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# LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF JOHN HUSS, 500 YEARS AFTER.

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Why hark back five hundred years for a subject at such a time as this? Who was this John Huss that men of the Twentieth Century should be asked to turn and give thought to him when there is so much right at hand to command attention?

We can find reasons in the present war for recalling Napoleon, who was crushed at Waterloo one hundred years ago, or Peter the Great, the builder of Petrograd, and the founder of the Russian Empire of a century earlier, and other reasons for thinking of the German Monk, who launched his thunderbolts against Romanism four hundred years ago, or John Wyclif, the English contemporary of Huss, who by heroic living and dying earned the distinction of being "the morning star of the Reformation." But why the concerted effort to have the people of free America, and of well-nigh all Christendom, join in celebrating the death of an obscure, peasant-born Czech, who lived 500 years ago in what the world has persisted in calling since "The Dark Age?"

## REASONS FOR RECALLING HUSS.

Well, ample reasons are not far to seek, reasons that may be perceived now more clearly and fully than ever before, reasons that gather force from the fact that there was for many years the most systematic and diabolic effort of the Roman hierarchy to blot out, suppress, or distort the facts of Huss' life and ministry. As far as possible every memorial of him was destroyed and the Bohemian people were taught to believe that he "whose heart beat so warmly for his own nation and for God's law," was its worst enemy, an emissary of evil, not of good. The desperate battle that was beginning even then to be waged between individual freedom and spiritual re-

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\*Opening address before the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, session of 1915-16.

ligion on the one hand and ecclesiastical tyranny and corruption on the other, stirred every drop of blood in Huss' veins. It is possible now as never before to penetrate the dust and smoke of the battle, to see the facts of the case as they really were, to perceive who Huss was and what are his true place and meaning in the history of intellectual freedom and modern civilization. We can study now critically both Wyclif and Huss in relation to their precursors and successors, as well as in their mutual relation to each other.

In the clearer, completer view that we thus get of Huss, not only does he appear as belonging to the roll of the prophets of all time and to the noble army of martyrs, but we find also, in spite of all efforts at obscurity, that he was conspicuous in his day as scholar, educator, teacher of philosophy, author and preacher. Light shines for us from a mass of newly discovered materials gathered from a variety of documentary sources, affording a clearer outline and a multitude of details concerning the person and life of the man, making possible a truer and juster estimate of his influence and activities, and of the great issues with which his life was bound up. It has been said that it would be hard to find such a full and well-organized collection of materials bearing on any other character in history.

#### A PART OF A WORLD-WIDE MOVEMENT.

We may see now, too, more clearly than was possible before, that Huss was in no sense alone in the movement of his time. He was a soldier in the world-wide war for the liberation of humanity. Although at the tragical close of his life he seemed a solitary and deserted man, he was really but a part of "a movement of enfranchisement in religion, philosophy, art and politics." It was out of his age that there flowed the stream of life which spread later like the fertile waters of a Nile, over all Europe, enriching the shores of the undiscovered new world. Then Huss was narrowly called a "Wyclifist," but it has been

shown that Wyclif, who represented the most important single, human influence in his life, was no more involved in this great movement than was the Florentine Catholic Dante, the Italian Astronomer Galileo, or the German peasant-genius who was to follow Huss and leave the impress of his powerful personality on the history of Europe. The brilliant French teacher, Abelard, who is rightly considered the founder of the University of Paris, at whose feet thousands of students, gathered from all over Europe; the illustrious Italian scholars to whom Manuel Chrysoloras brought the passion for Greek learning from Constantinople, and the painters and sculptors who recalled the half-forgotten beauty that was Greece and the glory that was Rome—all these, in one way or another, belonged to that great army in which John Huss was to become one of the foremost figures. While Count Lützow would seem to be right in saying that Huss was the darling idol of the Bohemian people, whose greatest representative in the world's history he remains, yet the world has come to see that he belongs, not to Bohemia alone, but to all Europe and to the West as well. In John Huss, indeed, Bohemia made its one notable and abiding contribution to the progress of Western culture and religious thought. It has proved, even as he himself prophetically proclaimed as he was being led to the funeral pyre: "You are frying a *goose* today, but remember, after a hundred years, there shall come out of these ashes a swan whom you shall never be able to destroy."

