

THE HISTORY
OF
PROTESTANTISM

BY THE
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WITH FIVE HUNDRED AND FIFTY ILLUSTRATIONS
BY THE BEST ARTISTS

“PROTESTANTISM, THE SACRED CAUSE OF GOD’S LIGHT AND TRUTH AGAINST THE
DEVIL’S FALSITY AND DARKNESS.”—*Carlyle*

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CHAPTER III.

GROWING OPPOSITION OF HUSS TO ROME.

The "Six Errors"—The Pope's Bull against the King of Hungary—Huss on Indulgences and Crusades—Prophetic Words—Huss closes his Career in Prague.

THE frightful picture which society now presented had a very powerful effect on John Huss. He studied the Bible, he read the early Fathers, he compared these with the sad spectacles passing before his eyes, and he saw more clearly every day that "the Church" had departed far from her early model, not in practice only, but in doctrine also. A little while ago we saw him levelling his blows at abuses; now we find him beginning to strike at the root on which all these abuses grew, if haply he might extirpate both root and branch together.

It was at this time that he wrote his treatise *On the Church*, a work which enables us to trace the progress of his emancipation from the shackles of authority. He establishes in it the principle that the true Church of Christ has not necessarily an exterior constitution, but that communion with its invisible Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, is alone necessary for it: and that the Catholic Church is the assembly of all the elect.¹

This tractate was followed by another under the title of *The Six Errors*. The first error was that of the priests who boasted of making the body of Jesus Christ in the mass, and of being the creator of their Creator. The second was the confession exacted of the members of the Church—"I believe in the Pope and the saints"—in opposition to which, Huss taught that men are to believe in God only. The third error was the priestly pretension to remit the guilt and punishment of sin. The fourth was the implicit obedience exacted by ecclesiastical superiors to all their commands. The fifth was the making no distinction between a valid excommunication and one that was not so. The sixth error was simony. This Huss designated a heresy, and scarcely, he believed, could a priest be found who was not guilty of it.²

This list of errors was placarded on the door of the Bethlehem Chapel. The tract in which they were set forth was circulated far and near, and produced an immense impression throughout the whole of Bohemia.

Another matter which now happened helped to deepen the impression which his tract on *The Six Errors* had made. John XXIII. fulminated a bull against Ladislaus, King of Hungary, excommunicating him, and all his children to the third generation. The offence which had drawn upon Ladislaus this burst of Pontifical wrath was the support he had given to Gregory XII., one of the rivals of John. The Pope commanded all emperors, kings, princes, cardinals,

¹ "Omnium prædestinatorum universitas." (*De Eccles.—Huss—Hist. et Mon.*)

² Lenfant, vol. i., p. 37.

nals, and men of whatever degree, by the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ, to take up arms against Ladislaus, and utterly to exterminate him and his supporters; and he promised to all who should join the crusade, or who should preach it, or collect funds for its support, the pardon of all their sins, and immediate admission into Paradise should they die in the war—in short, the same indulgences which were accorded to those who bore arms for the conquest of the Holy Land. This fulmination wrapped Bohemia in flames; and Huss seized the opportunity of directing the eyes of his countrymen to the contrast, so perfect and striking, between the vicar of Christ and Christ Himself; between the destroyer and the Saviour; between the commands of the bull, which proclaimed war, and the precepts of the Gospel, which preached peace.

A few extracts from his refutation of the Papal bull will enable us to measure the progress Huss was making in evangelical sentiments, and the light which through his means was breaking upon Bohemia. “If the disciples of Jesus Christ,” said he, “were not allowed to defend Him who is Chief of the Church, against those who wanted to seize on Him, much more will it not be permissible to a bishop to engage in war for a temporal domination and earthly riches.” “As the secular body,” he continues, “to whom the temporal sword alone is suitable, cannot undertake to handle the spiritual one, in like manner the ecclesiastics ought to be content with the spiritual sword, and not make use of the temporal.” This was flatly to contradict a solemn judgment of the Papal chair which asserted the Church’s right to both swords.

