Jan Hus

Jan Hus was born to a poor family in Husinec, Bohemia, which is now part of the Czech Republic. In 1390, he entered the University of Prague, where he studied theology. Hus graduated with a master’s degree from the university and later worked as an instructor there.

Hus was ordained as a priest in 1400. Two years later, he took control of Prague’s Bethlehem Chapel. In this chapel, preachers spoke in Czech instead of Latin. Through his preaching at the chapel, Hus became a leader of a reform movement in Bohemia. Around this time, he began studying the writings of church reformer John Wycliffe and found that they shared many ideas about reforming the Catholic Church. Eventually, Hus began to criticize the morals of church leaders in his sermons. After a long series of disagreements, Pope John XXIII excommunicated Hus.

The pope had also threatened to prevent church members from receiving certain sacraments of the church if they lived in the same place as Hus. As a result, Hus left Prague for southern Bohemia. There he lived among the nobility in the castles of his friends, away from the pope’s reach. While in Bohemia, Hus wrote many of his most significant works, the most important of which was called De ecclesia, which means “the Church.” In this work, Hus proposed many of the ideas that became important to the Protestant Reformation. For instance, Hus argued that nations should have the ability to supervise church activities and that scripture should have greater authority than the Church. He also stated that the pope could prove immoral and was capable of making mistakes while leading the Church.

In 1414, Hus traveled to a council of religious leaders that had been arranged to restore unity in the Church. He had been called to the council and told that he could explain his views there. Hus feared that he could
face persecution but received a promise that he could travel safely to and from the council. However, upon his arrival he was imprisoned and put on trial as a heretic. During the course of three public hearings, Hus refused to deny some of his beliefs unless authorities could prove them false. Because of this, the council sentenced him to be burned at the stake. Hus died on July 6, 1415. After his death, Hus became a national hero who some viewed as a martyr for his beliefs. Years after his death, Hus’s beliefs continued to influence future reformers.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Why was the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague unique?

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2. **Predict** Why do you think Jan Hus would have made an effective leader of a large reform movement?

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**ACTIVITY**

Suppose that you will be helping defend Jan Hus in his trial for heresy. What arguments would you present to the council on his behalf? Use his biography to write a brief statement in which you outline Hus’s beliefs and explain why the council should side with him.