

Reformation Day 2024: Jan Hus (1372–1415)

On Oct 31, 1517 (507 years ago), ML nailed his famous 95 Theses to the chapel door in Wittenberg, Germany, thus launching the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation was an attempt to return the church to a more biblical path. The Reformers sought to develop a theology and practice that conformed more closely to the NT. Some branches of the Reformation were more thorough than others, but they all wanted to bring the church back to the Bible.

The Reformation was a revolt against the authority of the RCC and its head, the pope. The Reformers, like Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox, believed the RCC was corrupt and that the pope did not have the authority to impose unbiblical teachings and practices on the church.

The consequences of the Reformation still persist today. Protestant, evangelical and fundamental Christianity trace their lineage back to the ideas rediscovered during the Reformation.

Every year about this time, I like to dedicate a message to exploring what the Lord did through the Reformation. Today I'd like to consider one of the earliest major reformers—Jan Hus of Bohemia. Hus was a preacher, scholar, and theologian who advocated reform and had great influence on later reformers.

If you've ever heard the expression, "Your goose is cooked," you've heard a reference to Jan Hus. "Hus" is the word for "goose" in the Bohemian/Czech language, and Hus was executed by being burned at the stake—the goose was cooked. His death on July 6, 1415 is still celebrated by Protestants in the Czech Republic as a national holiday.

Hus' Reformation teachings became a major influence on later reformers, especially Martin Luther. Luther stumbled upon a volume of sermons by Hus, whom he knew had been condemned as a heretic. But Luther was very impressed with Hus. He said, "I could not understand [why] they had burnt so great a man, who explained the Scriptures with so much gravity and skill."¹

¹ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, "Introduction," *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 369.

In fact, in a debate, Luther's opponent (John Eck) described Luther as a follower of Jan Hus, and Luther responded, "Ja, Ich bin ein Hussite." Yes, I am a Hussite!² He later wrote, "In my opinion, John Hus bought with his own blood the gospel which we now possess." Luther was not ashamed to be a follower of Jan Hus. Nor should we be ashamed to be in step with Hus.

Today I want to consider the life and times of Jan Hus and look at the beliefs that he died for and that were so influential in the Reformation to follow.

I. The life and times of Jan Hus

A. Hus was born in Bohemia around 1370. He was called "Hus" because he was born in a town called Husinec, or "Goose town," located in the south of what is now known as the Czech Republic.

B. Hus became a priest in 1400 and later a professor at the University of Prague, eventually becoming rector (head priest).³ He began his academic career as a lecturer in philosophy, but eventually, through reading the Bible and after reading Wycliffe, he was genuinely converted and became a true Christian believer.

Quote: [Hus was] a man of comprehensive learning, ... His moral character was blameless. His bitterest enemies were constrained to recognize the purity of his heart and the holiness of his life.⁴

C. The Bethlehem Chapel, where Hus took over preaching duties, soon became a platform for his reformation teachings.

Quote: He was a clear and fervent preacher. His words and life manifested a heart-felt zeal for practical holiness. ... As a preacher he was greatly esteemed both by the students and the common people.⁵

² <https://www.1517.org/articles/why-luther-claimed-to-be-a-heretic#:~:text=In%20Leipzig%2C%20the%20Catholic%20Scholastic,Catholics%20must%20have%20run%20cold>

³ Joshua Hollmann, "Hus, Jan," ed. Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Essential Lexham Dictionary of Church History* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).

⁴ Leslie K. Sovocol, "John Hus; His Philosophy and Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 89, no. 354 (1932): 209.

⁵ Leslie K. Sovocol, "John Hus; His Philosophy and Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 89, no. 354 (1932): 211-212.

- D. He continued to read Wycliffe and to study the Bible more seriously. He even translated Wycliffe into the Bohemian language. He began to react against some of the corruptions of the church, such as fraudulent claims about miracles that deceived so many people. He urged people to seek Christ in the Scriptures, not in supposed miracles.

