

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 68: Jan Hus: Incendiary Preacher of Prague

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## Jan Hus: Did You Know?

Interesting and unusual facts about Jan Hus and his followers.

Elesha Coffman

### Have Gun, Will Travel

After Hus's martyrdom his Czech supporters, the Hussites, organized militant resistance to the Holy Roman Empire. Remarkably, the vastly outnumbered rebels repelled six crusades and even launched several offensives outside Bohemia. One of their secrets was the war wagon (above), a mobile fortress loaded with bowsmen and gunners. The wagons slammed through enemy lines, facilitated evasive maneuvers, and once, when filled with rocks and rolled down a hill, sent an attacking force into such a panic that 1,400 soldiers were flattened or killed while trying to retreat.

### Il Duce, Biographer

In 1929 Benito Mussolini published a largely sympathetic biography of Jan Hus. He (or a ghost writer) wrote in the preface, "I hope that the reading of these pages will familiarize the public of independent thinkers with the epoch, the life, and the work of the least known of the heretics who lived north of the Alps." He also hoped that the book "may arouse in the minds of its readers a hatred of every form of spiritual and secular tyranny, whether it be theocratic or Jacobine."

### Fixer-Upper

Though promised safe conduct to and from the Council of Constance, Hus was arrested upon arrival. He spent eight days in a church official's house before being transferred to a stinking cell in the Dominican monastery on an island in Lake Constance. Conditions there were so bad that Hus nearly died. Centuries later, developers turned the monastery into a luxury hotel, the Steigenberger Insel Hotel, which Frommer's travel guide calls "the single finest place to stay along the German side of the lake."

### Stolen Symbol

A legend arose after Hus's death that, in final protest against priests withholding the Communion cup from lay people, he went to the martyr's pyre with a chalice in his hand. A chalice, sometimes a flaming chalice, became the main Hussite symbol. During World War II, European Unitarian Universalists co-opted the flaming chalice as an underground sign for their humanitarian operations. The symbol is now common in Unitarian churches, though Unitarians can claim no theological link with Hus.

### Fight Songs

Hussite songs like "Oh, Ye Warriors of the Lord" united communities, lifted soldiers' spirits, and proclaimed reforming beliefs. The Bohemian Brethren (later known as the Moravian Brethren or **Unitas Fratrum**), which grew from a moderate Hussite wing, continued the tradition, becoming the first Protestant group in Europe to publish a hymnbook. To reach a wider audience, they published editions in Czech, German, and Polish. "It has been our chief aim," they said, "to let everyone fully and clearly understand what our views are with regard to the articles of the Christian faith." The audience eventually

included John Wesley, who was amazed by Moravians he met on his way to North America. They sang while their ship was tossed by a storm, and his desire to know their faith led him toward his dramatic conversion at Aldersgate.

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## Jan Hus: From the Editors - Accidental Radical

Elesha Coffman

Jan Hus has a tendency to get lost. Following Peter Waldo and John Wyclif but preceding Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, he occupies nebulous and seldom discussed territory. Even Christian History has scarcely mentioned him since a prototype (developed to accompany Gateway Films' Jan Hus video) with only a handful of photocopied issues still in circulation. In our magazine as in his era, Hus appeared before the world was ready for him.

That Hus is so largely forgotten outside his native Czech Republic is perhaps as great an injustice as his execution 585 years ago. For though he was solidly a man of his time and place, his ideas merit broad recognition. In fact, most of them ring so true that it seems amazing they were ever considered revolutionary.

Hus believed pastors should model godly lives and preach vivid, accessible sermons. They should not make fortunes off their ministries but should think of themselves as servants (see "[A Pastor's Heart](#)"). Sounds like basic seminary wisdom so far.

Hus was also uneasy with the church hierarchy claiming final authority over worldly—and other-worldly—affairs. Now he begins to sound more specifically Protestant, but considering that at one point during his life three men claimed to be pope (see "[A Plethora of Pontiffs](#)"), his uneasiness is understandable.

Unfortunately for Hus, organizations in severe crisis have little use for fresh ideas. At such a time, "different" means "radical," and "radical" means "dangerous." Embattled institutions fire first and ask questions later.

Now it's much, much later, but the Roman Catholic Church is asking questions. As a Polish pope took special interest in Eastern European unity, Catholic and Protestant scholars started working together to reevaluate Hus. They decided he wasn't such a bad guy after all. Maybe he was even great.

On December 17, 1999, Pope John Paul II told an international symposium, "Today, on the eve of the Great Jubilee, I feel the need to express deep regret for the cruel death inflicted on Jan Hus." He commended Hus's "moral courage in the face of adversity and death" and proclaimed that through the scholars' work, "Hus, who has been such a point of contention in the past, has now become a subject of dialogue, of comparison and shared investigation."

So long neglected outside his home country and so long contested within, Hus is finally being seen the way he saw himself: as a passionate reformer with sound ideas and fierce integrity. The heirs of both his closest allies and harshest enemies agree on that much, and so do we.

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## To Build a Fire

**Jan Hus hoped his incendiary preaching and heated rebukes would purify a tainted church, but the flames consumed him first.**

Thomas A. Fudge

### **Constance, Germany, Saturday, July 6, 1415.**

The cathedral was packed to the doors. A hot heaviness hung in the air. Jacob Balardi Arrigoni, Bishop of Lodi, was preaching from the text, "that the body of sin be destroyed" (Romans 6:6). Cardinals with red hats and bishops wearing miters sat in a semi-circle around a dying man whose chained, emaciated hands were clutched together. Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund occupied an imperial throne in full regalia. In the nave a variety of priestly garments had been carefully laid out on a table.

There were now only two options left open to the man in chains: unqualified submission to the council or condemnation. Recant or die.

The stake stood ready outside.

### **Peasant provocateur**

Forty-three years earlier, Jan Hus had been born far from the shores of Lake Constance. He took his name from his hometown, the village of Husinec in southern Bohemia (today part of the Czech Republic). In Czech the word "hus" means "goose," and Hus often punned on his own name.

His parents were peasants—nameless and unknown. His mother taught Jan to pray and, as he grew older, influenced him toward a career as a priest.

Though Hus admits he originally pursued priesthood for the money and prestige, his spiritual zeal grew as he studied. In 1393 he spent his last bit of money to buy an indulgence, a certificate granting him forgiveness of sins. Hus recounts his poverty while studying at the university in Prague: "When I was a hungry young student, I used to make a spoon out of bread in order to eat peas with it. Then I ate the spoon as well."

Hus was not a brilliant student, and his university career was unexceptional, though he received a master's degree in 1396. He became well known in 1402 when he was appointed preacher in the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, a church founded in 1391 to provide preaching in the common language.

Shortly before Hus's appointment to the Bethlehem Chapel, the influence of English reformer John Wyclif reached Bohemia via Czech students who had spent time at Oxford. Hus found in Wyclif a philosophical framework for the practical ideas of the Czech reform program. "Wyclif, Wyclif," he wrote in the margin of a manuscript, "you will turn many heads."

Not everyone agreed. Prague University, where Hus taught in addition to his pastoral duties, soon split down the middle. The German masters agreed with Wyclif's 1382 condemnation by the Blackfriar Synod in London, while the Czech masters supported Wyclif's call for more scriptural teaching in the vernacular

and less deference for church hierarchy, since the Roman curia was largely corrupt anyway.

Another major point of contention was transubstantiation. The Germans and other Roman Catholics strongly supported the doctrine, while many Czechs and other "Wyclifites" argued for remanence—the idea that the bread and wine remain unchanged after consecration. Hus never adopted this radical view, though he was repeatedly accused of it later.

### **Here a pope, there a pope**

The debates about Wyclif were overshadowed by an even bigger church battle, the papal schism (1378-1417). Hus never took a direct role in this conflict, but two men with power over his fate did: King Václav IV of Bohemia and Zbyněk, Archbishop of Prague.

King Václav IV (sometimes called Wenceslaus) was vacillating, unpredictable, and probably mad. He drank far too much, frequently flew into fits of rage, and was notorious for naming incompetent advisers.

Václav's 41-year reign (1378—1419) spiraled consistently downward. He interfered in ecclesiastical affairs, committed numerous administrative blunders, alienated members of his own family, and was a conspirator to torture and murder. His first wife died after being mauled by his dogs, which he insisted on keeping in his bedchamber.

Václav did have one good adviser: his second wife, Žofie, who understood him perfectly. At their wedding, she presented him with a wagon load of conjurers and juggling fools, which pleased him enormously. Queen Žofie attended Hus's sermons in Bethlehem Chapel and used her influence in Bohemia to facilitate Hus's reforms.

The other leading man in the kingdom was Hus's spiritual superior, Archbishop Zbyněk, a military man wholly unsuited for the spiritual life. In 1402, when he was 25, he outbid other contenders and bought the archbishopric of Prague for the sum of 2,800 gulden. Though pious and well-meaning, at least initially, he had almost no theological training and lacked any sense of church administration.

Zbyněk did not understand the debates that gripped the university, and for a while he seemed to take little notice. However, Wyclifism had been declared heretical before Zbyněk took office, and as the papal schism dragged on, the presence of heresy in Bohemia became a momentous concern.

Václav hoped that if he could ally himself with the right papal contender and take a leading role in ending the schism, he might win back the title of Holy Roman Emperor, which he had lost in 1400. In 1409 he shifted his support from the Roman pope, Gregory XII, to the newly elected Pisan pope, Alexander V.

Zbyněk's job was to eradicate heresy at home, removing any obstacle to Václav's election as emperor. But Zbyněk resented the king's changing allegiance, and he refused at first to recognize Alexander V. Furthermore, Wyclifite "heresy" and church corruption were everywhere in Bohemia—and Hus made sure everyone knew it.

### **Hard words for "fat swine"**

While church and state clashed over which pope to endorse, Hus had forged ahead onto dangerous ground. In 1405 he denounced alleged appearances of Christ's blood on communion wafers as an elaborate hoax. His sermons condemned the sins of the clergy. He ridiculed the power some priests claimed for themselves when they called their parishioners "knaves" and declared, "We can give you the Holy Ghost or send you to hell."

Hus roared against such abuses. "These priests deserve hanging in hell," he said, for they are "fornicators," "parasites," "money misers," and "fat swine." "They are drunks whose bellies growl with great drinking and are gluttons whose stomachs are overfilled until their double chins hang down." The appalled clerics began to murmur against Hus.

Lashing out at widespread simony (the practice of buying spiritual office), Hus condemned Prague's wealthiest clergy—"the Lord's fat ones," as he called them—for charging steep fees for administering sacraments and for taking multiple paid positions without faithfully serving any. While claiming apostolic succession, they bore no resemblance to the apostles.

Hus put these words into the mouth of Christ: "Everyone who passes by, pause and consider if there has been any sorrow like mine. Clothed in these rags I weep while my priests go about in scarlet. I suffer great agony in a sweat of blood while they take delight in luxurious bathing. All through the night I am mocked and spat upon while they enjoy feasting and drunkenness. I groan upon the cross as they repose upon the softest beds."

The reaction came swiftly. Archbishop Zbyněk, openly guilty of simony and aware that publicized reports of immoral clergy made him look bad, took steps to silence some of Hus's supporters who had violated customary practice by preaching without permission.

Hus objected and accosted the archbishop: "How is it that fornicating and otherwise criminal priests walk about freely ... while humble priests ... are jailed as heretics and suffer exile for the very proclamation of the Gospel?"

