

The History of the Reformation...



HOW CHRIST
RESTORED
THE GOSPEL
TO HIS
CHURCH

The Goose That Became a Swan...

John Huss

I want to speak to you this morning about the Goose that became a swan. But before I do I want to put your mind at ease. I am not going to tell you a fairy tale or a fable or a parable or anything like that.

No, I am going to tell you a true story...or at least a story that is mostly true.

But doing that, I am also going to tell you a sad story...or at least a story that's partly sad.

Still... it's a great story.

It's a story about a man whose name was "**Goose.**" Honestly, that was really his name. He often referred to himself in his notes and letters to his friends as "**the Goose.**" Now this man, was a man that thousands of people came to despise....he became a man whose name was rarely spoken out loud in mixed company...a man whose name was most often spoken in whispers, in the

darkness of shadows. His name came to represent all things evil, all things forbidden, all things black and foul.

Now the way the story goes is that this man, this man named **“Goose”** was eventually arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed because of faith and his ideas and, in a very real sense, simply because he would not shut up. But his story is complicated. He lived in complicated times. Still I don't want to excuse the way he was treated or to make his story other than what it was. His arrest was the cunning and foul work of cunning and foul men. His arrest was marked by unbelievable treachery and deceit. It was a reprehensible act.

Now, that part of his story is true and it's not just true; it is undeniably and unquestionably true, and it is something that even his enemies admitted and bragged about. The men, who arrested him, some of them quite famous and powerful, broke their written and public promise of safe passage in order to get their hands on him and when they did they turned on him like wild dogs, like vicious wolves and tore him to pieces.

But they weren't content just to kill him. That is what makes his story so remarkable.

They weren't content just to burn his body and dump his ashes into the Rhine River. No, they wanted to destroy the very thought of him. They wanted to destroy his reputation. They wanted to destroy people's memory of him. They wanted to destroy whatever impact he had made on his followers. They wanted to destroy the very idea of him. So they tortured him and mistreated him and misrepresented him. They did their best to turn his memory into something

monstrous. They slandered him and told terrible lies about him even after they had already killed him and for a while it looked as if their efforts were going to be mostly successful. For a while, as a result of their slanders and vilification...men and women...men and women that knew him and knew better...came to speak of him as something of a medieval boogeyman.

Men and women and boys and girls came to be fearful to whisper his name on dark and rainy nights. Moms and dads frightened their disobedient children with his name. They even warned their children that if they persisted in their disobedience the same fate awaited them that overtook the goose.

Anyway, the powerful men that hated him...burned his books. They burned his friends. They even burned him.

But geese are noisy birds. They are almost impossible to herd. They are obstinate and untamable. They're hard to cook.

At least, that's the way it was with this particular goose.

Over time his enemies learned that they simply could not make his incessant cackling go away. They learned that his voice, his singing still echoed in the hills and countryside surrounding the city of Prague. They learned that his voice and his preaching still echoed in his beloved Bethlehem Chapel and in the corridors of the University of Prague. They were yet to learn that his martyrdom, stemming from his shameful, deceitful, senseless murder, would turn into a dreadful, festering wound...would take two hundred years to heal and would eventually lead to a terrible war and to a deep and abiding hatred between the

Czechs and the Germans that still exists somewhat even to this day. They were yet to learn that his murder would galvanize three generations of Czechs to hate and loath the Germans and three generations of Germans to hate and loath the Czechs.

Still that is what happened but that is not all that happened.

It is perhaps one of the great ironies of providence that a hundred years after his death, the Goose's name came to be associated most closely with a German...a particular German.

Now it is strange that that would happen.

It is strange because at the time the Germans and the Czechs hated each other. It is stranger still because the German that came to be associated with the Goose was not even born until 68 years after the Goose had been murdered. In fact, the German that came to be associated with the Goose was an obscure monk, in an obscure German town, in an obscure part of rural Germany a full hundred and two years after the Goose's death until he nailed a piece of paper to a church door to complain about indulgences and then people began to make the connection almost immediately, **"He's just like the Goose."**

The German's name was Martin Luther.

