it must be the most dignified work a creature can perform.

Additionally, Wyclif argues that it is through preaching that evangelism best occurs. He argues that the priest should give heed to the task of preaching above all others, and not lapse into idleness, because preaching is the work which most directly produces children of God. He proceeds to show on several following pages the importance of evangelism through preaching, using Scripture. He also examines the role and definition of a shepherd to make clear that its role is one of feeding, care, and nurture.

30 Stacy, 82.
31 VSS, 285.
32 VSS, 286.
33 VSS, 287.
34 Ibid.
of his flock. A shepherd’s duty cannot be fulfilled without a good knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, above all else. Spiritual sustenance is derived from the Scriptures, without a knowledge of and the preaching of the flock will starve, and be led down the path to damnation.\textsuperscript{35} Wyclif’s doctrine of preaching was directly driven by his strongly held conviction that Scripture in its totality was the perfect Word of God, and that it alone was sufficient for salvation and a Godly life. If the Scriptures were indeed the sole source of truth, and the sole sufficient source of life and salvation for mankind, then they should be proclaimed to the ends of the earth with as much fervency as possible.

The Scriptures also drove Wyclif’s beliefs and doctrines regarding the church and its functions. Through his knowledge of the scriptures, Wyclif came to define the church not in terms of priests and bishops, but as the body of Christ, as the eternal gathering of God’s elect forming the members with Christ at the head.\textsuperscript{36} Wyclif distinguishes between those \textit{in} the church and those \textit{of} the church, what would later be called the visible and invisible church. Wyclif recognizes that we may never really know who in this life are the true members of the Church, but God knows, and he will separate the wheat from the chaff at the end. In light of this, Wyclif held strong beliefs about God’s predestination and foreknowledge that were similar, but not identical, to those of the Reformation. Workman notes that Wyclif had a lot in common with Calvin, although Wyclif, forced by the times in which he was living, focused more on the destructive side of predestination rather than the constructive and positive side of this doctrine of grace.\textsuperscript{37} Evans, on the other hand, notes that Wyclif and Calvin would not agree on the double predestination of

\textsuperscript{35} VSS, 289.  
\textsuperscript{36} Levy, 21.  
\textsuperscript{37} Workman, II:8.
the saved and the damned. Wyclif held that those who were saved were predestined by God, while those in the camp of the devil were foreknown by God to be so.\textsuperscript{38} Nonetheless, as these doctrines were being worked out, it is clear that Wyclif’s view of the church, visible and invisible, was different from the Catholic view that all of those in the church, outside of committing a mortal sin, were of the church. It is in this respect that he can still be considered a pre-reformer.

There are several implications for the doctrine of the Catholic Church based on Wyclif’s doctrine of predestination. One is that Wyclif’s doctrine, as an article of faith, had no place for the Pope as the head of the Church. In Wyclif’s mind, it cannot be certain that he is even a member of the invisible, predestined elect. The Pope may be the head of the local Roman church, but only insofar as he believes and follows the commands of Christ.\textsuperscript{39} The Pope’s position (along with the cardinals, the bishops, and the priests) is not, then, determined by the institutional status, but by the fact that they follow Christ. Wyclif also insists that the church (invisible) existed before the incarnation of Christ. Another implication of Wyclif’s views on predestination was that salvation was dependent upon God solely, and not on the connection with the visible church, or upon the mediation of the priesthood.\textsuperscript{40} Wyclif’s doctrine stressed the priesthood of all believers and their free and immediate access to God in Christ. He also stressed that the test of the predestined in God was their character and life lived according to the commands and precepts of Christ. This view, as Workman states, swept away much of the Catholic system as it was then (and even now) practiced, including such

\textsuperscript{38} Evans, 217-218.
\textsuperscript{39} Workman, II:12.
\textsuperscript{40} Workman, II:12-13.
doctrines as absolution, indulgences, the powers of the Pope, and many others.\textsuperscript{41} It was perhaps in this respect that, along with his doctrine of the Scriptures, that Wyclif was a true reformer and scripturalist.

A final doctrine that distinguishes Wyclif from the 14\textsuperscript{th} century (and later) Catholic Church is that of the Eucharist. Wyclif’s view of Scripture determined his views of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, which caused him great trouble with the Church and precipitated a clear and final break with the Pope. Levy notes that in late 1380, an Oxford council convened by university Chancellor William de Berton, condemned two of Wyclif’s central Eucharistic doctrines: the substantial remnance of the bread and wine after consecration, and that Christ’s body does not exist in the host substantially or corporeally, but rather in a figurative manner.\textsuperscript{42} Wyclif refuted transubstantiation even in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century based on sound exegetical principles, and found it a metaphysical impossibility and in absolute violation of Scripture. Transubstantiation, Wyclif argues, creates all sorts of exegetical difficulties, making Christ speak falsely.

What happens in the Lord’s Supper based on Wyclif’s views is similar to those expressed by Calvin in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century. While the bread and wine do not change into the Lord’s body and blood after consecration, they do spiritually nourish the believer. Wyclif states in his tract, \textit{On the Eucharist}, that “with respect to the spiritual receiving of the body of Christ that it does not consist in bodily receiving, chewing, or touching of the consecrated host, but in the feeding of the soul out of the fruitful faith according to which

\textsuperscript{41} Workman, II:15.
\textsuperscript{42} Levy, 26.
our spirit is nourished in the Lord.” While the presence is “true and real” it does not depend on the substantial change in the elements. Following the consecration of the elements, the bread demonstrated in the proposition, “This is my body” still remains bread while at the same time is admitted to be the body of Christ in a spiritual sense. Christ did not intend to make an identical predication, but wished to convey a sacramental signification which revealed the truth of his presence in a way that identical predication could not. Christ was employing a manner of speaking often found within Scripture, that of figurative speech, and one must look at the author’s intended meaning. Wyclif argues that this intends to convey that the bread efficaciously and sacramentally signifies his body. Wyclif would agree more with Calvin than with Luther, in that the Lord’s Supper was not just a memorial, nor some sort of physical transformation, but truly a spiritual feeding on the body and blood of Christ that would nourish the believer.

In conclusion, Wyclif may indeed be called a “pre-reformer.” He developed in a rudimentary form the rejection of the Eucharist as practiced by the Catholic Church; he redefined the church itself; he placed an emphasis on preaching unknown to those of his time; and he advocated the placement of the Bible into the hands of the laity in their vernacular. He did these things and much more primarily due to his view of Scripture. Wyclif maintained an exceedingly high view of Scripture, for his own time as well as for any time. It was this view of the all-sufficiency of Scripture as the sole truth and source for Christian doctrine, faith, and life, that impacted his own view of the Church, doctrine, and the ministry. It was the Scriptures that held sway above all else in Wyclif’s mind.

43 Spinka, 65.
44 Levy, 28.
45 Spinka, 74-75.
While he used the church fathers and commentaries, he placed them on a subservient level to the Holy Scriptures. Wyclif’s scripturalism was perhaps not as refined as Gordon Clark’s, probably because Wyclif was still a man of his times, and had to be considered in context. However, he was nonetheless a forerunner of the Scripturalism of Luther, Calvin, the Puritans, and Clark. It may well be argued that Wyclif was a forefather of Puritanism as well as Scripturalism.