I'd like to cite an example of the kind of religious fraud/superstition that was common within the church at the time: In the ruins of an old church, someone found three communion wafers stained with what looked like blood. The priests spread the claim that it was the blood of Christ and could cure all manner of disease. Pilgrims came streaming in to see this supposed miracle and to be healed. Hus was very skeptical about the supposed miracle and insisted that the Archbishop appoint a commission to investigate these claims.⁶

Hus thought it was tragic that the people were being led astray by such ridiculous claims.

- E. This was a very unstable time in Europe and there was a lot of religious conflict within the church. One of the reasons for this instability was that two men both claimed to be the pope—one in Rome and that other in Avignon, France. They both claimed to be Christ's vicar/representative on earth, and they excommunicated each other from the church.
- F. At a church council in 1409, both of those men were deposed and a new pope was elected. But both those other popes rejected this new pope and continued to claim to be the proper pope. So now there were three popes, or at least three who claimed to be the pope.
- G. Hus was scandalized by the corruption of the RCC. He asserted that the final authority for the church was the Bible, not the pope. He said that the pope was ignorant, materialistic, worldly, and prone to mistakes. He said that to rebel against the pope is to obey Christ.

⁶ Leslie K. Sovocol, "John Hus; His Philosophy and Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 89, no. 354 (1932): 212–213.

Quote: Hus preached godliness and vigorously attacked the sins of the clergy, claiming, “These priests . . . are drunks whose bellies growl with great drinking and are gluttons whose stomachs are overfilled until their double chins hang down.”⁷

- H. The pope (Alexander V) condemned the teachings of Wycliffe and forbade anyone from preaching his ideas. But Hus continued to preach Wycliffe’s ideas and drew large audiences to the Bethlehem Chapel to hear him.
- I. In 1412, the pope excommunicated Hus because of his preaching. Under excommunication, no man was to associate with Hus; no one was to give him food or drink; no one was to give him a place to lay his head; no religious services for him, no Christian burial.⁸
- J. Hus withdrew to the country and began to write and to preach there. He wrote 15 books during this time. His most important book was titled *The Church*, in which he argued that Christ, not the pope, was the true head of the church.
- K. In 1414, Hus was summoned to the Council of Constance in Germany. He was promised safety and a fair hearing, but instead, Hus was imprisoned.⁹ During the course of his seven-month trial, he received little opportunity to respond to accusations. Throughout the proceedings Hus defended his teachings with Scripture.¹⁰
- L. During his trial, Hus said, “I appeal to Jesus Christ, the only judge who is almighty and completely just. In his hands I plead my cause, not on the basis of false witnesses and erring councils, but on truth and justice.” Many pleaded with him to recant, but he refused.

⁷ Sharon Rusten with E. Michael, *The Complete Book of When & Where in the Bible and throughout History* (Wheaton, IL: Michael E Rusten, 2005), 197.

⁸ Leslie K. Sovocol, “John Hus; His Philosophy and Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 89, no. 354 (1932): 213.

⁹ Joshua Hollmann, “Hus, Jan,” ed. Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Essential Lexham Dictionary of Church History* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).

¹⁰ W.S. Reid, “Huss, Jan,” ed. J.D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, *Who’s Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 335.

Thirty charges were leveled against him. Many were completely frivolous, such as the charge that Hus claimed to be the fourth person of the [Trinity]. He rejected all the charges, but his denials were shouted down. The council sentenced him to be burned at the stake the same day.

- M. On July 6, 1415, he was taken to the cathedral, dressed in his priestly garments, then stripped of them one by one. As the bishops ripped his vestments from his body, they cried, “We commit your soul to the devil.”¹¹ He refused one last chance to recant at the stake, where he prayed, “Lord Jesus, it is for thee that I patiently endure this cruel death. I pray thee to have mercy on my enemies.”