Well may we turn aside, then, from the tasks of the stirring present, turn a deaf ear to present day wars and rumors of war, in an effort to transport ourselves into that far-off age, and devote ourselves to a re-study of Huss, his times and surroundings. Only thus may we apprehend the true and momentous meaning of the religious and political forces at work in his day which culminated in his martyrdom, July 6, 1415, and in the Hussite wars which followed. Surely we may yet see, if we have not perceived it already, that there is much for

us to learn from that far-off and tragically troubled period. It is hoped, and not unreasonably, that this concerted effort will lead the Christian world to such a re-study of the foundations of the Church and church authority as will promote ideas more in keeping with primitive Christianity than those current in Huss' time, and may foster the disposition to treat with more tolerance and regard for religious freedom errors of opinion when they are held by persons of great purity of life who are moved by devotion to the person of Christ and the promotion of good will among men.

### BOHEMIA, THE HOME OF HUSS.

It is essential to the understanding of Huss and the wide-spread influence he exerted that we get some idea of the strategic position, geographically and educationally, of the little land that he has done so much to immortalize. Though one of the smallest of the illustrious countries of the world, embracing an area of only about 20,000 square miles, yet, as Goethe said, "It forms a continent within the continent of Europe." The little diamond-shaped, mountain-guarded, natural fortress, has been styled by military authorities "the key to modern Europe." It is no accident, therefore, that it has been the battlefield of so many wars and has supplied from its sons so many great warriors. Moreover, in view of what its people were intellectually and what the University of Prague stood for in Huss' day, it is no surprise that it has proved historically to be a country of such importance, that it anticipated by a full century the great general movement which culminated in the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. Geographically it is even yet the most important of the Slav States belonging to the Austrian Empire.

### THE PEOPLE OF BOHEMIA.

Recent researches seem to make clear that part of this fair land supported a Slavic population as early as the beginning of the Christian Era, or even before that time.

Other inhabitants of Celtic and Teutonic stock came in, among whom were the Boii, or "Terrible Ones," from whom the country took its name. But, the matter of special interest for us now is that about the middle of the fifth century, A. D., there came from Eastern Europe into Bohemia the people among whom were the ancestors of Huss, the Czechs. They are credited, justly it would seem, with having been a vigorous, high-minded people, the most gifted of the Slavonic tribes. They soon dispossessed or subdued the remnants of the earlier population, and became the permanent settlers. As they had fiery Slavonic blood in their veins, they were capable of great outbursts of enthusiasm, and, as the sequel proved, of violent disputations and desperate wars. They had not only the dash and zeal, but also the imagination, mysticism, poetry and piety characteristic of the Slavs. Like the Irish of today, they revelled in the strife and fascination of party politics and at the same time entered with keenest zest into the heated religious controversies of the time. It needs to be said further that, surrounded as Bohemia was by German-speaking states, the Germans soon began to intrude upon the Czechs, until at last they acquired property and power that brought on all sorts of clashes, social, educational and political, so that many of the religious conflicts of later times were embittered by the feuds. The Czechs and Germans have not even yet learned how to dwell together in perfect peace and harmony. This social disharmony played no small part in the story of Huss' ministry and martyrdom, but it survives in fact, though in different forms, today. The Czechs of today recall resentfully, we are told, the invasions of the German and Hungarian Papal armies that ravaged little Bohemia much as their descendents have outraged brave little Belgium and Servia.

#### THE AGE OF HUSS.

The age in which Huss lived and wrought must be considered also, for it exercised a formative influence in

making Huss what he was and furnishing the provocations, inspirations and moulds of his opinions and activities. Centrally located as Bohemia was, its susceptible people were bound to be strongly affected by the mighty influences that were surging and stirring in the great world about them, in spite of their lack of anything like the means of intercommunication of today. At the opening of the Fourteenth Century signs began to appear that the dominant medieval church system was breaking up. It had bound the human mind and held it for ages in fetters. Various causes, we now see, were co-operating for its overthrow. The early Christians called to suffer for the faith, had given to the world in the pristine martyrs the noblest of confessors and witnesses. But when Constantine, in the Fourth Century, granted State authority and great riches to the Church, a melancholy change set in.

The contrast between the noble martyrs of 313 A. D., and the worldly bishops of the great Church Council of a dozen years later, impressed all devout and thoughtful people of that day most sadly. The evils and corruptions of the Church reached the worst stage when what is known as the great schism in the popedom occurred, two men, one holding his court at Avignon in France, and the other at Rome, each claiming to be the true pope, each hurling diatribe and curses at the other and each having a powerful and enthusiastic following. The scandal and excitement of it spread throughout all Christendom. The results can be more easily imagined than described.

The dismembered Church and degenerate clergy lost their hold on the people and lost their power to foster living faith. The Bible, then not yet forbidden to the people, was neglected; indeed was known to but few. Church services had for the most part become senseless shows. Most of the clergy preached not at all, but spent their time hunting, gambling and carousing.

