

CAN ONE PERSON MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The Truth That Set Us Free
Psalm 46:1–2; Romans 1:16; 4:5



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Most of us know far more about our national heritage or our family roots than we do about our spiritual birthright. Dates like 1492 or 1776 or December 7, 1941, mean far more to us than October 31, 1517. We are even more familiar with the Battle at Gettysburg or the Normandy Invasion than the Council of Constance or the Diet of Worms. Strangely, we can name the little ships that carried men across the Atlantic—the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*—but if our lives depended on it, we'd be hard pressed to declare the contributions of men like John Wycliffe, John Calvin, or John Huss.

To illustrate how God uses ordinary people, let's travel back in time to a period of history called the Reformation. The Reformation's heroes and battlefields may not be as recognizable as the American Revolution's George Washington and Valley Forge. Yet the soldiers who led a religious revolution from the 1300s to the 1500s made a tremendous difference in what matters most to us—our understanding of God, the Bible, and salvation.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. John Wycliffe Struck the Spark

In Wycliffe's day, religion was a polluted mixture of piety, politics, and greed. Historian Stuart Garver explains that during the 1300s:

A vast papal bureaucratic system was moved from Rome to Avignon in France, making bishops civil servants and ministers of the State. The landed wealth of the clergy—estimated at about one-third of the nation's total—was not only tax exempt but immune to any legal action for its often cruel, if not criminal treatment of its poor tenants. . . . Sunday and Holy Day Masses drew large crowds while priests and friars hawked their relics and indulgences as they mingled with the multitudes in the streets—having no higher motive than to increase the wealth of their already rich monestaries.¹

Wycliffe, an Oxford-educated priest, was the first in a long line of Protestants—people who *protested* the corruptions in the established church. As Wycliffe saw it, the priest's role was to communicate God's Word in a way



Quotable

Today is a perfect day for you to dedicate yourself to the task of carrying God's light.

—Charles R. Swindoll



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the people could understand. Driven by this vision, Wycliffe and his followers set out to translate the Latin Vulgate into English—a work that was completed in 1382.

Wycliffe was forbidden to preach and was stripped of his position as a professor at Oxford. The religious hierarchy suppressed his writings, and in 1413—29 years after his death—they ordered his body exhumed, burned, and thrown into the Swift River.

John Wycliffe had struck the first spark. John Huss, from Bohemia, then took Wycliffe's place, kindling the coals until they glowed red hot.

2. John Huss Kindled the Coals

Ignited by Wycliffe's writings, John Huss burned with a passion to expose religious charlatans and proclaim the truth of Scripture. Each time he preached at the Bethlehem Chapel in his home city of Prague, capacity crowds would sit in rapt attention, their hearts stirred by his boldness.

Summoned to appear before the Council of Constance, Huss was accused of "Wycliffism." When he refused to recant because no one could show him from Scripture where his teachings were wrong, his enemies sentenced him to be burned at the stake.

According to Stuart Garver, before the executioner lit the embers piled at Huss' feet, he cried out this cryptic prophecy:

"Today . . . you will roast a lean goose (the name Huss meant 'goose') but a hundred years from now you will hear a swan sing, Him you will leave unroasted. No trap or net will catch him for you!"²

Who was the swan who would sing and never be silenced?

3. Martin Luther Brandished the Flaming Torch

Exactly a century later in Germany, an unknown monk was waging a fierce, private battle of his own. To earn his salvation, Martin Luther was praying and fasting, piling on penance after penance, and working slavishly to attain God's favor.



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Finally, his dark cell was flooded with spiritual light as one phrase from Romans 1:17 shone out: “But the righteous man shall live by faith.” That beacon of truth led Luther to freedom. He saw that righteousness is a gift that comes by faith in Christ alone.

In the years that followed, Luther would become the singing “swan” that challenged the false teachings of the church and proclaimed the good news of free salvation. The flame of truth fit into Luther’s hand as a blazing torch.



LET’S LIVE IT

In the afterglow of the Reformation story, two facts remain impressed on our minds:

- *God used very human people to carry out the Reformation.*

- *The grassroots work of the Reformation was done by ordinary people.*

How would you characterize the church today? What are some of our modern struggles? Your personal struggles?

ENDNOTES

1. Stuart P. Carver, *Our Christian Heritage* (Hackensack, NJ: Christ’s Mission, 1973), 60.
2. Carver, *Our Christian Heritage*, 53–54.



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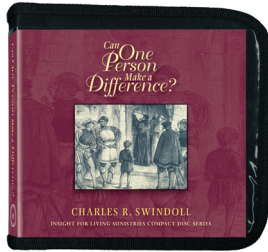
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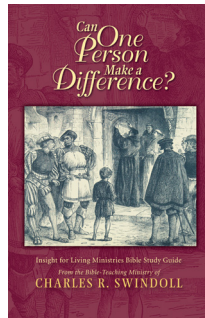
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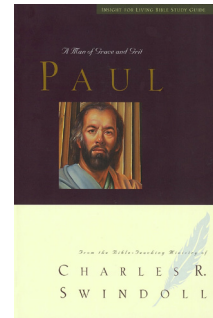
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