This was too much for church officials. Spies were placed in Hus's chapel to report on his preaching. Once, in mid-sermon, Hus spotted one of them.

"Hey, you in the hood, make a note of this, you sneak, and carry it over there," he said, pointing in the direction of the archepiscopal residence. Hus was cited before a hearing. He successfully defended himself, enjoying support from the crown and the public, but the archbishop was now his sworn enemy.

### **Catching a goose**

Zbyněk was forced eventually to submit to the king and support Alexander V. The beleaguered cleric had now lost both to Hus and Václav, and he was hungry for revenge.

Zbyněk complained bitterly to Pope Alexander V, begging for action against his enemies. A papal bull was published calling for an investigation into the potential heresies of Wyclif and Hus and demanding that preaching in private chapels cease. Essentially the pope censored Bethlehem Chapel.

Hus spoke publicly against the bull, and more than 2,000 worshipers declared their willingness to stand with him against the archbishop and the pope. The king made no comment, because he needed the archbishop on his side.

Zbyněk went on the offensive. Hus describes an attempt to destroy Bethlehem Chapel while he was in the pulpit preaching: "Led by Bernard Chotek, clad in armor, with crossbows, halberds, and swords, they attacked Bethlehem while I was preaching ... wishing to pull it down having conspired among themselves."

The attempt was abortive. Plan A having failed, the archbishop implemented Plan B. He gathered as many copies as he could find of the works of John Wyclif and hauled them into his palace courtyard. On July 16, 1410, with gates tightly barred, bells tolling, and priests singing the Te Deum, Zbyněk ordered the pile of books set ablaze. More than 200 volumes became ashes.

Fearing a backlash, the archbishop fled to his fortified castle in Roudnice, about 30 miles north of Prague. The reaction was severe—people rioted, made posters ridiculing Zbyněk, and scorned him in popular songs: "Bishop Zbyněk, ABCD, burned books not knowing what was written in them."

Hus responded forcefully: "I call it a poor business. Such bonfires never yet removed a single sin from the hearts of men. Fire does not consume truth. It is always the mark of a little mind that it vents its anger on inanimate objects. The books which have been burned are a loss to the whole people."

Feeling safe behind castle walls, Zbyněk excommunicated Hus. Two months later Hus was placed under "aggravated excommunication," but he continued to preach and go about his duties, paying little heed to the bulls. He had far more support in Prague than the archbishop did.

When the pope stalled in pursuing the Hus case, Zbyněk sent generous gifts. These were distributed at the papal court, and a third notice of excommunication was issued against Hus in February 1411.

Riding the crest of papal support, the archbishop took another step to consolidating his fragmented power. He excommunicated royal officials in Prague on May 2, 1411. It was a fatal move.

Silent for so long, King Václav awoke from his drunken stupor and told Zbyněk to back off. Head to head, like implacable warriors, the king and the archbishop tried to stare the other down. The king called the archbishop's bluff.

Zbyněk played his last card and placed Prague under interdict, suspending all church activities—marrying, burying, blessing, preaching, administering Communion. Though this was a powerful weapon, Václav did not blink. The magistrates supported the king. The fight was over. Zbyněk had no alternative but to relent and declare obedience to the king.

The archbishop was required to declare all proceedings against Hus null and void. A writ terminating all action against him was to be obtained from Pope John XXIII (the new Pisan pope, elected after Alexander's sudden death). Hus and his followers were ordered cleared of all heresy, and the archbishop was scheduled to make a public declaration to that effect.

Before these steps could be implemented, however, Zbyněk died under mysterious circumstances. Rumors suggested murder. It was a most inconvenient time to die.

On the brink of Hus's vindication, papal proceedings moved to another level. Hus was summoned to appear in Bologna. The king forbade it. "If anyone wants to accuse Hus of any charge, let them do it here in our kingdom. ... [I]t does not seem right to give up this useful preacher to the discrimination of his enemies."

Queen Žofie surely prompted Václav's action. She also took up the pen and in October and November 1411 posted letters to the papal see requesting that "the faithful, devout and beloved Hus," whom she calls "our chaplain," continue to have freedom to preach the gospel.

The queen's sincerity was genuine, but the king's support was contrived and politically expedient. Žofie's support would not waver even at the end, but Václav's could be counted on only as far as Hus remained politically useful. That usefulness was limited.

### **The indulgences game**

In 1412 Pope John XXIII proclaimed a crusade against the king of Naples, who had seized control of

Rome. To raise the funds, the pope instituted a large-scale sale of indulgences. Revenue raised in Bohemia would be shared with the king, so Václav stood to profit from their sale. Three of the principal churches in Prague became indulgence purchasing centers.

Hus was outraged and preached against the practice, charging that the operation supported brothels, taverns, and priests living with girlfriends. He called for a boycott.

Hus was cited to appear before the newly elected archbishop of Prague, Albik. He refused to submit or modify his language. "Even if the fire to burn my body were placed before my eyes," he said, "I would not obey."

His enemies continued to gather ammunition, but Hus remained defiant. "Shall I keep silent? God forbid! Woe is me, if I keep silent. It is better for me to die than not to oppose such wickedness, which would make me a participant in their guilt and hell."

Seeing his revenue stream beginning to slow, the king ordered Hus to submit to ecclesiastical authority. Hus demurred.

At this point, the radical influence of Wyclif comes into clear focus in Prague. Wyclif already had denounced the papacy in strident and provocative terms: "In a word, the papal institution is full of poison, antichrist himself, the man of sin, the leader of the army of the Devil, a limb of Lucifer, the head vicar of the fiend, a simple idiot who might be a damned devil in hell, and more horrible idol than a painted log."

Hus's friend Jakoubek of Stříbro joined the chorus declaring the pope antichrist. The indulgence controversy turned bloody, and protesters were summarily executed.

With royal revenue now in serious doubt, Václav breathed an ominous threat: "Hus, you are always making trouble for me. If those whose concern it is will not take care of you, I myself will burn you." Even Žofie was powerless to stay the rage of the mad king.

Hus was excommunicated for the fourth time, and Prague was again placed under interdict. This time the king did not intervene.

Unwilling to deprive the city of church ministrations, Hus voluntarily went into exile on October 15, 1412. For two years he labored in the villages of southern Bohemia, writing books and preaching in barns, fields, towns, and forests.

Then, in the fall of 1414, Pope John XXIII convened an ecumenical council in Constance, and he invited Hus to attend. The conciliar fathers gathered with two purposes: end the papal schism and eradicate heresy from the Western church.

### **Ambush**

Hus accepted the invitation. On October 11, 1414, riding on his "strong and high-spirited" horse Rabštýn, he departed for the council. His friends warned him he might be walking into a trap, but Emperor Sigismund, Václav's half-brother, had promised Hus safe conduct, and Hus believed him.

When Hus arrived in Constance, he was optimistic, sending a letter to friends joking that "the goose is not yet cooked and is not afraid of being cooked." The next week he was thrown into prison, where he languished for several months while the council addressed other matters.

Hus's health declined precipitously in the terrible conditions of the Dominican prison where his dark, damp

cell, hard by the latrines, was filled with awful stench. Only a visit from the pope's physician and relocation to a better cell spared Hus's life.

Hus's enemies in the council were caustic. According to one, "Since the birth of Christ there has never been a more dangerous heretic than you, with the exception of Wyclif." Others insisted that the "Czechs were unworthy of the name Christian." Hus was singled out as the chief heretic and his ideas declared as inimical to the faith as the "Koran of Mohamed." To his judges Hus was quite simply a "wicked man."

Hus's friends rallied around him, imploring Sigismund to honor the safe conduct. They smuggled letters and documents out of the prison. Since Václav seemed to have forgotten his suffering subject entirely, Czech noblemen signed their names and affixed their seals to numerous formal protests over the treatment of Hus. After receiving the letters, the council in Constance cited 452 nobles to appear. Not one obeyed.

At the hearings, Hus was refused opportunity to defend his ideas or reply to specific charges. Attempts to argue his case resulted in shouts from the conciliar fathers that Hus was arrogant and stubborn.

An old, bald, Polish bishop asserted that the law was clear on how to deal with heretics. Another priest shouted, "Do not permit him to recant; even if he does recant, he will not keep to it."

Sigismund, far from upholding his promise of safe conduct, acquiesced privately in the opinion that Hus was the greatest heretic ever to have arisen in Christendom and therefore deserved no protection.

"The case of Jan Hus ought not to interfere with the reform of the church and empire, which is the principle purpose for which the Council has been convened," he said. "For myself, I wish to stand by the holy church; I do not incline to like new ideas."

In this uproar, Hus was led out of the council chambers and back to his cell. His friend, Lord Jan of Chlum, courageously stepped forward and shook Hus's hand in full view of the assembly.

Later, Jan of Chlum urged his friend to recant and save his life. "But if, indeed, you do not feel guilty of those things charged against you," he said, "follow the dictates of your conscience. Under no circumstances do anything against your conscience." Hus followed only the latter advice.

The last session of the Hus case was held July 6. Thirty final charges were presented against the indicted heretic. Some were preposterous—one declared that Hus taught he was the fourth person in the Godhead!

Hus rejected all charges, but his attempts to speak were shouted down. He did not realize he was doomed. Sigismund had already warned the court that even if Hus recanted, the recantation should be dismissed, because Hus could not be trusted.

The warning was unnecessary, for Hus refused to recant on the grounds that he had never taught the errors ascribed to him. To do so would be to commit perjury: to lie. Instead, between interruptions, he refuted the council's accusations by telling them their facts were wrong.

Pierre d'Ailly, the presiding cardinal, advised Hus to submit to the council. In a fatherly tone, he gave Hus two options: "Either you throw yourself entirely and totally on the grace and into the hands of the Council ... or, if you still wish to hold and defend some articles of the forementioned, and if you desire still another hearing, it shall be granted you." Then d'Ailly counseled strongly against the latter option. It really did not matter; any hint of mercy was a sham.

When Hus asked to be shown his errors from Scripture, the bishops dismissed him as "obstinate in

heresy." The council assembled the 30 heretical articles Hus supposedly held, ignored Hus's assertions that he had never taught or believed the doctrines, and sentenced him to death.

Hus assented to the method, telling his friend Jan of Chlum that he preferred to be burned publicly rather than silenced in private "in order that all Christendom might know what I said in the end."

### **To the fire!**

The Archbishop of Riga led Hus to the cathedral door. Hus protested. Cardinal d'Ailly ordered him to "be silent." Hus persisted. Cardinal Zabarella rose, saying, "Be silent now. We have heard enough already." He then ordered the guard, "Force him to be still!"

As Hus fell to his knees on the stone floor, praying, his books were condemned to be burned. Hus wished to know if they had even been read but was met by a volley of shouts demanding silence. Hus appealed to God, and the council declared that such an appeal was erroneous because it contravened canon law.

When Hus prayed aloud that Christ might forgive his judges and accusers, many of the fathers of the council looked indignant and jeered.

Hus declared he had come willingly to the council under imperial safe conduct. As he made these remarks Hus turned to face Sigismund, who looked away.

The council made its final offer: "Recant or die." With those words ringing in his ears, Hus turned his face from his judges and prepared for his final journey on earth.

When the Bishop of Lodi concluded his sermon on destroying the body of sin, seven bishops dressed Hus in the priestly vestments that had been set on the table. Then he was defrocked.

