

The Life of John Huss (1369-1415)

Rev. Erik Guichelaar

Introduction:

Ever since the time of the Protestant Reformation there has been a saying that goes something like this: “The doctrine of election stands at the very heart of the church.” Maybe you have heard your own minister say that from off the pulpit, or in the catechism room: “The doctrine of election stands at the very heart of what the church is.” What that saying simply means is this: to know what the church is, one needs to know and embrace what the biblical doctrine of election is. If a person does not know the biblical truth of election, he really does not and cannot know what the church is.

The reason that the doctrine of election stands at the heart of the church is this: it is God’s decree of election that *governs* who the members of the church are. Those whom God chose (elected) in eternity to be his own people are the true members of the church of Jesus Christ. In fact, God elected them as his people exactly so that they might be members in the church. If you and I are the elect children of God, then by virtue of that very election, we are members of the church of Jesus Christ. This is an absolute, unconditional truth. Membership in the body of Jesus Christ is not based on any of your own works or decisions; it is not based on the approval and consent of other men; it is not based on the specific institution where you currently have your church membership. If you are an elect child of God, chosen in grace, then you are a member of the body of Jesus Christ, the church. If you are not an elect child of God, chosen in grace, you are a reprobate, and you are not a member of the body of Jesus Christ.

Now you might read that, and say, “Yes. That makes sense.” Maybe you say, “That is nothing new.” Maybe you even say, “I thought this article was about John Huss.”

But imagine for a moment, young people, that you never knew these things, that you were never taught these things. Imagine that instead of being taught these things, you were taught that you were saved based on your own actions and your own decisions. Imagine that you were taught that ultimately you were saved based on your church allegiance, and that if (and *only* if) you were a member of a certain, specific church here on earth, could you also be a member of the church in heaven. And imagine that nearly everyone around you believed this kind of lie, so

that nearly everyone around you made sure to belong to that one instituted church that was teaching all these things, and thought they were saved because of it. And imagine that you yourself happened to be a member of that church as well.

But now imagine that as you studied the scriptures for yourself, you became aware of how wrong all this was, and you came to a proper understanding of election. And imagine that you were a minister, and so you started to preach that it is God's decree of election alone that governs membership in the true church of Jesus Christ (just as our ministers do today). And then imagine that as you started to preach these things, others in the church started to persecute you: they labeled you as a heretic, they excommunicated you, and you were forced to go into hiding. And then imagine that eventually you were taken, and you were tied to a stake, set on fire, and burned to death. Ultimately, because you were teaching from the scriptures that eternal salvation is rooted in divine election, and not based on works or on membership in a particular church institute.

Now you might read that and say, "That is a lot to imagine!" And maybe you are still saying, "I thought this article was about John Huss." Well, what I have just asked you to imagine is exactly the story of John Huss, and what Huss experienced in his life as a member in the Roman Catholic Church.

John Huss was a pre-reformer. He was one whom God used in a very powerful way to prepare the way for the Protestant Reformation. What we enjoy today in the preaching and in catechism instruction, what we enjoy as our Reformed heritage (what we sometimes take for granted), we enjoy, because God raised up men like John Huss and many others to rediscover the truths of the gospel, to preach those truths to God's people in the face of fierce persecution, and even to suffer and die so that those truths might not be denied, but be spread throughout the world, even until today.

Huss' Life:

John Huss was born into a peasant's family around 1369 in Husinec, Bohemia, (which is now part of present-day Czech Republic), and was burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic Church in 1415. During Huss' entire lifetime, the Roman Catholic church was overrun with corruption and gross immorality. Many priests did not know how to read. Even more priests had no care for studying the Bible. And even more priests had no care for sound preaching or

faithful catechism instruction. What they all did seem to have a care for was money and the earthly, sensual pleasures that money could afford. This was the kind of corrupt church that John Huss grew up in, and in which Huss eventually became a priest in 1401.

Although Huss became a priest in the corrupt Roman Catholic church, it quickly became clear that John Huss was no normal, corrupt priest. Instead of having a love for money, Huss had a love for the gospel. Instead of having a love for sinful pleasure, Huss had a love for holy living. And what began to characterize John Huss above all things was a love for the preaching. While the preaching in Huss' day was either non-existent or thoroughly unbiblical, Huss stood out as an outstanding and passionate preacher. He was a preacher who studied the scriptures, who preached the scriptures, and who applied the scriptures to his congregation. He viewed the scriptures as the inspired, infallible word of God, and as the supreme authority for doctrine and for life. He preached the scriptures accordingly, and his congregation loved him for it.