While awaiting his death, Hus said, “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 ... I am willing gladly to die today.”¹²

As he was dying, Hus said, “In the truth which I have proclaimed according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the expositions of holy teachers, I will this day, joyfully die.”¹³

- N. After the fire burned out, his executioners scooped up his ashes and tossed them into a lake (or the Rhine River??) so that nothing would remain of the “heretic,” but some of his admirers collected bits of soil from the ground where Hus had died and took them back to Bohemia as a memorial.¹⁴
- O. The later Reformers looked to Hus’s steadfast commitment in the face of the church’s cunning brutality¹⁵ as an example of courage to follow.

¹¹ Sharon Rusten with E. Michael, *The Complete Book of When & Where in the Bible and throughout History* (Wheaton, IL: Michael E Rusten, 2005), 197.

¹² Sharon Rusten with E. Michael, *The Complete Book of When & Where in the Bible and throughout History* (Wheaton, IL: Michael E Rusten, 2005), 197.

¹³ Leslie K. Sovocol, “John Hus; His Philosophy and Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 89, no. 354 (1932): 217.

¹⁴ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Introduction,” *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 371.

¹⁵ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Introduction,” *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 369.

Trans: And so Jan Hus died by being burned at the stake; his goose was cooked. But that was not the end of the influence of Jan Hus, which persisted for many years.

II. The Reformation beliefs of Jan Hus—what was his theological legacy?

We still believe many things that Hus taught.

A. The authority of Scripture over the church—2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:19-20

1. The Reformation was a “back to the Bible” movement, and Hus wanted to put more emphasis on the Bible. He said that he wanted “to hold, believe, and assert whatever is contained in [the Scriptures] as long as I have breath in me.”¹⁶
2. He believed that, in all questions of faith and life, the Bible is the only infallible [standard], and the only source of truth in contrast to decrees of councils and laws of the Church.¹⁷
3. He said that even laymen were entitled to challenge church teachings if they were inconsistent with Scripture.

He said: “Every Christian is expected to believe explicitly and implicitly all the truth the Holy Spirit has put in Scripture, and this way a man is not bound to believe the sayings of the saints which are apart from scripture, nor should [they] believe papal bulls [decrees], except in so far as they speak out of scripture.”¹⁸

4. All of the Reformers held that Scripture must hold the primary authority over the church. And if a belief, tradition, or practice is not biblical, then it has no place in the church.

We still believe that same idea today; Scripture is the primary authority for faith and practice. *Sola Scriptura*

If Scripture is the authority, then ...

¹⁶ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Introduction,” *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 370.

¹⁷ Leslie K. Sovocol, “John Hus; His Philosophy and Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 89, no. 354 (1932): 214.

¹⁸ Frank Tunstall, “John Hus, Burned at the Stake.” <http://greatcommandministries.org/john-hus-burned-at-the-stake/>

- B. We should preach and read the Scriptures in the common language.
1. Because Hus believed in the authority of Scripture, he believed that it should be translated so that common people could read it.
 2. Likewise, he believed that preaching ought to be done in the language that common people could understand. At that time, church services would usually be conducted in Latin. Educated people could understand Latin, but not most common people. Hus became rather famous for preaching in the Czech language at the Bethlehem Chapel. And later he revised the Bohemian Bible to make it more readable for average people.

Likewise, we see the importance of having the Bible in a format that we can understand. Average people should be able to read and understand the Bible. Thankfully, we have Bible translations that average English-speaking people can read.

Hus also taught that...

- C. Jesus is the head of the church.

Ephesians 1:22 *[God] put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church.*

Colossians 1:18 *[Jesus] is the head of the body, the church, ...*

1. At the time when Hus was living, most people believed that the pope was the head of the church; he was the main authority. The officials of the church had the right to tell people what to believe and how to behave. Most people just followed the church; they did what they were told because they didn't know any better.
2. Hus believed that that church was the body of Christ and that the only head of the church could be Jesus.
3. The RCC certainly does not deny that Jesus is the head of the church, but they also believe that the pope is the "vicar" of Christ, that is, the representative and spokesman for Christ on earth. Thus, what the pope teaches as doctrine is authoritative for the church. Hus objected to that because the pope and his church often taught error, not the Bible.