It is no wonder that men lost faith in well-nigh everything but material force. The empire had been built up by force, and even the popes had come to have more faith in the sword, which they employed constantly, than in their own edicts and decrees. A reaction, of course, was bound to set in. It slowly, and for a long time silently gained strength, until at last it broke forth like a flood. Heroic men here and there began to think for themselves. The force of free religious thought began to be felt once more. The authority of the Bible as the standard and norm of faith was set up against the claim of the church's right to promulgate and enforce doctrines of her own creation. Men of something like Apostolic spirit and zeal, urged that there should be a return to the simplicity of primitive Christianity in doctrine, life and polity. The Czechs, as a people, were peculiarly receptive to these ideas and influences. The great missionary interest of Christianity had reached out to Bohemia in the middle of the Ninth Century. It proceeded from both the Roman and the Greek Churches; but, if we may take their word for it, with much more vigorous expression and telling results from the latter than from the former, as the efforts of the Roman Church were through the agency of the hostile German race. The Missionaries of the Greek Church more readily than the Germans gained a way for the Gospel into the hearts of their kinsfolk, the Czechs. They translated the Scriptures into the Czech language, and used this language, not only in giving instruction, but also in public worship and congregational singing. Thus, it is claimed, they laid the foundation for the spirit and the principles which cropped up and asserted themselves later in Huss and his followers and in the Protestantism of the Sixteenth Century.

#### A SKETCH OF HUSS' LIFE.

Born, we do not know just when, but in the latter part of the stormy Fourteenth Century, in a little village in

Southern Bohemia, from which he took his name, Huss studied at the University of Prague, the first university north of the Alps in Central and Northeastern Europe, ranking with the universities of Bologna, Paris and Oxford as a daring centre of restless, intellectual life and literary endeavor. While not conspicuous as a student for intellectual brilliancy, Huss was conspicuous from the first for piety and character. He was known and loved for his purity, dignity, sweetness and courage. While he received the degrees of B. A., B. D. and M. A., from his Alma Mater, he never attained his doctorate in theology. He supported himself in part in his course by singing, as later Luther did in Germany. In 1401, we find him lecturing at the University on the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard, a famous theological text-book in that day, and later in the same year dean of the philosophical faculty. The following year he was elected rector of the University, the highest position in the gift of the great institution.

In the meantime he had been ordained a priest in the Catholic Church and appointed preacher in the famous chapel of the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem, in Prague. Here, though not yet 30 years old, he became the most noted popular preacher of his century and the chief ecclesiastical figure of his country. Though located in one of the poorer sections of the city to furnish preaching to the common people in the Czech or Bohemian tongue, this pulpit became his throne and his voice here reached all classes, cleric and lay, from the king to the beggar, from the queen to the woman of the streets. Though it had previously enjoyed the services of other famous preachers, the chapel became under the magnetism and magic of Huss' personality and preaching the centre of religious interest throughout all Bohemia. This was largely due, no doubt, to his departure from the conventional style of preaching, and his unaffected delivery of a plain, practical, searching, evangelical message with utmost fearlessness and moral earnestness.

It was this position and responsibility as a religious teacher and preacher that led Huss to the examination of the ground of his faith and to his rare knowledge of the Scriptures. It was not long, of course, before he began to be denounced as a heretic.

#### RELATION TO WYCLIF.

While yet a student he had begun to study the writings of Wyclif, the Oxford Schoolman and Reformer, having avowedly become one of his disciples and defenders. Wyclif had broken fundamentally with the Catholic conception of the Church, the priesthood, the sacraments, etc. While Rome had come to hold that the Church was a religious corporation presided over by the Pope and the hierarchy, Wyclif defined the Church as "the body of the elect." Wyclif, like Dante, dared even to put some of the popes in hell, boldly declaring that the papacy was not only not infallible but not necessary, that the only ground of obedience to the papal commands is their agreement with the Scriptures. Huss, likewise, made proclamation of fundamental differences with the papacy in matters of doctrine. Though he stopped short of Wyclif on transubstantiation, he went further in some respects even than his master. In terms equally as unflinching, though less mordant, he condemned the corruptions of many of the priests and the notorious abuses, of which the sale of indulgences was the most outstanding. Not even Luther was more unsparing in his denunciation of the sale of indulgences than was Huss, and in this, as in other things we may see how far he was in advance of his time and with what unflinching courage he led the way in a dark time toward religious freedom.