In turn a different bishop tore each of the vestments from Hus's body, saying, "O cursed Judas ... we take from you the cup of redemption." They removed the stole, the chasuble, and all of the vestments with appropriate curses concluding with the words, "we commit your soul to the Devil."

Hus was crowned with a paper miter upon which were three demons and the inscription: "This is a heresiarch." Accompanied by a multitude, Hus was then pushed through the streets of Constance to the place of death.

He was bound to the stake with a sooty chain wrapped around his neck. Wood was piled to his chin. Hundreds of men, women, and children thronged restlessly.

Hus was given one final chance to save his life by recanting all his errors and heresies. A pause fell over the meadow, then Hus's voice could be heard clearly: "God is my witness that ... the principal intention of my preaching and of all my other acts or writings was solely that I might turn men from sin. And in that truth of the Gospel that I wrote, taught, and preached in accordance with the sayings and expositions of the holy doctors, I am willing gladly to die today."

An audible murmur rippled. The signal was given. The executioner set the pyre ablaze. From the smoke and flames that shot upward into the summer sky, Hus's voice could be heard once more, this time in song. "Jesus, son of the living God, have mercy on me."

In the midst of the billowing flames, witnessed by an incredulous crowd, Master Jan Hus sang these words three times. The goose was cooked. He died singing.

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## Jan Hus: A Gallery of Foes in High Places

As reformation divided Bohemia, it turned some of Hus's most influential allies against him.

Maartje M. Abbenhuis

**Zbyněk Zajíc of Hazmburk**  
(c. 1378—1411)  
*Archbishop and archenemy*

Zbyněk had exactly one qualification for the highest ecclesiastical office in Bohemia: money. He purchased the archbishopric in 1402 for 2,800 gulden, plus 1,480 gulden to cover the debts left by his two predecessors.

Merely 25 years old, he lacked the education, theological training, or maturity to handle the demands of his new job. Despite his inexperience, however, this ex-soldier had faith, enthusiasm, and an earnest desire to do God's work.

At first, Zbyněk and Hus got along extremely well. Zbyněk joined Hus's efforts to curb immorality among Prague's clergy, and he asked Hus to alert him personally or by letter to any offenses he had missed. He also invited Hus to preach at two important church synods held in Prague in 1405 and 1407.

Their friendship did not last very long, for anti-reformers soon converted the naive archbishop to their cause. In 1408 they convinced Zbyněk that local reformers held heretical beliefs, and Zbyněk determined to end the movement.

The archbishop issued a decree forbidding anyone to teach Wyclif's errors or even mention the words "bread" and "wine" during the Eucharist. Hus disobeyed both orders and went on to write a treatise examining, among other things, the uses of the word "bread" in the New Testament (Jesus used it 11 times in John 6 alone). The relationship between archbishop and pastor never recovered.

Zbyněk used every ecclesiastical weapon in his arsenal against Hus. He asked the pope to forbid Hus from preaching at the Bethlehem Chapel. Hus disobeyed, saying, "Am I bound to obey the archbishop in his command contrary to the command of God? Be it far from me!" So Zbyněk excommunicated him. The archbishop also repeatedly forced Hus to defend himself against heresy charges.

In the process of harassing and prosecuting Hus and other Czech reformers, Zbyněk brought Hus's case to the pope's attention. The pope ordered an investigation into Hus's theology, which eventually led to the preacher's appearance at the Council of Constance on charges of heresy.

Zbyněk did not live to see his adversary's condemnation. He died suddenly in 1411 while fleeing Prague, having lost the support of its pro-reform populace. According to the Old Czech annals, he was poisoned by his cook.

**Stanislav of Znojmo**  
(died 1414)

**Štěpán of Páleč**  
(c. 1365—1422)

***Repentant reformers***

As a student of theology at Charles University in Prague, Hus became friends with a fellow student, Štěpán of Páleč. Both Páleč and Hus studied closely with one of their revered teachers, Stanislav of Znojmo.

The threesome became so interested in the Czech reform movement and the works of English reformer John Wyclif that the anti-reform German masters at the university formulated a mock genealogy of Wyclifite heresy: "Stanislav begat Peter [of Znojmo, another Wyclifite], Peter begat Páleč, and Páleč begat Hus."

Stanislav and Páleč, far more than Hus, were attracted to Wyclif's more extreme ideas, such as remanence—the idea that the bread and wine remain unchanged after consecration. (Catholic teaching insists that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ.)

Under an old system designed to attract foreign scholars, the German masters at Charles University got three votes to the Czech masters' one. In 1403, this voting bloc maneuvered to declare Wyclif's works heretical and ban them.

Stanislav, Páleč, and Hus all defended Wyclif, and Páleč even proclaimed: "Let anyone who wishes rise and impugn one word of it, and I will defend it!"

Zbyněk, siding with the anti-reformers, reported the "heretics" to the pope. Pope Gregory XII ordered Stanislav and Páleč to defend their thoughts personally before him. However, they were detained by Cardinal Baldassare Cossa (later Pope John XXIII) in Bologna, Italy, and imprisoned for a year. They were released only after rejecting Wyclif and promising to hold strictly Catholic beliefs.

On returning to Prague, they were true to their word. In fact, they became ardent supporters of the anti-reform movement. Before long, they were Hus's sworn enemies. They publicly denounced Hus and wrote several treatises challenging his beliefs.

Both Stanislav and Páleč prepared documentation to condemn Hus at the Council of Constance. While traveling there, Stanislav fell ill and died, but Páleč was instrumental in the attack on Hus. He identified 42 "heresies" in Hus's work—including some beliefs Páleč once held but Hus had never accepted.

Hus complained to his friends in a letter, "Almost the whole last night I wrote responses to the articles formulated by Páleč. He labors directly for my condemnation."

When Hus's case was nearing its conclusion, he made one last attempt at reconciliation with his old friend. He met with Páleč and apologized for calling him "Fictor" (liar) and "a pointer dog," but he also brought up the wound Páleč had inflicted by telling the council, "This man does not fear God." Páleč denied it and harsh words were exchanged, but the conversation brought both men to tears.

A few weeks later, Hus was dead.

**Václav IV**  
(1361—1419)

***Bohemia's weak-willed king***

In principle, Václav favored the Czech reform movement. He supported the foundation of the Bethlehem Chapel well before Hus preached there. By the time Hus was employed at the Chapel, it was a well-established place for Praguers to be inspired by messages of godliness and faithfulness.

But Václav was a weak ruler. He was impulsive and insecure, often violent, and he drank far too much. He is sometimes called a "second Nero." This impulsiveness explains his on-again, off-again support of Hus.

In 1409 the Council of Pisa tried to elect a new pope to replace the existing two popes. Václav and Hus supported the move, but the German masters at the university in Prague did not. This gave Václav a reason to change the university's constitution, giving the voting majority to Czechs rather than foreigners. Incensed, the German professors marched out of Prague. Hus became the new rector.

Hus's favor with Václav was short-lived. In 1411, Pope John XXIII declared a crusade against Ladislas, the king of Naples, who had taken Rome and driven the pope into exile in Bologna. To pay for the campaign, the pope urged the sale of indulgences. Václav supported the idea because he received a percentage of the profits.

Hus criticized the king's decision because he was disgusted by the way corrupt clerics and subordinate sellers infected the whole operation. "What a strange thing!" he wrote. "They cannot rid themselves of fleas and flies, and yet want to rid others of the torments of hell." The king, Hus thought, had no business getting mixed up in such a scheme.

Before the pope banished Hus from Prague in 1412, Václav and his wife, Queen Žofie, did try to get Hus's heresy case dealt with by the more lenient Bohemian ecclesiastical courts. This was the last time Václav attempted to help Hus.

When hundreds of Czech nobles signed petitions to free Hus at the Council of Constance, the king remained silent. Unlike Sigismund, Václav did not want Hus condemned, but once Hus left Bohemia for Constance, Václav believed that Hus was no longer his problem. He left Hus to face his fate alone.

**Žofie**  
(c. 1378—1428)  
*Royal ally*

Aside from his enemies, Hus also had many friends and supporters in Bohemia. One of the most ardent and influential was Václav's second wife, Queen Žofie, who had married Václav in 1389 at the tender age of 13.

Extremely fond of Hus, she was influenced by his religious reform ideas, attending the Bethlehem Chapel on a number of occasions when Hus was preaching. On these excursions, her escort was one of the king's most loyal guards, Jan Žižka, who would in the 1420s lead so many Hussite military campaigns.

When Hus was repeatedly persecuted, Žofie used her royal power to support "her beloved, faithful, and godly chaplain." For example, she urged the pope to revoke Archbishop Zbyněk's ban on preaching at the Bethlehem Chapel. She also protested the burning of Wyclif's books.

At Constance, Hus wrote to Žofie several times expressing his gratitude for her support. In a letter from prison, he calls her "my gracious lady" who has "dealt affectionately with me ... [and] striven diligently for my liberation."

Žofie's association with a suspected heretic created consternation in papal circles. At Constance, she was

accused of heresy for protecting Bohemian reformers such as Hus. The charge, luckily, was not pursued.

After Hus's death, Žofie openly supported the Hussite movement. She promoted Hussite priests to nine of her churches.

In 1419, under pressure from the church and her brother-in-law Sigismund, she returned to the Catholic fold. After Václav's death, she spent her remaining years a virtual prisoner at Sigismund's court in Hungary. Her many escape attempts all failed, and she died alone, in grief and forgotten.

### **Sigismund (1368-1437) *The evil emperor***

Of all the people responsible for Hus's death, Sigismund, the king of Hungary, tops the list.

Sigismund was Václav's half-brother, but there was little love between the two siblings. On two separate occasions, Sigismund kidnapped and imprisoned Václav, each time trying to usurp him as monarch of Bohemia.

Unable to keep the Bohemian crown, Sigismund angled to become Holy Roman Emperor. To facilitate his coronation, he forced Pope John XXIII to call the Council of Constance.

When Sigismund offered Hus a safe-conduct to Constance, Hus's friends urged him not to go. They did not trust the Hungarian king. Naively, Hus did.

Not only was the safe-conduct of little use once papal representatives captured Hus in Constance, but when John XXIII fled the city, he gave Sigismund the keys to Hus's cell. Rather than free the Czech reformer, Sigismund locked Hus in another, bleaker cell.

Sigismund had great contempt for Hus and the reform movement. He told the council, "I was but a boy when this sect began and spread in Bohemia and now look how strong it has already become." He was also overheard at Constance saying, "There is enough to condemn him. If he will not recant his errors let him be burned."

The burning of Hus haunted Sigismund for the rest of his life. When Bohemians made Hus their hero, Sigismund became public enemy number one.

Because Václav did not have children, Sigismund was heir to the Bohemian throne. Although Sigismund was crowned as the new king soon after Václav's death in 1419, his ascension to the throne was not possible until 17 years later. In those 17 years, Hussite revolutionaries led by another Czech hero, the blind Jan Jäka, successfully defeated several crusades commanded by Sigismund.

Sigismund himself died only a year after being accepted as the new Czech king in 1436.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 68: Jan Hus: Incendiary Preacher of Prague

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## A Plethora of Pontiffs

**With two popes, then three, vying for power, more was at stake in Constance than Jan Hus.**

Peter E. Prosser

The trouble started when Pope Gregory XI died in 1378. One year earlier, he had returned the papacy to Rome after 68 years of "Babylonian captivity" in Avignon, France. The shift made Italians happy but enraged the French, putting the cardinals charged with choosing Gregory's successor in a very tight spot.

