

John Hus

The Moravian Church traces its roots back to the life and ministry of John Hus, the Czech reformer who was burned at the stake at the Council of Constance in 1415. Many of the principles for which he lived and died remain at the core of our church's mission nearly 600 years later.

Hus was a priest of the Roman Catholic Church and a teacher at the University of Prague. He had originally thought to enter the priesthood to find a secure and ample living for himself. Gradually, however, as his studies progressed, he was led to a deeper personal commitment of faith and dedication to God. This commitment caused him to speak out to the church in his day, calling for reliance on Scripture, simplicity, and works as the fruit of faith. Hus did not originate the Czech reform movement, but joined others who through preaching to the lay people and in debates within the university community were seeking to call individuals to renewed dedication to God and to recall the institutional medieval church from too great a reliance on worldly power and riches. Hus laid great stress on the grace of God, the saving work of Christ, and the need for personal dedication in one's life. He built on his reading of Scripture and the faith of the church which through the centuries has always had many faithful and devoted Christians in it, whatever failures the institutional church may have known at any given time. Through his work at the university and through his preaching in Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, Hus became leader of both the popular and academic strands of the reform movement.

This meant, however, that those in the church who benefited or were content with things as they were focused on Hus as a natural enemy and tried to discredit him. This sometimes had political overtones, for at that time many Czechs were distraught over what they saw as German encroachments on their lands and society. Hus became a sort of champion of the Czech nation in this regard, even as many proud and wealthy members of the church hierarchy sought to nullify his calls for reform by finding things in his writings which could be branded as heretical.

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of the leaders of this council were themselves reformers and in other circumstances could have sympathized with many of Hus' positions. Unfortunately, nationalistic politics and the question of which of the three claimants for the papal throne was the real pope absorbed most of the council's attention. The prime agenda was to calm things down, and many at the council saw Hus' calls for rigorous personal dedication and following one's own conscience, after this had been formed by grace, Scripture, and the witness of a faithful church, as leading to chaos and anarchy. It has been said that at Constance Hus was rocking the boat when everyone else was already seasick.

Accordingly, without reading Hus' own words very carefully, the council found him guilty of several points of heresy and ordered him to recant. This Hus refused to do, saying that many of the things that were attributed to him were things he had never said, and that for the rest they should show him from Scripture (and the ancient Doctors of the Church) where he was wrong. The council did not particularly want to make a martyr out of Hus, but faced with what they saw as his obstinacy against proper church authority, they delivered him over to the secular powers to be executed on 6 July 1415.

Hus met his fate courageously and mounted the stake with prayer. Appropriately, he began to sing a hymn and continued to sing until he was totally engulfed by the flames. His enemies wanted to blot out all trace of him and went so far as to gather his ashes and throw them into the river to be swept away.

The principles for which Hus lived, however, could not be silenced so easily, and his death provoked an outcry in the Czech lands and even more demands for reform. Out of the many groups which sought to preserve his message grew one which later became our Moravian Church.

A maxim attributed to Hus, which is now the motto of the Czech Republic, was "Pravda vítězí!" (Truth will conquer!). Our legacy from Hus calls us to seek God's truth, and then humbly but determinedly to live it out in all that we say and think and do –not a bad legacy to inspire our mission today and in the years to come.

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