"Sellers of indulgences are thieves who take by cunning lies what they cannot seize by violence. The Pope and the whole Church militant often err, and an unjust papal excommunication is to be disregarded."

Within a few years the Archbishop of Prague, who for a time was friendly to Huss, turned violently against him and ordered his books burned. Soon there followed the excommunication of all who were found with any of Wyclif's writings in their possession. When Huss proclaimed from his pulpit that he had appealed from the archbishop's decree and asked his hearers if they would stand by him, they cried with one voice: "We will! We do!" The death of the Archbishop, however, left him face to face with the still more hostile foe, the Pope, and he was soon placed under the ex-communication that made him an outcast, a moral leper. The faithful everywhere were forbidden to give him hospitality, to speak, walk with or salute him, to give him any of the necessities of life, to offer him any help or consolation, and the Chapel in which he preached was ordered destroyed.

#### HIS MARTYRDOM AND ITS EFFECTS.

At last, summoned to the Council, called at Constance, among other things to pass on his case, he went joyfully under what he regarded as an ample imperial safeguard, and hopeful of a fair hearing. There he stood among his accusers as bravely as Luther stood at Worms, re-affirming all that he had preached or written and denying according to the Holy Scriptures that he had been guilty of heresy. We know the sad sequel: he was at last pronounced "guilty of teaching many things evil, scandalous, seditious and dangerously heretical," ordered to be degraded from the priesthood, and turned over to the civil authorities for punishment. The terrible formula was pronounced against him: "We commit thy soul to the devil"; to which Huss calmly retorted, "And I commit it to my gracious Lord, Jesus Christ." Of the mock paper crown which was placed on his head with a picture of three devils striving to seize a soul and the word "Heresiarch" in large letters, he said, "The crown which my Saviour wore was heavy and irksome, the one

I wear is easy and light. He wore a crown of thorns to the most awful death; I will wear this much lighter one humbly for the sake of his name and the truth." Commanded, after he was tied to the stake and the fagots were ready to be lighted, to recant, he refused and called upon God to witness that the one great object of his preaching and writing had been to convert men from sin. "In the truth of that Gospel which hitherto I have written, talked and preached, I now joyfully die," and until the flames silenced his voice he continued to sing, "Christ, have mercy!" His ashes were then thrown into the river, lest his friends should gather them up and carry them away as sacred relics.

The news of Huss' death aroused a tremendous national revolt which for a time seemed destined to make Bohemia the first reformed country; but by the adoption of most violent methods the Papal power recovered its lost ground, and the Hussite movement survives today ecclesiastically only in the Moravian Church. But with Dante, Wyclif and Savonarola, he was a reformer before the Reformation, and his work and theirs made possible the more conspicuous achievements of Luther, Calvin and Knox, yea, even of Roger Williams in Colonial America.

#### IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS.

Of this thin pale man—with whose face we are made so familiar by a picture as fixed in conventional form as that of Luther, or Washington, or Lincoln—it may be truthfully said after all these surging centuries, though so long dead, he yet speaketh. He speaks by spirit and example, rather more than by precept and preaching.

He died the martyr's death because he lived the martyr's life. He was conqueror and more than conqueror in the age-long conflict in which every man saves or loses his soul. But he strove, as a man, as a patriot, as a preacher, not only for his own soul, but for the soul of Bohemia, the soul of Europe, the soul of Christianity, the soul of humanity.

Like his beloved Master, he strove for the souls of the misguided men who opposed and persecuted him. He is conspicuous among the reformers of all ages, not only for courage, but for benignity of spirit. He was remarkably free from the vice of intolerance, characteristic of his age, and like the great Proto-martyr prayed with almost his last breath even for his murderers.

By his self-forgetting bravery on behalf of the truth as he saw it, he becomes at once a rebuke and an example to the men of this age, which, because of its very spirit of tolerance, needs such a lesson in fidelity to truth. As a preacher he is an imperishable example in this, he insisted on bringing everything in question to the test of Scripture teaching and common sense. He applied the truth relentlessly to corruptions and conditions of the day in the face of threatening perils and penalties.

He died at last, not so much because he exposed and opposed an all-powerful, corrupt, ecclesiastical organization, but because he was informed and inspired by that greatest of all passions that inflame and glorify the religious nature of man, the passion for the truth that makes free, and for souls made free by the truth.

More than half a million of John Huss' countrymen, we are told, have found an asylum in our free Republic. Even the free thinkers among them, though driven by centuries of persecution and repression to break with organized Christianity in all its forms, are found honoring Huss as their national hero.