Or maybe the trouble started even earlier. The opulence of the papal court at Avignon had alienated many Catholics. As the abbots of the church in Cologne stated publicly in 1372, "The Apostolic See has fallen into such contempt that the Catholic faith in these parts seems to be seriously imperiled."

King Edward III of England was even more caustic: "The successor of the Apostles was commissioned to lead the Lord's sheep to pasture, not to fleece them."

So the church's problems were obvious. The solution proved elusive.

### Pope and anti-pope

Because the papacy had been based in France for so long, by 1378 a disproportionate number of French cardinals had been created. Their inclination toward another French pope was stifled, however, by the rioting crowd outside the conclave in Rome. The cardinals took a quick vote and elected an Italian who took the name Urban VI. Then they ran for their lives.

Urban VI turned out to be impetuous and despotic, and the cardinals who had elected him promptly repented of their choice—especially after Urban turned on them. He told one cardinal to "shut up his ceaseless chatter." He called another a "blockhead" and humiliated him in front of his colleagues.

Angry and bitter, the French cardinals called another conclave and elected a second pope (or, according to Roman Catholics, an anti-pope), Clement VII, saying that Urban's election had been forced by the Roman mob. Clement, Swiss by birth, moved his court back to Avignon.

Catholic nations split over which pope to obey. Half the church now accused the other half of being heretical, blasphemous, and excommunicate. Catherine of Siena, who had been influential in bringing the papacy back to Rome, denounced Clement as "Judas Iscariot." Vincent Ferrer, a prominent Dominican preacher in France, applied the same slur to Urban.

Both sides claimed that the sacraments ministered by the priests of the opposite party were invalid—the children who had been baptized were not really baptized, those who had been forgiven their sins were not forgiven, the dying who had received final rites had died unpardoned. And matrimony pronounced by the wrong priest meant that those who thought they were married were actually living in sin.

Hatred and suspicion rose to such a pitch that when seven of Urban's newly appointed cardinals came to him in 1385 asking him to step down, he had them arrested, tortured, and killed.

When Urban finally died in 1389, Clement anticipated a triumphal return to Rome. Instead, the 14 cardinals who had survived in Urban's camp elected one of their number to be the new Roman pope, Boniface IX, and the division continued.

### **"I'll quit if you will"**

Clement VII died suddenly in 1394, and instead of accepting Boniface, the predominately French cardinals elected a Spaniard, Benedict XIII, to be the new pope in Avignon. King Charles V of France proposed that both popes should resign and a new one be elected, but Benedict would not resign unless Boniface promised to do so as well.

After Boniface died in 1404, the Roman cardinals elected Innocent VII. A revolt broke out, led by prominent Italian families, and Innocent fled to another town. The Roman mob, looking for the pope, sacked the Vatican in 1405, threw the papal registers and historic papers into the streets, stole all the money and gold they could find, and rioted for days.

After the mob cooled down and sobered up, they made their peace with the pope, asking him to come back and forgive them. Innocent returned, then died a short time later.

Innocent was succeeded in Rome by Gregory XII, who invited Benedict to a conference. Benedict offered to resign if Gregory would, but Gregory's relatives dissuaded him.

With no end to the schism in sight, some cardinals withdrew to Pisa and called for a general council to elect a pope acceptable to all of Western Christendom and depose the other two.

Church councils still had the potential for this kind of power, for as philosopher and theologian William of Ockham had proposed in the fourteenth century, "The Church is the congregation of all the faithful; the whole has authority superior to any part. It may delegate its authority to a general council of all the bishops and abbots of the church. Such a council should have the power to elect, reprove, punish, or depose the pope."

The 1409 Council of Pisa was impressive. In a majestic cathedral, 26 cardinals, 4 patriarchs, 12 archbishops, 80 bishops, 87 abbots, the generals of all the monastic orders, 300 professors of canon law, and ambassadors from many governments all appeared. The council declared itself canonical and ecumenical—representing the whole Christian world (minus the Orthodox church). Then it elected Alexander V as the new pope, told him to call another council before 1412, and directed his rivals to resign.

Of course, neither of the existing popes submitted to the council's authority. The church now had three popes: Alexander V in Pisa, Gregory XII in Rome, and Benedict XIII, who had no supporters (the French cardinals had defected to Gregory) and had fled to Spain. None acknowledged the others.

### **Empty victories**

Just one year after his election, Alexander V died. Rumors circulated that Balthasar Cossa, who succeeded Alexander as Pope John XXIII, had him poisoned. Such treachery would hardly be out of character.

John, who began his pontificate in Bologna (the king of Naples had seized Rome), presided over that city like the pirate he had once been. He taxed everything, including prostitution, gambling, and usury. According to his secretary, he seduced 200 virgins, matrons, widows, and nuns. He

also commanded a private army.

John delayed as long as he could in calling the required council, but he was ordered to do so in 1411 by Hungary's King Sigismund. Sigismund chose Constance, Germany, and set the date for 1414.

Sigismund invited all the prelates, princes, lords, and doctors in the West to attend. Everybody responded except the three popes. So many dignitaries came at their own leisure that six months went by before the assembly could begin. When they all arrived, the clergy and their attendants numbered 18,000—the largest and most complete council since the Council of Nicea in 325.

Constance, normally a small city, was turned into a huge armed camp. Five thousand attended the council itself, while 1,500 prostitutes offered their services after hours.

The council had hardly begun when it lost the support of the pope who had convened it. John was shocked to learn that his enemies were preparing to present a record of his crimes to the assembly. A committee of cardinals advised him to resign. He agreed, read a formal resignation, and fled, disguised as a laborer.

Fearing a repeat of Pisa, the council declared, "If anyone ... including also the pope, shall refuse to obey the commands, statutes, and ordinances of this holy council ... he shall be subject to proper punishment." The council then sent a committee to find John and ensure his abdication.

The committee got no answer from John, so 54 charges were presented against him, the least of which were that he was a pagan, an oppressor, a liar, a buyer of church office, a traitor, a lecher, and a thief. Sixteen other accusations were suppressed for being too severe.

On May 29, 1415, the council deposed John, leaving him no claim to Peter's throne. Broken by the charges, John accepted the decree and was imprisoned for three years.

The council celebrated its triumph with a parade through the city of Constance. Then it ordered Benedict and Gregory to resign. Gregory volunteered, on condition he first would be allowed to reconvene the council by his own papal authority. The council assented, and after reconvening, it declared him a valid pope and named him a governor of Ancona in Italy (to give him something official to do for the remaining two years of his life).

Benedict still refused to resign, but since his cardinals had deserted him, he was deposed in 1417. He retired to Spain and died there at age 90, protesting to the end that he was the true pope.

In October, the council decreed that another general council should be convened within five years to elect a replacement pope. On November 17, 1417, an electoral committee chose Martin V. All of Western Christendom accepted him, and so after 39 years of chaos, the Great Schism came to an end.

Though the council achieved this victory, it utterly failed in its other purpose: to reform the church. It sent Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague to the stake, delaying widespread reformation for 100 years. It also allowed Martin to play politics and make sure that only minimal reforms, written in obscure language, could be passed.

In 1430, merely 15 years after the council opened, this grim report of the Envoys of the Teutonic Order pointed to more trouble ahead:

"Greed reigns supreme in the Roman court, and day by day finds new devices for extorting money from Germany. ... Hence much outcry and heartburnings. Many questions in regard to the papacy

will arise, or else obedience will at last be entirely renounced, to escape from these outrageous exactions by the Italians; and this latter course, as I perceive, would be acceptable to many countries."

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## Cast of Characters

### Rome

Urban VI (1378-1389)

**elected by:** full college of cardinals under duress to end over 70 years of French popes

**main actions:** consolidated hold on papal states

**weakness:** abrasive; violent campaigns and nepotism emptied coffers

**downfall:** death (poisoned?)

Boniface IX (1389-1404)

**main actions:** fought a bloody 10-year battle to regain control of Naples; refused to negotiate with Benedict

**weakness:** despotism, simony

**downfall:** death (violent fit)

Innocent VII (1404-1406)

**main actions:** refused Benedict's proposals to end the schism; fought with Ladislas, king of Naples

**weakness:** displeased Romans, who launched mob attack

**downfall:** sudden death

Gregory XII (1406-1415)

**main actions:** made abortive attempt to settle with Benedict; called Council of Pisa

**weakness:** broke promise not to create any new cardinals

**downfall:** deposed by Council of Constance; resigned

### Avignon

Clement VII (1378-1394)

**elected by:** French cardinals

**main actions:** gathered support from Urban's enemies

**weakness:** opulent court required excessive taxation

**downfall:** death (apoplectic fit)

Benedict XIII (1394-1417)

**main actions:** sought to negotiate with Boniface IX, Innocent VII, and Gregory XII; summoned a church council in opposition to Gregory's

**weakness:** lost support in France

**downfall:** deposed by councils of Pisa and Constance, but refused to step down; finally died in 1423

### Pisa

Alexander V (1409-1410)

***elected by:*** Council of Pisa

***main actions:*** secured plush positions for friends

***weakness:*** nepotism

***downfall:*** sudden death

John XXIII (1410-1415)

***main actions:*** regained Rome from Ladislas, then lost it; convened Council of Constance at Sigismund's behest

***weakness:*** depravity

***downfall:*** deposed by Council of Constance

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 68: Jan Hus: Incendiary Preacher of Prague

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## Jan Hus: Christian History Timeline - Reform and Resistance in Hussite Bohemia

The Christian History Timeline

### Growth of Reform

**1370-1374** Jan Milič of Kroměříž teaches in Prague, establishes "New Jerusalem" for prostitutes

**c.1372** Jan Hus born in Husinec

**1384** John Wyclif dies in England

**1389** Reformer Matěj of Janov charged with heresy, recants

**1391** Bethlehem Chapel founded

**1401** Jerome of Prague brings copies of Wyclif's books back from England

**1402** Hus becomes preacher at Bethlehem Chapel

**1403** Wyclifism condemned in Prague

**1409** Anti-reform German professors leave Charles University, Hus elected rector

### Church and State

**1378** Emperor Charles IV dies, Václav IV becomes head of Czech lands; Great Schism begins with both Urban VI and Clement VII elected pope

**1387** Václav's half-brother Sigismund crowned king of Hungary

**1393** Political conspiracy against Václav

**1400** Václav deposed as Holy Roman Emperor

**1402** Sigismund imprisons Václav; Zbyněk Zajíc of Hazmburk consecrated archbishop of Prague

**1408** King Ladislav of Naples seizes Rome from Pope Gregory XII

**1409** Council of Pisa deposes Gregory XII and Benedict XII, elects Alexander V as pope

### Opposition

**1410** Papal bull prohibits preaching in private chapels, including Bethlehem; Wyclif's books publicly burned in Prague; Hus excommunicated (twice)

**1411** Hus excommunicated a third time; Zbyněk flees Prague, dies in hiding

**1412** Public demonstrations break out in Prague; Jakoubek of Stříbro declares the papacy antichrist; Hus excommunicated a fourth time; Prague threatened with interdict, Hus goes into voluntary exile