The Goose's name was John Huss.

You see in the Czech language Huss means **"goose"**.

Now because of that association...that is, because of his association with Martin Luther...John Huss wound up becoming one of the principle characters...one of the principal heroes of the Protestant Reformation and that is true even though he had been dead a hundred years when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door at Wittenberg.

Now because of that many scholars scoff at the account I am about to read to you. You remember that I said earlier that most of John Huss' story was true. Well the part I am about to read to you is the part about which there is some doubt. You see many scholars doubt that John Huss ever said the words I am about to read to you. It's not that they don't want them to be true. It's just that they do not see how they could be true. That is, they do not see how this man, this man named "**Goose**" could have said what he was supposed to have said at his martyrdom.

Are you interested? Alright then here is the disputed part...as far as I know the only disputed part of John Huss' story.

I am reading now from the letter of Poggius Florentini to his friend Leonhard Nikolai. Poggius, was a Roman Catholic priest and an observer at Huss' martyrdom. He came to be known in history as Poggius the Papist. He was an official church observer and not a friend or admirer of Huss at all prior to his trial. Anyway, in his letter, Poggius describes the scene where they were Huss was being taken to the stake to be burned alive. This is what he says:

Then *Hus* sang in verse, with an elated voice, like the psalmist in the thirty-first psalm, reading from a paper in his hands:

"In thee, O Lord, I put my trust, bow down thine ear to me."

With such Christian prayers, Hus arrived at the stake, looking at it without fear. He climbed upon it, after two assistants of the hangman had torn his clothes from him and had clad him into a shirt drenched with pitch. At that moment, one of the electors, Prince Ludwig of the Palatinate, rode up and pleaded with Hus to recant, so that he might be spared a death in the flames. But Hus replied: **"Today you will roast a lean goose, but 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."** Full of pity and filled with much admiration, the Prince turned away.¹

Now that same story...that exact same story is repeated in Foxe's Book of Martyrs.

When the chain was put about him at the stake, he said, with a smiling countenance, **"My Lord Jesus Christ was bound with a harder chain than this for my sake, and why then should I be ashamed of this rusty one?"** When the fagots were piled up to his very neck, the duke of Bavaria was so officious as to desire him to abjure. **"No, (said Huss;) I never preached any doctrine of an evil tendency; and what I taught with my lips I now seal with my blood."** He then said to the executioner, **"You are now going to burn a goose, (Huss signifying goose in the Bohemian language:) but in a century you will have a swan which you can neither roast nor boil."** If he were prophetic, he must have meant Martin Luther, who shone about a hundred years after...²

Now you can see there are two variants.

Poggius has Huss say what he says to a prince. Foxe has Huss say what he says to an executioner. It's hard to know whether one of the two is true or whether either one is true but I am not too concerned about that...we have an official

transcript of his trial and even his death...so we know the basic facts and the basic story.

What I want to talk about this morning is why anyone saw a connection between Huss and Luther and why Foxe thought this cryptic phrase, **“but in a century you will have a swan which you can neither roast nor boil”** might possibly have been applied to Martin Luther.

The first reason and really the simplest is that Luther’s Coat of Arms bore the image of a swan. That is, Luther’s family crest bore the image of a swan. So in that time and culture the common people would have picked up on the idea of a goose and a swan. In much the same way that people in our day and time use the letter **“W”** to refer to a specific person.

The second they connected them is that both men got into trouble over the issue of indulgences. Now we talked at length last week about indulgences, what they were and why they were vile. Both men got into trouble over indulgences.

The third is that both men attracted the popular sentiment of the masses. Both men spoke out against what everyone already knew to be wicked and sinful. It is just that both men were brave...or obstinate depending upon your point of view.

In fact, Luther’s enemies noted the similarities and often charged him with being a Hussite, a follower of Huss. They sometimes called Luther the Saxon Huss.