But not surprisingly, this is exactly where John Huss came into trouble with the Roman Catholic church, for almost as soon as Huss became a priest and began preaching to the people, he started to preach against the gross sins that characterized the other priests around him. As Huss also carried out his work as a lecturer at the university in Prague, he began to study the writings of the English pre-reformer John Wycliffe. Through studying Wycliffe, Huss began to see not only the wicked lifestyles of the clergy, but also the thoroughly false doctrine that characterized the Roman Catholic Church. And so Huss started to preach against false doctrine as well. He started to preach against indulgences, he started to preach that the pope was not infallible (only the scriptures were, he said), and he started to preach more and more about the glorious truth of predestination and election. The saints in Prague loved him for it, but the Roman Catholic church hated him for it.

Soon Huss became a marked man. In 1407, John Huss was ordered to stop preaching against the sinful lifestyles of the other priests. In 1410 Huss' church was forced to close down. Soon enough Huss was excommunicated and became a hunted man. From 1412–1414, Huss went into exile, hiding in castles, translating portions of the Bible into the vernacular Czech language, and writing his most important work, "On the Church." In 1414, the Roman Catholic Church summoned the Council of Constance and invited Huss to come to the meeting, promising him a safe passage back to his hometown after the meeting was done. Huss decided to go to the Council, thinking he needed to show his fellow Christians and church members that he was not

ashamed of the gospel and was ready to give a defense of the truth. But soon after his arrival, the promise of a safe return home was broken, and Huss was thrown into an utterly filthy prison. After five months, Huss was taken out of prison and asked if he would recant. He said he would only recant if he was shown that his teachings were not Biblical. The Roman Catholic Church was furious with Huss, and after four more weeks in prison, Huss was burned at the stake.

Huss' Significance:

When we look at how the Roman Catholic church treated Huss, we might ask why the Roman Catholic church hated John Huss so much and went so far as to burn him at the stake. If all John Huss preached was the scriptures, the need to live holy lives before God, the glorious truth of predestination and election, and other such things, then why put the man to death?

This is where we must see John Huss as truly a pre-reformer. What John Huss emphasized was this: the scriptures *alone* are the supreme rule of faith and conduct. That kind of thinking attacked the very foundation of the Roman Catholic church, for what the Roman Catholic church was doing (and still does) was this: it was elevating the sayings of men (the church institute) *above* the scriptures. What the Roman Catholic Church was saying (and still says) was this: "In order to go to heaven, you need to go through the Roman Catholic church institute. If you are not in good standing with the Roman Catholic church, then you cannot be saved. But if you are a member of the Roman Catholic church, in good standing with the church hierarchy, then you are guaranteed to go to heaven. The church saves you. What John Huss showed was this: it is not an instituted church here on earth that decides or determines your salvation and eternal life, but it is just the opposite: it is God's decree of election unto salvation that governs the church and the members of the true church. As Huss emphasized, true and faithful *instituted* churches on earth need to recognize this and *preach* this as the plain teaching of the scriptures.

But you see, this means that it is *God* that saves, and *not* the Roman Catholic instituted church. This means that it is *God* who saves, and *not* the pope or priests or an instituted church. That kind of thinking threatened the complete control that the Roman Catholic church had over its members, who for fear of their eternal salvation were obeying and believing everything that the Roman Catholic church was telling them without comparing it with the scriptures. The

Roman Catholic church could not tolerate giving up any control it had over the people. So Huss, even though all he was teaching was the scriptures, had to be put away and put to death.

Over a hundred years before the Protestant Reformation even began, John Huss was preaching loudly and clearly, “The doctrine of election stands at the very heart of the church. Election governs the church.” By God’s grace, that continues to be sounded forth across Reformed pulpits today. Thanks be to God if we hear that preaching in our churches. It needs to be that way, for this is *how God* saves: through faithful churches that faithfully preach the truth of what the church actually is—“the company of the predestinated.”

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