**1413-1414** Hus writes *De Ecclesia* and other books

**1414** Hus departs for Council of Constance; Jakoubek introduces utraquism (lay Communion in bread and wine) in Prague

**1415** Utraquism condemned by Council of Constance; Hus burned as a heretic; Czech barons form Hussite league

**1416** Jerome of Prague burned at Constance

### **Church and State**

**1410** Alexander V dies; John XXIII becomes Pisan pope; Queen Žofie defends Hus's reforms

**1411** Sigismund becomes king of Germany; John XXIII uses sale of indulgences to fund crusade against Ladislas

**1412** Žofie and Václav attempt to have Hus's case tried in Bohemia

**1414** Urged by Sigismund, John XXIII summons Council of Constance

**1415** Council of Constance deposes all three papal rivals, elects Martin V

### **Hussite Rebellion**

**1417** Utraquism ratified by Charles University, Roman bishops forced to ordain Hussite priests

**1419** Priest Jan Želivský leads defenestration of city officials in Prague; Jan Žižka emerges as Hussite military leader; Hussites begin to gather for mass worship services on Bohemian hilltops

**1420** Four Articles of Prague formulated; Hussite settlement at Tábor founded; First crusade against Hussites defeated

**1421** Second crusade against Hussites defeated

**1422** Third crusade against Hussites defeated; Želivský murdered in Prague

**1424** Žižka dies

**1427** Fourth crusade against Hussites defeated

**1431** Hussites experience first military loss

**1433** Hussites open discussions with Catholics at Council of Basel

**1436** Final version of Hussite-Catholic agreement (***Campactata***) affirmed

### **Church and State**

**1417** Economic blockade enforced against Bohemia

**1418** Martin V empowers Sigismund to crush Hussitism

**1419** Václav dies, Žofie returns to Catholic church

**1420** Sigismund quietly crowned king of Bohemia

**1433** Sigismund becomes Holy Roman Emperor

**1436** Sigismund finally takes Bohemian throne

**1437** Sigismund dies

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 68: Jan Hus: Incendiary Preacher of Prague

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## The Wanderer

Jerome of Prague's zest for life was surpassed only by his zeal for reform.

Frieda Looser

Wenceslas College at Charles University, Prague, was a hotbed of reform in the 1390s, and black-bearded Jerome of Prague was perhaps the hottest head of all. Tall and impressive, impetuous and adventurous, he got into plenty of trouble. Only once was he unable to get out.

Jerome received his Bachelor of Arts in 1398, then he gained leave to study abroad. Close links had developed between Bohemia and England since the marriage of King Václav's sister, Anne, to Richard II, and scholarships encouraged students to further their studies at Oxford University.

While his friend Jan Hus pursued an academic career at Prague, Jerome avidly absorbed the teachings of John Wyclif, the English reformer, at Oxford. Jerome copied Wyclif's books, then carried them back to Prague in 1401.

As Hus and the other Czech masters devoured the books, Jerome's restless spirit set him traveling again. Jerome made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1403, and he was no sooner back in Prague than he was off to Paris. He never finished a degree in theology or sought ordination, but he eagerly participated in theological debates wherever he went.

On a journey to Poland and Lithuania in 1413, he helped spread reform even as he gathered fuel for the Czechs' cause. At a great public disputation at the University of Kraków, he caused a fantastic commotion. He also learned that Orthodox churches administered Communion in bread and wine—knowledge that helped his colleagues in Prague solidify their case for the practice.

Jerome's abilities as a scholar and orator gained him acceptance as a master at the Universities of Paris, Heidelberg, Cologne, and Vienna. His rhetorical skills also brought his downfall, as he increasingly used them to condemn the evils and corrupt teachings of the Catholic Church. Jerome barely escaped from each university and city in turn, having outraged the university masters, city fathers, and church authorities.

As his reputation for oratory grew, so did his arrogance. After his 1410 arrest on heresy charges in Vienna, he broke parole and fled the city. Once in the safe company of friends, he thought it highly amusing to send his presiding judge an insolent letter, informing him of his good health and professing his continued loyal service.

Despite his wanderlust, Jerome fervently loved his home country and was always drawn back to Prague. He was not, however, blind to its faults. When the city's preachers proclaimed the sale of indulgences in 1412, Jerome was the principal organizer of popular demonstrations that disrupted the sermons. Three young demonstrators were beheaded by the authorities, and Jerome led the grieving procession that conveyed the martyrs' bodies to the Bethlehem Chapel.

In this volatile atmosphere, Jerome sometimes resorted to violence. He boxed the ears of one friar and drew a knife on another; he might have killed the second man, if he had not been stopped. He once heaved an indulgence-preaching friar into a small boat and rowed him into the middle of the fast-flowing

Vltava River. Jerome then threw the terrified monk into the turbulent water with only a thin rope as his lifeline.

### **A friend in need**

When Hus was lured to Constance in 1414, Jerome promised him help if the need arose. Both men believed that Sigismund's promise of safe conduct would be upheld, but Hus later remembered that Jerome had said, "If I go to the council, I suppose I shall not return."

After Hus's arrest, he wrote to Jerome and urged him not to come. Nonetheless, on April 4, 1415, Jerome snuck into the city. He went about Constance nailing inflammatory posters on church doors and other public places, demanding a safe conduct and the right to speak before the council. Warned by friends to flee and avoid arrest, he slipped away from the city at night and secretly made his way toward Bohemia. He almost made it, but his luck ran out in Bavaria and he was dragged back to Constance in chains.

Once more Jerome sought to escape his fate, this time by very publicly recanting all that he had so loudly proclaimed. He wrote: "I, Jerome of Prague, master of liberal arts, confess hereby the true catholic faith and condemn all errors, especially those with which I have been hitherto befouled and which were formerly held by John Wyclif and Jan Hus ... for which they, along with their views and errors, were condemned by this sacred Council of Constance as heretics."

Though Jerome thought he would soon be free, the council pressed harder for his condemnation and ordered a new trial. Defeated, and overcome with remorse at his disloyalty, Jerome denounced his recantation as being made "for fear of death" and resolved to defend himself.

When the council attempted to interrogate him again, he lashed out: "What iniquity is this! While I have languished for three hundred and fifty days in the most cruel prisons, in stench, squalor, excrements, and chains, lacking all things, you have ever heard my adversaries and slanderers; but me you now refuse to hear even for an hour! ...

"For you have already in your minds condemned me as an unworthy man, before you could learn what I really am. But you are men, not gods, not immortals, but mortals! You can fall, blunder, be deceived and misled just like other men. It is said that here are gathered the lights of the world and the wisest of men. For that reason you should take care not to do anything rashly, inconsiderately, or unjustly."

Jerome's speech impressed a few observers but only enraged the council. He was swiftly sentenced to death.

Capped with a tall paper hat painted with red devils, Jerome sang hymns in Latin and Czech as he was led to the stake. When all was ready, with some compassion the torchbearer stepped behind Jerome.

"If I were afraid of the flames I would not have come to this place," Jerome retorted. "Light the fire here before my eyes." His death was prolonged and agonizing, but it earned Jerome lasting honor as a Hussite martyr.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 68: Jan Hus: Incendiary Preacher of Prague

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## A Pastor's Heart

Even in the midst of his campaign for reform, Hus never forgot the faithful flock back home.

Bruce L. Shelley

Like Paul at Miletus, Jan Hus bid a tender farewell to his congregation at Bethlehem Chapel as he departed for Constance.

"Faithful and dear friends," he said, "you know that for a long time I have faithfully labored among you, preaching to you the Word of God without heresy or errors. Your salvation was, is now, and shall remain my desire until my death."

Hus knew he might never return to Prague. But if not, "we shall, of course, meet one another in the heavenly joy."

We think of him as "Jan Hus, the martyr." But before that, he was Jan Hus, the pastor—passionate about reform yet gentle toward his flock.

### Leading by example

The Council of Constance charged Hus with "Wyclifism." The charge misrepresented Hus's theology (Martin Luther would later criticize Hus for accepting too much Catholic doctrine) but caught the spirit of his attack on the excesses of the medieval church.

What Hus desired was not a radical shift in church teaching, but for the church to be more worthy of its calling. This meant a return to the model of the early church and a complete re-evaluation of what it meant to be a priest.

First, Hus believed a priest's authority should be tied to his character and not merely his office. Naturally, this shook the foundations of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, which maintained that as long as a priest was in good standing with the Church, his ministry would remain effective regardless of his morality.

Hus, in contrast, believed it a priest's duty to model the godly life. As Wyclif had written, "Living a good life stirs rude men more than true preaching by word only."

For Hus, the "good life" began with ascetic simplicity. He demanded that priests live in apostolic poverty, being satisfied with the food and clothing provided by their office and giving the rest away. This idea arose both from Scripture and from Wyclif, who wrote that priests must "live a humble life, of poor men's alms and goods ... and the remainder give truly to poor men that have not of their own."

Hus did not go so far as to deny the ministry of immoral priests. He maintained that sacraments in the hands of an unworthy priest remain valid, but the usefulness of the priest is undermined by his unseemly behavior.

Second, Hus wanted to narrow the gap between priest and people by giving lay people access to the Communion cup. Restoring the laity's right to take the chalice in Holy Communion became the battle cry

for the whole Hussite movement.

For centuries the Holy Church had restricted the cup to the priest, lest the clumsy laity should spill any of the "blood of God." But the Hussites pointed to the words of Christ, "Drink of it, all of you."

Finally, Hus denounced as blasphemous the claim of priests to forgive sins directly, of their own power, whenever and wherever they wanted. He growled and barked at the practice of some priests who demanded money for such "forgiveness." Hus emphasized that it is God and Christ alone who forgive sins. Priests only declare such forgiveness.

The Czechs generally rejected the idea that the Church is restricted to the pope, cardinals, bishops and clergy. Hus insisted that the Church comprises the common people, the nobles, and the clergy.

The clergy, he said, constitute the best part of the Church if they perform their duties rightly, but that means they should relinquish the world and follow Christ most closely. If they are unfaithful to their duties, they become the worst part of the Church, laboring against Christ.

### **Godly words**

Hus's own ministry centered in his pulpit. His emphasis on preaching echoes Wyclif, and like Luther, he was a preaching professor. "Preachers," he once said, "count for more in the church than prelates."

In 1402, professor Hus was named rector and preacher of Bethlehem Chapel, which had been founded with the clear purpose of providing preaching in the Czech language. Except for the cathedral, where his colleague Peter of Stupno delivered sermons in Czech, there was no church in Prague with preaching in the vernacular.

After this appointment, Hus continued his practice of gathering students about him and teaching them. A hospice called Nazareth, built in the immediate vicinity of Bethlehem, provided students room and board. Hus supervised both chapel and hospice.

Bethlehem itself was a large, extremely plain structure, capable of accommodating 3,000 hearers. Hus preached godliness and castigated corrupt priests, once instructing the clerics in his audience "to preach the gospel, not some entertainment, or fables [priests at the time often based sermons on hagiographies of saints], or plundering lies, so that the people with attentive minds will accept the gospel and both the preacher and the hearer will be grounded by faith in the gospel."

Even the chapel walls proclaimed a message of reform. They were decorated with several pictures, always arranged in pairs. One of them portrayed the pope astride a large horse, resplendent in all his papal pomp; its counterpart portrayed Christ in all his poverty, carrying the cross.

In another set, the pope was depicted sitting haughtily on his throne having his feet kissed, while Christ was shown in a kneeling position washing his disciples' feet.

Hus approved of this use of pictures in the churches, provided they were not worshiped for themselves. He held that pictures were useful because the common people could not read and because the mind has a surer grasp of concepts when they are seen as well as heard.