No one is exactly sure of the year John Huss was born. It was probably between 1369 and 1371. It is remarkable to me but not even Huss was never sure how old

he was. He was born in the little town of Hussinetz, whose name meant something like “**Gooseville**” and from which he later took his name. His parents were very poor and Huss’ father died at an early age. Huss first started school when he was thirteen. He loved learning and learned quickly and soon decided on a life of ministry not because he was particularly religious but rather because it was a vocation open to someone that poor like he was and because it was vocation in which he could continue to study and learn.

Eventually Huss was ordained as a priest by the Roman Catholic Church. He both taught and the University of Prague and preached at Bethlehem Chapel on Sundays. The church where Huss preached, Bethlehem Chapel, was unusual in that it required its minister to preach in the naïve language of the people. So Huss preached to the people of Bethlehem Chapel in Czech. That was unusual because in that day almost all services were in Latin.

Early on, Huss came under the influence of the English Reformer John Wycliffe.

At first that was true because Wycliffe was an able philosopher. Wycliffe was a professor at Oxford University in England and both a philosopher as well as a wonderful theologian. Because Huss taught philosophy he enjoyed reading Wycliffe’s books and reading Wycliffe he also picked up some of Wycliffe’s theology. Anyway the Holy Roman Emperor’s sister married the King of England, Richard II and one of the results was that a great many students traveled to England to study at Oxford and when they did they came under the influence of Wycliffe. Huss too was impacted by Wycliffe’s radical ideas and later read and incorporated into his teaching many of Wycliffe’s ideas.

Some of Huss's most radical ideas were:

- ...that the church was made up of all the predestined believers of all ages. During the time of Wycliffe and Huss the official position of the church was that the true church consisted of the Pope and the cardinals his bishops and priests and that common lay people were not real members but only communed with the church as they received communion, which was limited to bread.
- ...that the authority of the Bible was higher than the authority of the church. That was a radical idea in his day and it was an idea derived from Wycliffe. This particular point is principally what got him killed and it is interesting that his words regarding the authority of Scripture were later to be repeated almost word for word by Luther.
- ...that Jesus Christ Himself was the head of the church and that reprehensible lives disqualified men from their positions of authority in ministry. He believed that Jesus was the head of the church and that reprobate leaders were disqualified from leading the church.

Now all those things seem so simple to us but in Huss' day they were radical ideas and fearful ideas to monarchs and religious leaders alike. Early on Huss found himself being accused of being a follower of Wycliffe and you know what, he was. He had several volumes of Wycliffe which he copied with his own hand.

Now originally there was so much political and ecclesiastical turmoil in the empire that Huss managed not only to survive but to prosper. He was a popular preacher in Prague, principally because he preached in the language of the people. He was a popular preacher and a respected seminary professor.

Still, he was considered something of a radical and his radicalism was seen both in the fact that he taught the views held by Wycliffe and because he administered both the bread and the cup to his parishioners. Probably he survived as long as he did because he was such a popular preacher.

Now to understand why John Huss was burned at the stake, it is important to understand something of the religious conflict of his day.

The first thing that you need to understand is that in Huss' day there was more than one pope. Do you find that surprising?



If you look instance at this map you can see that there are principally two different colors dividing up western Europe. The lighter cream color represents those areas under the domain of the King of France and the golden color represents the domain of the Holy Romans Empire. You can see that not even Italy was exempt from division.

Now let me take just a moment or two to explain how that came to be.

Now what happened originally is that in 1305 the King of France forced a number of bishops to appoint a pope. When they did the King changed the pope's residence to Avignon in France. That meant that over a period of the next seventy years or so, the papacy moved from Rome to Avignon. How that

happened and why it was permitted are important but that is not our subject this morning. What is important is that the King of France for all practical purposes hijacked the papacy and kept it under his dominion in Avignon. This period became known to the Italians, who had lost their pope, as the Babylonian Captivity of the Church...presumably because like the Babylonian Captivity of Israel it lasted for about 70 years.

Luther, as some of you already know, later wrote a book called the Babylonian Captivity of the Church...but his book was about the sacraments and not about Avignon. Still the people of his day would have had this particular event in mind.