#### THE CENTENARY CELEBRATION IN THE NEW WORLD.

A significant celebration of this 500th anniversary of his martyrdom took place in New York City, July 4, 5 and 6, at the John Huss Church and the Neighborhood House on the East Side. There, on the upper East Side of the metropolis, packed into an area ten blocks in length and three in width, are 40,000 men and women, who look upon Huss as not only the patriot but the patron saint of their beloved country that used to be.

When the great war, now raging, broke out, Bohemians all over the world—in Canada, Mexico, South America, Australia, Asia and Africa, as well as in America—spontaneously and naturally declared themselves in favor of the Allies, and began once more to cherish the hope that the conflict might result in an opportunity for Bohemia to retake her place among the free nations of the earth, might once more have her place in the sun.

Even Bohemians who are still Austrian subjects, but cherish the memory of Huss, never forget that it was through the connivance of the Austrian King and hierarchy that Huss was burned at the stake, simply because he loved his own land and liberty of conscience better than his own life; and, though forced to serve as soldiers, they have no desire to save the tottering Hapsburg throne from fall. Indeed, we are told that in great numbers they have left the Austrian army to fight with the enemies of Austria. Dr. Vincent Pisek, pastor of the John Huss Church in New York, says:

“Let a Russian army appear on the threshold of Bohemia, and the Czechs would desert the Teutonic cause in a body; and were Huss alive today he would approve such a course, for he would realize that the Allies are fighting the fight of democracy. And, while what we Czechs want is independence, we would prefer even the sort of government Russia would give, to the oppressive rule of the Austrian hierarchy.”

On the second day of the significant celebration alluded to, the East Side of the great American city was startled by the sight of the Huss Historical Pageant, winding through the streets. Floats smote the eye showing among other scenes such as these: John Huss as a boy and his mother standing before his birthplace; Huss as the rector of the University of Prague; Huss as a preacher; Huss and his friend John Zizka, the great Hussite General; Huss at the stake suffering martyrdom; a Hussite battle wagon with General Zizka and his warriors;

and last, but not least in significance for us, Bohemia pointing to Columbia and saying: "The sufferings and sacrifices of the Bohemian people have not been in vain." It is not surprising that on the last day of commemoration delegates from every Christian denomination in the city, except the Roman Catholics, together with representatives of the Slavic societies of the city, came together in a mass meeting in honor of the man who had played such a role in the history of civil and religious liberty.

#### OUR DEBT TO HUSS.

This celebration has certainly served to show us the figure of Bohemia pointing to America and claiming justly, "The sufferings and sacrifices of the Bohemian people have not been in vain." It has reminded us of the debt which the religious institutions of the West and the great cause of religious freedom owe to this pioneer reformer. Dr. David Schaff, one of the most scholarly and judicious of his biographers, says it is doubtful, if we except the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, whether the forward movement of religious enlightenment and human freedom have ever been advanced as much by the sufferings and death of any single man as by the death of Huss. The mind of all Europe was striving to get free from the sacramental fetters with which it had been bound by the papal decrees and the speculations of the schoolmen and to find its way to the assertion of the right of the individual to immediate communion with God and individual sovereignty in matters of conscience. In Huss and kindred spirits of his day gleams of this new liberty and a new social order soon to be introduced, shot forth suddenly like Northern lights, but well-nigh as suddenly disappeared. It was the death of Huss that made it impossible for the matter to stop there—to remain in eclipse. Emblazoned as that was to the world by the fires of martyrdom kindled by the Council of Constance, and made matter of detailed record by friend and foe, it could

not be suppressed. And so his biographer would seem to be right in saying: "In dying, Huss accomplished even more than he did by living."

#### CONCLUDING TRIBUTE.

The testimony to Huss which the University of Prague left on record in Latin in 1416, is perhaps the most remarkable single short tribute to him that has come down to us. I cannot do better, I am sure, than to give it here, translated, as a fit conclusion of this address.

"O matchless man shining . . . by the example of splendid sanctity. O humble man flashing with the ray of piety, who contemned riches and ministered to the poor even to the opening out of his own bosom—who did not refuse to bend the knee at the beds of the sick,—who brought with tears the hardened to repentance, and composed and softened untamed minds by his unspeakable sweetness,—who burned against the vices of all men and especially the rich and proud clergy, basing his appeals upon the old and forgotten remedies of the Scriptures as by a new and unheard of motive, conceived in great love, and who, following in the steps of the Apostles, by his pastoral care revived in clergy and people the righteous living of the early church,—who by braveness and wisdom in utterance excelled the rest, showing in all things the works of love, pure faith, and undeviating truth . . . that in all things he might be a Master of life without compare."