When forced into exile in 1412, he said, "I have preached in towns and market-places; now I preach behind hedges, in villages, castles, fields, woods. If it were possible, I would preach on the seashore, or from a ship, as my Savior did."

## Labor of love

Many reforming preachers get caught up in their cause and neglect pastoral care. Not Hus. His consistent care for the spiritual welfare of his congregation won him the hearts of those he called, in a letter from Constance, "my beloved brothers in Christ, cobblers, tailors, and scribes."

"Dearly beloved," he wrote his Praguers from prison, "I desire zealously, with my whole heart, that you be freed through Jesus Christ from all sins, and despising the vanities of this world, you would conquer the flesh, the world, and the devil. ... I have labored among you for more than 12 years in the Word of God—as God is my witness ... "

Some scholars consider these letters from Hus during his months of imprisonment "among the world's treasures." Many of the letters remind us of the apostle Paul's prison epistles. They reflect his pastoral heart like none other of his writings.

Hus knew so many of his people personally. In a letter to his disciple Martin, he writes tenderly, "My grey gown you can keep as a memento. But I think you do not care for grey; so give it to whom you like. My white gown give the curate. To my pupil George Grizkon give ... my grey gown, because he has faithfully served me."

Just months before he was martyred, Hus was still teaching. Early in November 1414, he wrote from his prison in Constance to an unknown priest:

"Dearest brother! Be diligent in preaching the gospel and do the work of a zealous evangelist. ... Labor as a good soldier of Christ. First of all, live a devout and holy life, and then teach faithfully and truly. ... I admonish you not to attend taverns with guests, lest you become familiar to men, for the more a preacher keeps his distance from the people, the more acceptable he is. Nevertheless, do not refuse such help as you can render to others."

To the very end, Jan Hus was an ardent reformer with a pastor's heart.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 68: Jan Hus: Incendiary Preacher of Prague

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## Jan Hus: Christian History Archive - Faith Formed in Love

In De Ecclesia (The Church) Hus encourages Christians to trust God but question the Church.

Jan Hus

Whoever has in common with others faith formed in love, this suffices for salvation when accompanied with the grace of perseverance. For God, who gave the first faith, will give to his soldier clearer faith, unless he puts some hindrance in the way. For God does not demand of all his children that they should continuously during their sojourn here be in the particular act of thought about any particular point of faith, but it is enough that, putting aside inertia and callousness, they have faith formed as a habit.

Faith, we must understand, is twofold: the one unformed, which is exercised by the demons who believe and tremble; the other faith formed in love. The latter, accompanied with perseverance, saves, but not the former. Hence with reference to the faith formed in love the words were spoken: "Whosoever believeth in the Son of God, hath eternal life" (John 3:15). And the Savior said to Peter, who had that faith and professed it: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah."

This faith is the foundation of the other virtues which the church of Christ practices. Inasmuch as faith is not of things which appear to the senses but of hidden things and inasmuch as it is difficult to believe hidden things, therefore two elements are necessary to faith in order that we may believe anything truly: (1) the truth which illumines the mind, (2) the authority [evidence] which confirms the mind.

Here belongs one property of faith, that it is concerned alone with the truth—all falsehood being excluded—the truth which the faithful ought to defend even unto death.

The second property of faith is, that without proof and special knowledge it is obscure to the faithful, for what we see with the eye we cannot be said to believe. And the saints in heaven who see the articles clearly, which we know obscurely, are not said to believe them but to see. In the place of faith they have clear vision and in the place of hope unending fruition.

The third property of faith is, that it is the foundation [assurance] of the things which are to be believed for the pilgrim who is to come to the peaceful dwelling. Therefore, the apostle says that faith is "the substance," that is, the foundation, "of things hoped for": "the evidence of things which do not appear," that is, to the senses (Heb. 11:1). For now we hope for our blessedness and believe, but do not see with the eyes of the flesh. And, because it is not possible without faith to please God, therefore every one who is to be saved ought first of all to be faithful—*fidelis*.

A faithful person, however, is he who has faith infused by God and has no fear of ill to himself mixed with his faith. But all open offenders according to the law of present unrighteousness are unfaithful—*infideles*—[without faith], for it is impossible for any one to sin mortal sin except in so far as he lacks faith. For, if he were mindful of the penalty to be inflicted on those sinning in that way and fully believed it and had the faith which comes from divine knowledge—wherewith God knows all things clearly and is present with such sinners—then, without doubt, he would not sin mortal sin.

A person may lack faith in three ways:

1. By weakness, and in this way he is lacking who vacillates in believing and does not persist unto death in the defense of faith.
2. He is lacking in faith who firmly believes the many things to be believed and yet is lacking in many things to be believed, which unbelieved things are as holes, and thus he has a shield of faith which is full of holes.
3. He is lacking in faith who lacks in the use of this shield; and this happens in this way: that, though he has the firm habit of things to be believed, he nevertheless lacks in acts of meritorious living because of an undisciplined life. These things are referred to in Titus 1:16: "They confess that they know God, but in deeds deny him."

Every one, therefore, who is lacking in faith in any of these three ways is wanting in the abiding strength of faith.

And we must remember that faith differs from hope:

1. In this, that hope has reference to the future prize to be obtained, but faith concerns the past, namely such things as that God created the world, that Christ was incarnate, etc. And it concerns also the present, as that God is, that the saints are in heaven, and that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father. Faith also concerns the future, as that Christ will come again in judgment; that all who have not arisen at that time will arise in the day of judgment; and that God will finally reward in bliss all the saints who finish this present life in grace.
2. Hope does not reach the knowledge of faith in that which it hopes for, but it rests in a certain middle act between doubt and belief, so that there are many things which are to be set before the faithful to accept which, when the distinction is removed, they should neither doubt, nor grant, nor deny but only hope for. ...
3. Faith also differs from hope in this, that hope is only of good which is possible to him who hopes, but faith is about the evil as well as about the good, for we believe the forgiveness of sin, which is most certainly a good thing for all who are to be saved; and we believe also that the sin of blasphemy will not be forgiven either in this world or in that which is to come.

And for the reason that believing is an act of faith, that is, to put trust in—*fidere*—therefore know that to believe that which is necessary for a man to secure blessedness is to adhere firmly and without wavering to the truth spoken as by God. For this truth, because of its certitude, a man ought to expose his life to the danger of death.

And, in this way, every Christian is expected to believe explicitly and implicitly all the truth which the Holy Spirit has put in Scripture, and in this way a man is not bound to believe the sayings of the saints which are apart from Scripture, nor should he believe papal bulls, except insofar as they speak out of Scripture, or insofar as what they say is founded in Scripture simply.

For both the pope and his curia make mistakes from ignorance of the truth. And, with reference to this ignorance, it can be substantiated that the pope makes mistakes and may be deceived. Lucre deceives the pope, and he is deceived through ignorance. ...

Of one kind is the faith which is placed in God. He cannot deceive or be deceived; of another is the faith placed in the pope, who may deceive and be deceived. Of one kind is the faith placed in holy Scripture; and another, faith in a bull thought out in a human way.

For to holy Scripture exception may not be taken, but it is proper at times to take exception to bulls

and gainsay them when they either commend the unworthy or put them in authority, or savor of avarice, or honor the unrighteous or oppress the innocent, or implicitly contradict the commands or counsels of God.

It is, therefore, plain which faith is the foundation of the church—the faith with which the church is built upon the Rock, Christ Jesus, for it is that by which the church confesses that "Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God." For Peter spoke for all the faithful, when he said: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." "This is the victory," says John, "which overcometh the world—even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4).

***Written in exile, 1413-1414; adapted from translation by David S. Schaff, 1915.***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 68: Jan Hus: Incendiary Preacher of Prague

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## The Reformation Connection

Hus shared ideas with Wyclif and Luther, yet they were not all of one mind.

Timothy George

Jan Hus has always been difficult to place precisely in the history of Christian thought. Does he belong to the Middle Ages or to early modern times? Is he a representative of medieval heretical dissent or a precursor of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the sixteenth-century Reformation? Was he merely a local leader of a Czech movement or a figure of wider European significance?

Recent scholars have protested the earlier tendency to depict Hus as a mere echo of English reformer John Wyclif (whose writings he knew and quoted) or a simple forerunner of Luther. These cautions are well taken.

Furthermore, unlike many other reformers, Hus retained much of Catholic theology. He did not teach the doctrine of justification by faith alone, a fact Luther noted when he observed that, unlike himself, Hus had attacked only the life, not the doctrine, of late medieval Catholicism.

All the same, Luther was not entirely without reason when he applied to himself the prophecy attributed to Hus as he faced the martyrs' pyre: "Today you will roast a lean goose, but a hundred years from now you will hear a swan sing, whom you will leave unroasted and no trap or net will catch him for you." Luther posted his theses 102 years later; soon after, he read Hus's work and realized, "We are all Hussites without knowing it."

### Local roots

Hus's work was deeply rooted in the Czech reform movement that was already well under way when Hus was born in 1372. The religious awakening in Bohemia was related to the emergence of the Czech language and the revival of national identity led by Charles IV, king and emperor, who ruled in Bohemia from 1333 to 1378.

Charles wanted his capital, Prague, to be a great political and cultural center, and in 1348 he established there a university modeled on those at Paris and Oxford. The exchange of ideas that flourished at Charles University profoundly affected Hus and others of his era.

Early proponents of church reform included Konrad Waldhauser and Matěj of Janov. These preachers criticized the loose morals of many of their fellow clergy and encouraged the study of the Bible in the Czech language. Scholars have discovered more than 50 manuscripts of the Bible in Czech, all in circulation before the invention of the printing press.

Another key figure in the early Czech reform movement was Jan Milič from Kroměříž (1325-1375). Like Hus, Milič was both a scholar and a preacher: he broke through the language barrier by preaching in Latin for the university audience, in German for Prague's upper classes, and in Czech for the workers and common people. He called for personal conversion, but he also emphasized the practical and ethical consequences of following Christ.

In Prague, Milič established a house he called "New Jerusalem." It was a haven for prostitutes, one of the most despised and marginal groups in medieval society. The name was taken from the Book of Revelation and indicates the strong eschatological character of the Czech reform movement.

One of the ironies of church history is that frequently those who have the most acute sense of the future reign of God—of living in the "last days"—are precisely those who invest themselves with purpose and energy in changing things here and now. Hus too brought together the sense of living at the edge of history (for example, the Antichrist was one of his major themes) with an earnest hope for the renewal of church and society.

Milič is called "the Father of the Czech Reformation," but he was not able to carry forward the reforms he had begun. He died in Avignon while defending his cause before his accusers at the papal court. But in 1391 some of his disciples established Bethlehem Chapel, a public center in Prague for preaching and worship where Hus was appointed chaplain in 1402.

From the pulpit in Bethlehem Chapel, Hus preached with great power and persuasion to a large number of followers. At the same time, he emerged as a leader in the university, serving terms as both dean and rector. Like Luther a century later, Hus was trained in scholastic theology (though he never obtained the doctorate), but he also appealed to the masses and became widely known as a popular religious leader.

### **The invisible church**

During the two years of exile between his departure from Prague and his trial at Constance, Hus wrote some 15 books. In these he continued to sound the alarm against church abuses, criticizing the papacy and the practice of indulgences. But his most important work during this period was a Latin treatise *De Ecclesia* (1413), "On the Church."

Hus insisted that the true church was invisible, the Body of Christ comprised of all the redeemed of all the ages, God's chosen elect known infallibly only to Him.