Having condemned crusades, the carnage of which was doubly iniquitous when done by priestly hands, Huss next attacks indulgences. They are an affront to the grace of the Gospel. “God alone possesses the power to forgive sins in an absolute manner.” “The absolution of Jesus Christ,” he says, “ought to precede that of the priest; or, in other words, the priest who absolves and condemns ought to be certain that the case in question is one which Jesus Christ Himself has already absolved or condemned.” This implies that the power of the keys is limited and conditional, in other words that the priest does not pardon, but only declares the pardon of God to the penitent. “If,” he says again, “the Pope uses his power according to God’s commands, he cannot be resisted without resisting God Himself; but if he abuses his power by enjoining what is contrary to the Divine law, then it is a duty to resist him as should be done to the pale horse of the Apocalypse, to the dragon, to the beast, and to the Leviathan.”³

Waxing bolder as his views enlarged, he proceeded to stigmatise many of the ceremonies of the Roman Church as lacking foundation, and as being foolish and superstitious. He denied the merit of abstinences; he ridiculed the credulity of believing legends, and the grovelling superstition of venerating relics,

³ Huss—*Hist. et Mon.*, tom. i., pp. 215–234.

bowing before images, and worshipping the dead. "They are profuse," said he, referring to the latter class of devotees, "towards the saints in glory, who want nothing; they array bones of the latter with silk and gold and silver, and lodge them magnificently; but they refuse clothing and hospitality to the poor members of Jesus Christ who are amongst us, at whose expense they feed to repletion, and drink till they are intoxicated." Friars he no more loved than Wicliffe did, if we may judge from a treatise which he wrote at this time, entitled *The Abomination of Monks*, and which he followed by another, wherein he was scarcely more complimentary to the Pope and his court, styling them the *members of Antichrist*.

Plainer and bolder every day became the speech of Huss; fiercer grew his invectives and denunciations. The scandals which multiplied around him had, doubtless, roused his indignation, and the persecutions which he endured may have heated his temper. He saw John XXIII., than whom a more infamous man never wore the tiara, professing to open and shut the gates of Paradise, and scattering simoniacal pardons over Europe that he might kindle the flames of war, and extinguish a rival in torrents of Christian blood. It was not easy to witness all this and be calm. In fact, the Pope's bull of crusade had divided Bohemia, and brought matters in that country to extremity. The king and the priesthood were opposed to Ladislaus of Hungary, and consequently supported John XXIII., defending as best they could his indulgences and simonies. On the other hand, many of the magnates of Bohemia, and the great body of the people, sided with Ladislaus, condemned the crusade which the Pope was preaching against him, together with all the infamous means by which he was furthering it, and held the clergy guilty of the blood which seemed about to flow in torrents. The people kept no measure in their talk about the priests. The latter trembled for their lives. The archbishop interfered, but not to throw oil on the waters. He placed Prague under interdict, and threatened to continue the sentence so long as John Huss should remain in the city. The archbishop persuaded himself that if Huss should retire the movement would go down, and the war of factions subside into peace. He but deceived himself. It was not now in the power of any man, even of Huss, to control or to stop that movement. Two ages were struggling together, the old and the new. The Reformer, however, fearing that his presence in Prague might embarrass his friends, again withdrew to his native village of Hussinetz.

During his exile he wrote several letters to his friends in Prague. The letters discover a mind full of that calm courage which springs from trust in God; and in them occur for the first time those prophetic words which Huss repeated afterwards at more than one important epoch in his career, the prediction taking each time a more exact and definite form. "If the goose" (his name in the Bohemian language signifies *goose*), "which is but a timid bird, and cannot fly very high, has been able to burst its bonds, there will come afterwards an

eagle, which will soar high into the air and draw to it all the other birds.” So he wrote, adding, “It is in the nature of truth, that the more we obscure it the brighter will it become.”⁴

Huss had closed one career, and was bidden rest awhile before opening his second and sublimer one. Sweet it was to leave the strife and clamour of Prague for the quiet of his birth-place. Here he could calm his mind in the perusal of the inspired page, and fortify his soul by communion with God. For himself he had no fears; he dwelt beneath the shadow of the Almighty. By the teaching of the Word and the Spirit he had been wonderfully emancipated from the darkness of error. His native country of Bohemia had, too, by his instrumentality been rescued partially from the same darkness. Its reformation could not be completed, nor indeed carried much farther, till the rest of Christendom had come to be more nearly on a level with it in point of spiritual enlightenment. So now the Reformer is withdrawn. Never again was his voice to be heard in his favourite Chapel of Bethlehem. Never more were his living words to stir the hearts of his countrymen. There remains but one act more for Huss to do—the greatest and most enduring of all. As the preacher of Bethlehem Chapel he had largely contributed to emancipate Bohemia, as the martyr of Constance he was largely to contribute to emancipate Christendom.

⁴ *Letters of Huss*, No. 6; Edin. ed.