Now here is the list but for our discussion this morning their names are not very important. The one that is important is Gregory XI. Here's why. Over the seventy years or so of the Babylonian Captivity seven popes ruled from Avignon. Finally one of the popes Gregory XI decided to return to Rome. The Italians were ecstatic. Rome had fallen on terrible times without the Pope there to protect there to guide the city and to draw pilgrims. Still Gregory did not intend to stay. He

enjoyed the climate of southern France much more than the climate of southern Italy. He intended to return to Avignon. But before he could, he died.

Now the cardinals that attended the Pope were almost all French and their intention was to leave Italy and to return to Avignon. But when the Italians found out Gregory had died and that the cardinals were about to return to France they were filled with rage. They stormed the Vatican. Let me let David Schaaf describe the scene.

The French cardinals were unable to agree upon a candidate from their own number. But the Italian mob outside the Vatican *influenced them*. A scene of wild and unrestrained turbulence prevailed in the square of St. Peter's. The crowd pressed its way into the very spaces of the Vatican, and with difficulty a clearing was made for the entrance of all the cardinals. To prevent the exit of the cardinals, the captains of the thirteen districts into which Rome was divided, had taken possession of the city and closed the gates. The mob, determined to keep the papacy on the Tiber River, filled the air with angry shouts and threats, "**We will have a Roman for pope or at least an Italian.**" On the first night soldiers clashed their spears in the room underneath the chamber where the conclave was met, and even thrust them through the ceiling. A fire of combustibles was lighted under the window. The next morning as their excellencies were praying the mass of the Holy Spirit and engaged in other devotions, the noises became louder and more menacing. One cardinal, "**better elect the devil than die**" *here in Rome.*³

So they appointed an Italian as Pope.

His name was Urban the VI.

Now after his appointment and installation, the French cardinals escaped the city and returned to Avignon. They resented, as you might suspect, having been forced to appoint a pope. They also resented the thought, perhaps even more,

that the papacy was going to return to Italy. So that same group of cardinals decided to elect another pope who was in their mind the real pope. His name was Clement VII.



Now I think they actually expected Urban to step down or to defer to Clement. But that is not what happened. What happened was that instead of having one pope they now had two. One ruled in Rome and one ruled in Avignon. Neither man was willing to step down. Both men were duly and legally appointed to the office. In fact, both men were elected by the same group of cardinals. This particular point later became one of the central arguments Protestants were to use during the Reformation whenever Catholics argued that the church never erred in its official decrees. Obviously this example was an important illustration of the point.

Now over the next thirty years or so, the church endured two popes...one in Rome and one in Avignon and they fought it out both trying to gain the upper hand. Now if you ever want to read a really interesting portion of church history this is a good place to start. The two popes threatened each other and even anathematized each other...they excommunicated and anathematized whole

regions and whole countries trying to gain support and control...still neither one was able to gain the upper hand.

Finally, around the 1409...just about the time Huss came on the scene the political leaders, that is the Holy Roman Empire and the French King, decided to put an end to the conflict and appoint a conciliar commission to depose the other two popes and to select a third pope agreeable to everyone. The only problem was that when they elected their new conciliar pope, Alexander V, neither one of the other two men was willing to step down. The result, of course, was that there were no longer two popes. Instead, there were now three.

The Great Schism

- **French Popes Ruling from Avignon**
- **Benedict XIII... 1394-1424**
- **Italian Popes Ruling from Rome**
- **Gregory XII... 1406-1417.**
- **Conciliatory Popes**
- **Alexander V... 1409-1410**
- **John XXIII... 1410-1415**
- **Martin V... 1417-1431**

To make matters worse, Alexander V did not live very long and when he died he was replaced by a vile human toad named Baldassarre Cossa, John XXIII.

John XXIII was, however, a man of action. He had been a famous soldier, probably I ought to say infamous soldier, and when he was elected pope he took Rome by force and caused Gregory XII to flee for his life.

However, the King of Naples hated John XXIII and when he discovered that he had taken Rome by force, he marched up to Rome and forced John XXIII to flee. When that happened John XXIII was infuriated and he began to raise money to put together a massive army to take Rome back. But he didn't have any money.