"The unity of the church," Hus wrote, "consists in the bond of predestination, since the individual members are united by predestination, and in the goal of blessedness, since all her sons are ultimately united in blessedness." The "chief abbot" of the church was not the pope but Christ, and it was possible to be in the church (visible) without being of the church (invisible).

This idea was not new. Wyclif had said much the same thing, echoing earlier theologians such as Augustine. But in the context of the religious awakening in Bohemia, Hus's correlation of predestination and ecclesiology ignited a national reform movement with revolutionary implications.

Near the end of his life, Wyclif had repudiated the entire papal system and called for its abolition. What Hus called for was not the abolition of the institutional church, nor even the separation of the godly from the impure (as some later Hussites believed), but rather the reform of the church based on the example of Christ and apostolic simplicity.

Just the same, Hus's appeal to the invisible church, as well as his elevation of Scripture as a superior norm for doctrine, proved a solvent to the kind of extravagant papal claims made by Boniface VIII in his famous bull, *Unam Sanctam* (1302), which made obedience to the pope a condition for salvation.

### **The Czech "Magna Carta"**

The execution of Hus sent shock waves throughout Bohemia. Nearly 500 Czech nobles gathered in

Prague to protest his condemnation and death. They entered into a solemn covenant, pledging to defend the Czech reformation against all external threats.

Out of this gathering emerged the Four Articles of Prague (1419), a manifesto that Czech theologian Jan Milič Lochman has called "the Magna Carta of the Czech Reformation." Lochman sees these four principles as an extension of Hus's basic theology.

1. The Word of God is to be preached freely.

Like Wyclif, Hus insisted both that the Scriptures be in the language of the people and that they be the normative rule of faith and conduct for all believers. Hus defied his archbishop's order to cease preaching because he was committed to a prior authority, namely, the expressed law of Christ set forth in the Bible.

During his trial at Constance, Hus insisted that he be corrected out of the Scriptures before he would retract his views. This did not mean, of course, that he had no respect for the tradition of the church, but rather that church tradition could not be placed above the written Word of God.

In an age when printed books were not available, Hus stressed the importance of *viva vox evangelii*—"the living voice of the gospel." For Hus, public preaching of the Word of God was an indispensable means of grace and a sure sign of the true church. The Scriptures must be proclaimed freely, without institutional constraints or political interference.

Some later Hussites, especially the Taborites, went even further than Hus in questioning the necessity of a formal preaching office. Taborites thought that all believers, men and women alike, should bear witness to the spirit-anointed Word. This motif was extended by spiritualists and radical reformers in the sixteenth century, some of whom disparaged the external form of the Bible for the "word of faith" and "inner light" within.

2. The sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is to be served in the form of both bread and wine to all faithful Christians.

The practice of withholding the cup from the laity during the celebration of the Lord's Supper was rooted in early medieval traditions. By 1414, some of Hus's disciples had begun to share the cup as well as the bread with their communicants. When the Council of Constance condemned this practice, Hus lent his considerable support to the serving of the Eucharist *sub utraque specie* (under both kinds).

Eventually, the chalice became the defining symbol of the Czech reformation. By sharing both elements with laity as well as clergy, the Hussites were reintroducing what later became known as the priesthood of all believers.

Unlike Wyclif, Hus supported the doctrine of transubstantiation, which to him meant that serving Communion in both kinds was that much more important. When priests withhold the cup from the laity, they actually become "thieves of the blood of Christ," as the Hussite leader Jacob of Mies put it.

The eschatological dimension of the Lord's Supper was also prominent among the Hussites. They often celebrated the Lord's Supper under the open skies on mountaintops. As Jesus had ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives, so he returned in bread and wine to celebrate with his people the coming kingdom of God.

3. Priests are to relinquish earthly position and possessions and all are to begin an obedient life based on the apostolic model.

The Hussites emphasized obedience and discipleship. They also picked up the earlier emphasis

of St. Francis and the Waldensians in advocating a return to the example of Jesus and the apostolic church. Like Milič with his ministry to the prostitutes and Hus with his devotion to Jesus, the King of the Poor, later Hussites took seriously the mandate to reform both church and society, with special care extended to "the least of these."

4. All public sins are to be punished and public sinners in all positions are to be restrained.

In this last article, we hear a plea for intentional Christianity and a protest against the laxity that is endemic to every established religion. Christians should obey and live by the law of Christ and this requires both personal and corporate discipline.

There is an egalitarian thrust in that sinners "in all positions" are to be held equally accountable to the community of faith. This emphasis of the Hussite movement would later be picked up by Calvin and the Reformed tradition with their concern to bring every dimension of human life and culture under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Many scholars see the Czech reform movement as the First Reformation. Luther claimed continuity with Hus in many respects, although there was a theological chasm between the two on the doctrine of justification. Likewise, Hus was not strictly a Wyclifite, although there were important contacts and some influence between England and Bohemia.

Clearly, Hus stood in an indigenous tradition of Czech reformers who emphasized preaching, studying the Scriptures, and eliminating clerical abuses. Hus's rediscovery of the Augustinian doctrine of the invisible church enabled him to criticize contemporary church practices in the light of God's sovereignty over time and eternity.

The motto of Hus's life was "truth conquers all." He was not without fault, and we may criticize him for his lack of understanding and theological mistakes. But all Christians can surely respond with gratitude to the kind of faith set forth in this letter written by Hus less than two weeks before his death:

"Oh most kind Christ, draw us weaklings after Thyself, for unless Thou draw us, we cannot follow Thee! Give us a courageous spirit that it may be ready; and if the flesh is weak, may Thy grace go before, now as well as subsequently. For without Thee, we can do nothing, and particularly not go to a cruel death for Thy sake. Give us a valiant spirit, a fearless heart, the right faith, a firm hope, and perfect love, that we may offer our lives for Thy sake with the greatest patience and joy. Amen."

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## Rebels to Be Reckoned With

The most powerful empire in Europe was no match for a peasant army led by a blind man.

Elesha Coffman

When radical preacher Jan Želivský arrived in Prague in 1418, he stepped into a seething conflict. In the three years since Jan Hus's death, Praguers had grown more passionate about reform—particularly about receiving both the bread and the chalice in Communion.

Reform-minded clergy, enjoying the support of commoners, nobles, and university masters, had expelled Catholics from most of the city's churches. King Václav did not interfere, but then he grew to fear the reformers' escalating power and in 1419 forced many of them, including Želivský, from their pulpits.

Želivský wanted his church back.

On July 30 he and his followers, some armed with pikes, swords, and clubs, marched to their former sanctuary. Finding the doors locked, they smashed through, then held a Communion service with bread and wine.

The group proceeded to the town hall, where several newly appointed Catholic councilmen were gathered. The angry crowd demanded the release of imprisoned reformers. When the councilmen refused, the protesters threw 13 of them out the window. Any who survived the fall were killed—but their corpses were not robbed.

The event was less a riot than a planned coup. The rebels succeeded in gaining some concessions from the king, who died a fortnight later of apoplexy. The victory was only temporary, though, and for the next 17 years Bohemia became a military and ideological battleground.

### The great divide

The Czech reform movement comprised two major camps: the radical wing, including the Tábórites, and the more moderate Utraquists. Radicals largely came from the lower levels of society (Želivský sometimes called himself "preacher of the poor, unfortunate, miserable, oppressed"), while moderates drew from the ranks of nobles and university masters.

When Václav had reneged on reform and placed Catholics in power, some Hussites began gathering for Communion in the hills outside Prague. They gave these hills biblical names like Tábóř, Horeb, and Olivet. Because of increasing persecution in the cities, and because the group believed the end times were coming soon, the meeting places became refuge settlements.

"Therefore do not resist evil," a Tábórite song proclaimed, "but go out to the mountain, and here learn Truth; for so Christ commanded when he prophesied on the mountain and preached of the destruction of the temple."

The Tábórites, early proponents of *sola scriptura*, rejected anything not found in the Bible, including the veneration of saints, prayers for the dead, transubstantiation, and indulgences. They lived

communally, conducted their austere worship services in Czech, and welcomed laymen and women to preach.

Utraquists, like Taborites, firmly believed that lay people should receive Communion in both bread and wine (*sub utraque specie*). As Jacob of Mies had argued at the Council of Constance, citing Scripture, "Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you." However, being generally wealthier, they were not nearly so eager to upset the order of Bohemian society.

### **"Warriors of God"**

Upon Václav's death, Sigismund gained formal right to the Bohemian crown. But Hussites hated Sigismund, "the dragon of the Apocalypse," for his duplicity at Constance. Pope Martin V, hoping to silence the reformers, gave Sigismund permission to take the kingdom by force.

Utraquists attempted to reach a diplomatic compromise with the incoming monarch, asking only that Communion with the lay chalice be permitted, not imposed. This was hardly enough for the Taborites, who threw their support behind Jan Žižka, a royal guard turned radical.

Žižka fortified Taborite settlements and trained a militia. Lacking conventional weapons, his men, the "warriors of God," adapted their farming implements: threshing flails, studded with iron spikes, served in hand-to-hand combat, while armored peasant carts became highly mobile war-wagons. The rebels' zeal, combined with Žižka's strategic genius, led to several early victories, despite the fact that Žižka was nearly blind.

Utraquists initially opposed Žižka's efforts because they were unsure about the rightness of holy war. Then in 1420 Sigismund abandoned the bargaining table and launched a crusade against Bohemia, going so far as to enlist German soldiers, the Czechs' "natural enemies." In declaring war on his own kingdom, Sigismund became the common foe uniting both wings of the Hussite movement.

To work together, the moderates and radicals needed a formula for basic agreement. They arrived at the Four Articles of Prague (see "[The Reformation Connection](#)"), guidelines for reform that left a lot of room for interpretation. But this vagueness contributed to their acceptance—the factions could barely agree on that much.

### **Advance and retreat**

As reformers were hammering out their articles of agreement, an international force under Sigismund's direction entered Bohemia and besieged Prague. Though the army was large, it suffered from long supply lines and low morale. At the battle of Vítkov Hill, Žižka's inferior forces secured a strategic position and broke the siege. Sigismund, defeated, had himself crowned quietly, then withdrew to non-Hussite territory.

At a national assembly, the Czechs declared their position: "Because of great cruelty and injustice brought about by Sigismund, the king of Hungary, the entire Kingdom of Bohemia has endured great harm. We have never accepted him as king nor recognized his right as lord."

The king attacked again later in 1421, aiming to take the strategic city of Kutná Hora. Žižka and his men camped near the city, unaware that its citizens intended to help Sigismund. Žižka was surrounded by enemies, but before they could close in on him, he used his blindness as an advantage and launched a deadly night raid. Crashing through the enemy line with guns blasting from the war-wagons (the first documented use of mobile firepower in Europe), Žižka escaped. He also earned such a fearsome

reputation that on at least one occasion, a hostile army fled at the sight of the Hussite banner.

More crusades followed in 1422, 1427, and 1431, with lesser forays in between. The Hussites held their ground but also sustained losses: Želivský was murdered in Prague in 1422, Žižka succumbed to the plague in 1424, and Jakoubek of Stříbro, a leading moderate theologian, died in 1429. The country grew weary of constant battle, and Tábórites and Utraquists remained unable to forge a shared vision of Bohemia's future.

### **The dragon's forked tongue**

Finally, in October 1431, Sigismund and the Catholic Church gave up on a military solution and invited the Hussites to negotiations at the Council of Basel. Most Hussite factions agreed—after securing ironclad safe-conduct and the assurance that they would be treated, not as heretics, but as brothers in Christ.

