

spent his last two years writing, instructing, and probably giving attention to the Bible translation. Following his death the Roman church pronounced a ban on all Wyclifite ideals and teaching and launched a persecution of his followers. The Papal Bull "De heretico Comburendo" of 1401 was the decisive note. Following the Council of Constance in 1416, his body was exhumed in 1428 and burned with the ashes thrown in the river Swift. A lot of legend has grown up about that and I will probably cite some of it.

b. The challenge: the Bible for the people

I am not sure when the whole thing began but well before Wyclif's time there had been movements in the western church to keep the Bible from the people. There were several reasons for this:

--it was thought they could not understand it without the benefit of holy orders and in their poor understanding much heresy could come...so better they should not read it at all...

--it was feared the priestly office would be unneeded if all persons had and utilized the Bible...

--the common use of the Bible would be a menace to the understanding and authority of the tradition which only the church understood and used well...

--the clergy, the lower ranks of whom were far from educated, would lose whatever advantage they possessed over the laity...

--and the Scripture could be abused or mutilated if allowed to rest in the hands of the multitudes.

None of these look very impressive to us today but they find some expression in the canonical passages of the Council of Toulouse (1229) when we read:

"We also forbid the laity to possess any of the books of the Old or New Testament, except, perhaps, the Psalter or Breviary for the Divine offices, or the Hours of the Blessed Virgin, which some, out of devotion, wish to have; but having any of these books translated into the vulgar tongue, we strictly forbid."

This was fortified in England in 1408 by a "constitution" which said in part:

"We therefore enact and ordain that no one henceforth on his own authority translate any text of Holy Scripture into the English or other language, by way of a book, pamphlet, or tract, and that no book, pamphlet or tract of this kind be read, either already recently composed in the time of the said John Wyclif, or since then, or that may in future be composed, in part or in whole, publicly or privately, under pain of the greater excommunication until the translation itself shall have been approved by the diocesan of the place or if need be by a provincial council."

And that is not easy to read so you may want to try it again. Both of these quotes are found in THE BOOK OF BOOKS, by John Lea, 1922.

Thus we may safely say that the tenure of church life was opposed to a translation of the Scripture and that in his pursuit of this Wyclif was bucking the tide and became one of those pioneers to whom the pursuit of a goal was more important than the plaudits of a crowd.