Now I want you to guess how he intended to raise the money to pay for the army to drive the King of Naples out of Rome.

He intended to raise the money by selling indulgences. Now you can see, I think, how Huss and Luther became connected. And when John Huss caught wind of that he went crazy. He began to preach against indulgences. He began to preach against the sinful folly of men like John XXIII. He began to preach that the church was not made up of the Pope and his cardinals, obviously if it were then there were at least three separate churches, but was made up of the elect of all the ages.

Now when that happened Huss became the mortal enemy of all three popes. Huss fell under the ire of the Holy Roman Emperor, and at least two of the three popes. He was excommunicated but he would not stop preaching. Finally, the City of Prague was placed under an interdict, which meant that all the people of the City were excommunicated and were going to die in their sins unless they expelled Huss. That meant that if a person died while the city was an interdict they went to hell. A person could not be married. No Priests could be ordained. No person could receive communion. When a city was placed under an interdict, the people became so spiritually discouraged that they often forced their leaders to comply with the wish of the pope. Anyway, to spare the city Huss left the city and went into exile. Still, he would not shut up and plans were hatched to lure him to a Council and deal with him once and for all.

Now you might think it strange that Huss became the focus of anger of both the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor...you might think it strange that he became the focus of so much anger and hatred. But the problem for them was that Huss had the hearts of the people and to let him go...to let him have his head they knew was a danger that could lead to the revolt of the everyday citizens.

So they lured him to a town of Constance under the promise of resolving their conflict. They offered him safe conduct to and from the city. Now the point is terribly important because 120 years later they were going to offer safe conduct to Luther as well. Only Luther knew the story of Huss and knew that such men could not be trusted. When Huss arrived in Constance they promptly put him in chains and put him in prison and they did that in violation of their promise to give him safe conduct. They began the process of putting him to death.

Finally they decided to kill him. On July 6, 1415 they stripped him of his priestly office and placed a large paper cone or dunce hat on his head. The hat contained the image of dancing devils and bore the word "**Chief of the Heretics**". John Huss was paraded through the city in chains wearing this ridiculous dunce cap with devil on it and still he carried himself in a noble and manly way, head up...shoulders back with an air of dignity and refinement. He had been in prison for almost six months at the time...he had almost died several times from disease and exposure and hunger. He was terribly gaunt and pale and emaciated yet he possessed extraordinary courage and bearing as he marched to the place where he was to be burned alive.

I thought I might just read you an account of his execution. This is from *John Hus* by Matthew Spinka. I think Spinka is a Czech and it seems to me that he holds

Huss and Huss' memory in deep reverence. I think you feel Spinka's pride in writing of his countryman.

Nevertheless, before they took him to the stake, they placed on his head a tall paper crown on which were painted three devils fighting for the possession of a soul. The inscription on it read: **"This is a heresiarch."** The bishops intoned therewith the final curse: **"We commit your soul to the devil?"** — as if they had power over Huss' soul and could order the devil to take it! He answered: **"No, I commit it to the most merciful Lord Jesus Christ!"** Thereupon, King Sigismund, the Holy Roman Emperor, ordered Duke Louis to receive Huss from the hands of the bishops; the prince, in turn, entrusted him to the care of the executioners.

When the sad procession, accompanied by **"almost all the inhabitants of that city,"** was passing the cemetery, where his books which could be found in Constance were being burned, Huss smiled. On the way he exhorted the crowd not to believe that he was guilty of heresy.

When they reached the place of execution, he knelt and prayed that God might have mercy on him. The crowd of onlookers was impressed and uttered their amazement at his prayer. Some thought that he should be allowed to confess his sins but the officials disagreed, noting it was not appropriate for a heretic.