The radicals were reluctant to negotiate. Žižka's replacement, Prokop Holý, believed war was necessary "in order to bring about the recognition of these holy truths by the Church of God, and to live and see the blessing of peace and good days from which unity, brotherly love, moral reform and everything else will come." Only when the radical forces lost a major campaign against Bohemian Catholics did Prokop join discussions.

The Hussites argued for concessions described in the Four Articles of Prague. Like Hus they believed that if they were allowed to make a case for reforms, church leaders would be converted and reform would spread. Like Hus they were disappointed.

Pope Eugenius IV, Martin V's successor, opposed reforms. The church's leading representative at the council, Cardinal Cesarini, believed some changes were needed; he feared the radicals, having barely escaped a clash with them at Domaëllice. Sigismund played both sides of the table, holding a hard line during meetings but promising support for reform when talking to the Hussites in private.

Duped again by Sigismund, the Hussites agreed with the council on a watered-down version of the Four Articles. The lay chalice would be permitted but not encouraged—a decision that set the stage for Hussite-Catholic civil war in Bohemia. Priests and deacons would be allowed to preach, but not laymen or women. Priests would be required to give up their estates and maintain fiscal responsibility—the church's largest concession. Mortal sin would continue to be punished by those "whose office it is."

The agreement achieved what the Roman church and empire could not win in battle. In 1436 Sigismund assumed Václav's long-vacant throne, then initiated a Catholic uprising against the Hussites. Utraquist priests found themselves shut out of Bohemian churches once again.

The new king lived only a year, and at his death the country was in turmoil. Divisions that had always plagued the reform movement widened, and Utraquists sometimes joined Catholics in persecuting radicals. But from 1415 to 1436, the Hussites proved that "heretics" could fight Rome—and survive.

***Elesha Coffman is associate editor of Christian History.***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 68: Jan Hus: Incendiary Preacher of Prague

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## Jan Hus: Christian History Interview - To Live in Truth

The integrity for which Hus died lives on among Czech Christians.

conversation with Jan Milic Lochman

*Often our closest connection with history is a book or an archaeological dig, but in Jan Milič Lochman we found one of Jan Hus's living heirs. Born in the Czech Republic to Protestant parents who named him after Hus's reforming predecessor, Dr. Lochman has preached in Bethlehem Chapel and lectured at Charles University. He would even call himself a Hussite, except that the term fails to encompass the whole Czech reform tradition stretching before and after Hus.*

*Dr. Lochman, now professor emeritus of systematic theology at the University of Basel, Switzerland, not only connects with the distant past—he has witnessed his home country's twentieth-century upheavals as well. Christian History asked him what Hus means today to the church and the people of the Czech Republic.*

**What aspects of today's Czech society are in some way Hus's legacy?**

I could not speak of a strong, inspiring presence of the Hussite legacy in Czech society today. Certainly Hus enjoys a high status in Czech history, and a considerable majority of people consider him one of the most famous Czechs. That's true. But this is very often a vague attitude. The specific Hussite legacy, Hus's important contribution to Czech culture and spirituality, is less known.

However, even people who don't know the content of Hus's message appreciate his high authority as a witness to the dignity of human conscience, because he was one who refused to recant. And he remained faithful to what he preached under pressures and even unto death.

**Did you ever experience that kind of pressure?**

For the major part of history, Czech Protestants have been persecuted. But there was no persecution in my childhood—just a very deep sense of being a minority within the nation and within the world.

But then, of course, after 1948 Communists took the power. I was a young student in those days. I then became a pastor and began serving in a situation, I wouldn't say of direct persecution, but rather of being under duress. But this was not tragic for a devoted Christian, because under that particular pressure you get the chance also to appropriate your faith in a more genuine way—under the cross, in the hope of resurrection. And this was my inspiration to study theology and to teach theology.

Living in the Communist society was difficult. At the same time it was spiritually challenging, and I am grateful for that challenge.

**Has a Hussite church survived to the present?**

There is a small church body in the Czech Republic that calls itself explicitly "Hussite," as well as a Hussite theological faculty at Prague University. There is also a Czech Brethren Church, which came to the United States as the Moravian Church. Because of tragic developments in Czech church history, though, all Protestant churches there are small. Most Czechs are nominally Catholic or don't belong to any church. But the Protestant churches have kept their traditions and their role within the society, and that is much more important than the numbers.

**How has Hus's motto, "Truth conquers," been a rallying cry for Czechs, especially in the twentieth century?**

Those words were a rallying cry for Thomáš Masaryk, the founder of the first Czech Republic in 1918. He was very dedicated to the memory of Hus and decided that the Czech coat of arms should carry the words, "The truth conquers." Masaryk knew that politics is not just a power game and that politicians have responsibility with respect to the truth, which for him was the Christian truth.

So at that point the slogan became really an inspiration to the nation. Even in the Communist day, the coat of arms always carried that inscription, "The truth conquers." It was paradoxical, because the Communist system was a system of manipulated truth. Still, for everyone who saw that inscription, it was a challenge not to get discouraged by the oppressive system but to know that eventually the truth shall conquer.

I was very much involved in the movement of Prague Spring—the attempt in the sixties to democratize the Communist society. In that movement of Christians, former Communists, and writers, Hus suddenly became extremely important. I remember one major speech by a philosopher/writer who said, "As that Czech intellectual in the fifteenth century refused to let his conscience be dominated by the official demands, so even now we have to follow him. We must stop manipulating truth and to start to live in truth."

Václav Havel also participated in the movement, and amazingly enough he, too, very much appreciates the legacy of Hus. Back in those days he described his political development as "an attempt to live in truth." And that became a major program for him—he's the same as a president as he used to be as a dissident. His political steps followed out of a spiritual conviction that human dignity means not just to live, but to live in truth.

Hus's motto appeared again in 1989 as the major rallying cry in the streets of Prague. That anti-Communist movement, which began earlier but broke through in 1989, was not superficially political, but also a spiritual movement inspired by Czech history. Hus, of course, was very much part of it.

### **With the recent political and economic changes in the Czech Republic, how is Hus relevant today?**

Communism, with its totalitarian structure, was a challenge to the Christian faith. Now capitalism, which nearly absolutizes the profit interest, has taken its place. The church gave a credible response to the Communist system, and now it must respond to a system that is also tempted by totalitarian tendencies. And Hus is once again important.

Hus insisted that no human institution—not even the institution of the church—is ultimate in its authority. One of his major statements on this subject was his so-called "appeal to Jesus Christ" at his trial. Against those who tried to convince him to shut up and give up, he always said, "Well, I take seriously the institution of the church, but it's not the ultimate authority. The Lord of the church is the ultimate authority to whom I shall appeal."

Czech Christians in the Communist days also appealed to Christ as the final authority and final point of orientation of human life, even when it cost them.

Now we live in a market economy, which is a rather sensible system in many respects. But if the liberating effect of the market is made a new idol, that means it has been absolutized—and there are people and political leaders who absolutize the market economy. Then you have again to appeal to Christ and to proclaim that humanity cannot be understood in purely economic terms. Humanity has to be seen also in those dimensions that are not bought or sold on the market but deal with personal identity and integrity.

We are not today in a position to say, "Well, it's beautiful. The Communist domination is over and now we have the new earthly paradise." There is no paradise under the domination of capitalist ideology.

Hus is helpful in this because there is a particular Christology with Hus: Jesus Christ is the Lord of the poor. Not of the poor only; he's not sectarian. Everybody stands under the cross and the resurrection as the sign of hope. There is no discrimination, not even for those who are on the sunny side of society. But the basic trend of the gospel is the trend of solidarity with those who are on the shadowy side of society. And Hus helps us to ask always, ***What happens to them?***

In Hus's Bethlehem Chapel, one pair of images was particularly meaningful for the common people of Prague. There was the picture of the pope in all his glory, all his crowns and beautiful clothes, seen as the absolute authority on earth. On the other wall was the image of Jesus Christ entering Jerusalem on a little donkey—a symbol of a king, no doubt, but of a king whose solidarity belongs to those who are under the wheels of, for instance, economic and political development.

With his different emphases, Hus is relevant to both societies: the Communist and new one. This is why it's important to study the work and the message of Jan Hus. It's medieval in minor attitudes. But it's definitely not obsolete in regard to ultimate questions of human orientation, conscience, and dignity under the final authority of Christ as the king of the poor.

## Jan Hus: Recommended Resources

Jan Hus's status as a forgotten figure becomes a problem when you start looking for more information about him—unless you read Czech or really enjoy using inter-library loan. This list will at least get you started.

### The Classics

The big name in English-language Hus studies is Matthew Spinka, a native Bohemian Protestant who later taught church history at Hartford Theological Seminary. His *John Hus: A Biography* (Princeton, 1968), published after his retirement, is the definitive biography, and *John Hus' Concept of the Church* (Princeton, 1966), based heavily on primary sources, illuminates the subject's nuanced theology.

Spinka also contributed greatly to the field as an editor and translator. *The Letters of Jan Hus* (Manchester, 1972) contains all 105 surviving letters and documents relating to Hus. *John Hus at the Council of Constance* (Columbia, 1965) features an eyewitness account of Hus's trial and execution, as well as a lengthy introduction on the conciliar movement and a selection of relevant letters and documents.

Before Spinka, the best known Hus scholar in America was David S. Schaff, a professor of church history at Western Theological Seminary. His translation of Hus's most influential book, *De Ecclesia (The Church)* (Scribner's, 1915), is the best available. Schaff also published a biography, *John Huss* (Scribner's, 1915), which, though dated, is very readable and offers some shrewd insights.

### New(er) and Noteworthy

Spinka made such a mark in Hus studies that no one else attempted a full English study for more than 30 years. Then in 1998, Thomas A. Fudge (the author of "To Build a Fire," page 10) published *The Magnificent Ride: The First Reformation in Hussite Bohemia* (Ashgate). Fudge begins with a look at Hus, then focuses on the Hussite political and theological campaign that gained speed after the reformer's death. Fudge has also published articles on Hus in the journals *Communio Viatorum* (No. 2, 1993) and *Fides et Historia* (No. 1, 1998).

Another interesting book, if you can find it, is *The Hussite Revolution* by Jeří Kejř (Orbis Press Agency, 1988). Though difficult to follow in spots—our hardbound copy is actually missing about 20 pages—the translated manuscript is decent and the images are stunning.

Since the list of books specifically on Hus or the Hussites is short, chapters in overview works help to add breadth. For this issue, R. R. Betts's *Essays in Czech History* (Athlone Press, 1969) and Malcolm Lambert's *Medieval Heresy* (Blackwell, 1992) were very useful. Volume 7 in *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 1998), edited by Christopher Allmand, and volume 6 of *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (Scribner's, 1978), edited by James Strayer, are relevant as well.

### On Video

The drama of Hus's life and death plays out in the 55-minute film *John Hus* (Gateway, 1980), which was

the inspiration for **Christian History** issue 0. It's available from Vision Video ([www.visionvideo.com](http://www.visionvideo.com)).

**The Dissenter** (1993), part two of the five-part PBS series Renaissance, covers Hus and Martin Luther. Despite minor errors, the material is well presented.

For a look at the Hussites and their land, the best choice is **Blind Courage: The Unique Genius of Jan Žižka** (Cartesian Coordinates, 1999), which was shot on location and is factually sound.

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