4. Hus further taught that salvation comes from being rightly related to Jesus, not being rightly related to the church. The true church is composed of those who confess that Christ is the Son of God. This confession is the rock upon which the church is founded.

Like Hus, we deny the authority of the pope as the head of the church. We agree that salvation comes from faith in Christ, not from belief in a church.

D. Salvation by faith—Eph 2:8-9

1. Hus affirmed that faith is the means of justification. He strongly asserted that saving faith is not dead faith; saving faith perseveres in love and in good works.
2. He said that no one is justified by works but only by God's grace.
3. We would disagree with some things that Hus affirmed. Remember that he was a RC priest and was advocating only mild reforms.

He affirmed the sacraments of the church. However, he denied that the priest made the sacraments effective. God works through the sacraments, he said. He believed that God alone has the power to forgive sins for those who are genuinely repentant.

4. Hus was beginning to move away from the RC doctrines and more towards the Protestant viewpoint. He was an early reformer who was advocating for reform of some of the most obvious abuses of the church.

One of the marks of an evangelical church is that it preaches salvation by grace, through faith, not by good works. That's what we believe.

E. The necessity of reforming the church—Acts 17:11

1. Hus condemned the sale of indulgences and the church's involvement in military actions.

a) The pope was planning a crusade against the king of Naples and promised indulgences for those who participated. Under the indulgence system, one could pay for or otherwise earn spiritual merit and forgiveness. The church used the sale of indulgences to raise money for questionable projects. Hus boldly protested against the crusade and against the sale of indulgences.

Of course, Luther protested the same things about 100 years later.

b) Hus saw a biblical distinction between the spiritual realm and the political realm. The pope should not have any civil authority; the church should not be involved in military actions. The church and its officers should have no power to coerce behavior or belief. There is no justification for using violence to uproot heresy.¹⁹

2. Hus also took a different doctrinal position than the RCC on some matters.

a) He insisted that God alone can forgive sin and that the priest has authority only to declare God's forgiveness in absolution.²⁰

¹⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 324.

²⁰ Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 324.

- b) He adhered to the doctrine of transubstantiation in the eucharist but insisted that Christ's body is not present in a [physical] way in the elements; it is a sacramental presence.²¹ His view seems to be closer to what the Lutherans hold today.

Quote: Hus was a moderate Catholic reformer but is rightly admired by Protestants because in his attitude to biblical authority, his passion for reform and insistence upon Christ's Lordship over the church; he paved the way for the spiritual enlightenment that culminated in the Protestant Reformation.²²

Borrowing biblical language, we can say, "He being dead yet speaketh" (Heb 11:4). Hus is long dead, but he still speaks; his influence persists still today.

I've said before that if the RCC would have been willing to reform moderately, they probably could have avoided the Protestant Reformation. But the RCC refused even basic reforms, and it thus condemned Hus and killed him. Other people picked up and further publicized Hus' views, and that eventually led to the full-blown Reformation.

One last story about Hus which may or may not be strictly true: Just before his death, Hus supposedly said, "You may kill this goose, but after me shall come a swan, and him you will not be able to kill." And the man who condemned him to death, the Bishop of Constance said, "Over my dead body." About 100 years later, when Martin Luther was ordained, part of the ordination process for him was lying down on the floor of the church prostrate. And it so happened that Luther was lying down on the crypt of the Bishop of Constance—the man who condemned Hus to death. So Luther was ordained over that man's dead body, just as he said. Luther was that swan who came after Hus' goose was cooked. If that story is true, God has a sense of humor.

On Reformation Day, we should celebrate men like Jan Hus and affirm our belief in the biblical doctrines that he taught. We especially appreciate his insistence that the Bible is the final and highest authority for faith and practice. We should seek to emulate his commitment to Christ as the only true head of the church. We can follow his example of holiness of life, purity of heart, courage, and boldness in the face of opposition.

²¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 324.

²² Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 324.