While he was praying, the paper crown fell from his head. Some soldiers exclaimed: **"Put it on him again, so that he might be burned with the devils, his masters."** Huss then rose and said clearly that he was willing to bear most patiently and humbly the dreadful death. They disrobed him down to his shirt and tied him, with his hands behind his back, to the stake. He faced east...but some bystanders objected because facing east was only permitted to those hoping in the resurrection. They untied him, turned him around and made him face west. Then bound by the neck to the stake with a rusty chain, he commented with a smile that his Savior had been bound by a heavier chain. Thereupon, the executioners placed wood interspersed with straw all the way up to his chin.

Before the order to apply the torch was given, the imperial marshal and Duke Louis approached and once more exhorted Huss to recant to save

his life; but even in this supreme moment of decision, Huss remained firm. Thereupon the two men clapped their hands as a signal to the executioner to proceed with his grim task.

When the fire was lit, Huss began to sing: **“Christ, Thou Son of the living God, have mercy on us”**; and then **“Christ, Thou son of the living God, have mercy on me.”** In the third place he prayed, **“Thou, Who art born of Mary the Virgin”** but he did not finish it, for the wind blew the flame into his face and snuffed out his voice. He continued to pray silently, until he died a short time later, **“about the time one could quickly recite Our Father’ two or three times.”**

When the pyre died down and the ropes were burned, the remains of the body stood erect, hanging by the chain placed at his neck. The executioners pulled down the body with the stake and adding more wood, burned it, breaking the bones and the skull that they might be incinerated even faster. When they found the heart, they impaled it on a sharpened stick so they could burn it separately. The clothing also was thrown into the fire at the order of the marshal, who remarked that otherwise the Czechs might venerate it as a relic. He promised the executioners, who otherwise would have divided the garments among themselves, to pay them for what they worth...only to burn them. Finally, loading the ashes into carts, the executioners dumped them into the Rhine. The faithful Czechs did not need any relics; they carried the memory of their great champion of truth in their hearts. They still do.⁴

John Huss died because he resisted the selling of indulgences. A hundred and two years later when Luther nailed the Ninety Five Theses on the door at Wittenberg, the immediate charge was that he was a Hussite. They said, **“He’s just like John Huss!”** And the expectation was what had happened to Huss would also happen to Luther but we’ll talk about that more next week. I do want to read one other thing to you though this morning. It was something written by Luther himself, something that I found in my private reading of Luther...something I never realized he said, until just a couple of months ago.

This is from Luther's Commentary on the Imperial Edict. It was written in 1531.

I love this. Luther writes:

However, I, Dr. Martin, have been called to this work and was compelled to become a doctor, without any initiative of my own, but out of pure obedience. Then I had to accept the office of doctor and swear a vow to my most beloved Holy Scriptures that I would preach and teach them faithfully and purely. While engaged in this kind of teaching, the papacy crossed my path and wanted to hinder me in it. How it has fared is obvious to all, and it will fare still worse. It shall not hinder me. In God's name and call I shall walk on the lion and the adder, and tread on the young lion and dragon with my feet. And this which has been begun during my lifetime will be completed after my death. St. John Huss prophesied of me when he wrote from his prison in Bohemia, **"They will roast a goose now (for 'Huss' means 'a goose'), but after a hundred years they will hear a swan sing, and him they will *have to endure.*"** And that is the way it will be, if God wills.⁵

That's the story. The story of how a goose turned into a swan. It's a great story.

It's our story as people of the Reformation.

Let's pray.

¹ Poggius the Papist, *Hus the Heretic*, Letter 2, pg. 60.

² John Fox, *Foxes Book of Martyrs*, Chapter 8, 193. First translated into English in 1563.

³ David S. Schaaf, *The History of the Christian Church Vol. 4: The Middle Ages A.D. 1294-1517* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1910), 118-9.

⁴ Matthew Spink, *John Hus: A Biography*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 288-290. Slight edited by me for smoother reading.

⁵ M. Luther, (1999, c1960). *Vol. 34: Luther's Works, Vol. 34 : Career of the Reformer IV* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Vol. 34, Page 103-104). Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Taken from...*Dr. Martin Luther's Commentary on the Alleged Imperial Edict Promulgated in the Year 1531 After the Imperial Diet of the Year 1530*