

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 VI.

IMPRISONMENT AND EXAMINATION OF HUSS.

The Emperor's Safe-conduct—Imprisonment of Huss—Flame in Bohemia—No Faith to be kept with Heretics—The Pope and Huss in the same Prison—Huss brought before the Council—His Second Appearance—An Eclipse—Huss's Theological Views—A Protestant at Heart—He Refuses to Retract—His Dream.

WHEN John Huss set out for the Council, he carried with him, as we have already said, several important documents.¹ But the most important of all Huss's credentials was a safe-conduct from the Emperor Sigismund. Without this, he would hardly have undertaken the journey. We quote it in full, seeing it has become one of the great documents of history. It was addressed "to all ecclesiastical and secular princes, &c., and to all our subjects." "We recommend to you with a full affection, to all in general and to each in particular, the honourable Master John Huss, Bachelor in Divinity, and Master of Arts, the bearer of these presents, journeying from Bohemia to the Council of Constance, whom we have taken under our protection and safeguard, and under that of the Empire, enjoining you to receive him and treat him kindly, furnishing him with all that shall be necessary to speed and assure his journey, as well by water as by land, without taking anything from him or his at coming in or going out, for any sort of duties whatsoever; and calling on you to allow him to PASS, SOJOURN, STOP, AND RETURN FREELY AND SECURELY, providing him even, if necessary, with good passports, for the honour and respect of the Imperial Majesty. Given at Spiers this 18th day of October of the year 1414, the third of our reign in Hungary, and the fifth of that of the Romans."² In the above document, the emperor pledges his honour and the power of the Empire for the safety of Huss. He was to go and return, and no man dare molest him. No promise could be more sacred, no protection apparently more complete. How that pledge was redeemed we shall see by-and-by.

Huss's trust, however, was in One more powerful than the kings of earth. "I confide altogether," wrote he to one of his friends, "in the all-powerful God,

¹ These documents are given in full in Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., pp. 786–788.

² This document is given by all contemporary historians, by Von der Hardt, tom. iv., p. 12; by Lenfant, *Hist. Council. Const.*, vol. i., pp. 61, 62; by Fra Paolo; by Sleidan in his *Commentaries*; and, in short, by all who have written the history of the Council. The terms are very precise: *to pass freely and to return*. The Jesuit Maimbourg, when writing the history of the period, was compelled to own the imperial safe-conduct. In truth, it was admitted by the Council when, in its nineteenth session, it defended the emperor against those "evil-speakers" who blamed him for violating it. The obvious and better defence would have been that the safe-conduct never existed, could the Council in consistency with fact have so affirmed.

in my Saviour; He will accord me His Holy Spirit to fortify me in His truth, so that I may face with courage temptations, prison, and if necessary a cruel death.”³

Full liberty was accorded him during the first days of his stay at Constance. He made his arrival be intimated to the Pope the day after by two Bohemian noblemen who accompanied him, adding that he carried a safe-conduct from the emperor. The Pope received them courteously, and expressed his determination to protect Huss.⁴ The Pope’s own position was too precarious, however, to make his promise of any great value. Paletz and Causis, who, of all the ecclesiastics of Prague, were the bitterest enemies of Huss, had preceded him to Constance, and were working day and night among the members of the Council to inflame them against him, and secure his condemnation. Their machinations were not without result. On the twenty-sixth day after his arrival Huss was arrested, in flagrant violation of the imperial safe-conduct, and carried before the Pope and the cardinals.⁵ After a conversation of some hours, he was told that he must remain a prisoner, and was entrusted to the clerk of the Cathedral of Constance. He remained a week at the house of this official under a strong guard. Thence he was conducted to the prison of the monastery of the Dominicans on the banks of the Rhine. The sewage of the monastery flowed close to the place where he was confined, and the damp and pestilential air of his prison brought on a raging fever, which had well-nigh terminated his life.⁶ His enemies feared that after all he would escape them, and the Pope sent his own physicians to him to take care of his health.⁷

When the tidings of his imprisonment reached Huss’s native country, they kindled a flame in Bohemia. Burning words bespoke the indignation that the nation felt at the treachery and cruelty with which their great countryman had been treated. The puissant barons united in a remonstrance to the Emperor Sigismund, reminding him of his safe-conduct, and demanding that he should vindicate his own honour, and redress the injustice done to Huss, by ordering his instant liberation. The first impulse of Sigismund was to open Huss’s prison, but the casuists of the Council found means to keep it shut. The emperor was told that he had no right to grant a safe-conduct in the circumstances without the consent of the Council; that the greater good of the Church must over-rule his promise; that the Council by its supreme authority could release him from his obligation, and that no formality of this sort could be suffered to

³ *Hist. et Mon. J. Huss.*, epist. i.

⁴ Lenfant, *Hist. Council. Const.*, vol. i., p. 43.

⁵ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 790. Dupin, *Eccles. Hist.* cent. 15, chap. 7, p. 121.

⁶ Dupin, *Eccles. Hist.*, cent. 15, chap. 7, p. 121. Bonnechese, *Reformers before the Reformation*, vol. i., pp. 170–173.

⁷ Lenfant, *Hist. Council. Const.*, vol. i., p. 61.

obstruct the course of justice against a heretic.⁸ The promptings of honour and humanity were stifled in the emperor's breast by these reasonings. In the voice of the assembled Church he heard the voice of God, and delivered up John Huss to the will of his enemies.

The Council afterwards put its reasonings into a decree, to the effect *that no faith is to be kept with heretics to the prejudice of the Church.*⁹

Being now completely in their power, the enemies of Huss pushed on the process against him. They examined his writings, they founded a series of criminatory articles upon them, and proceeding to his prison, where they found him still suffering severely from fever, they read them to him. He craved of them the favour of an advocate to assist him in framing his defence, enfeebled as he was in body and mind by the foul air of his prison, and the fever with which he had been smitten. This request was refused, although the indulgence asked was one commonly accorded to even the greatest criminals. At this stage the proceedings against him were stopped for a little while by an unexpected event, which turned the thoughts of the Council in another direction. It was now that Pope John escaped, as we have already related. In the interval, the keepers of his monastic prison having fled along with their master, the Pope, Huss was removed to the Castle of Gottlieben, on the other side of the Rhine, where he was shut up, heavily loaded with chains.¹⁰

While the proceedings against Huss stood still, those against the Pope went forward. The flight of John had brought his affairs to a crisis, and the Council, without more delay, deposed him from the Pontificate, as narrated above.

To the delegates whom the Council sent to intimate to him his sentence, he delivered up the Pontifical seal and the fisherman's ring. Along with these insignia they took possession of his person, brought him back to Constance, and threw him into the prison of Gottlieben,¹¹ the same stronghold in which Huss was confined. How solemn and instructive! The Reformer and the man who had arrested him are now the inmates of the same prison, yet what a gulf divides the Pontiff from the martyr! The chains of the one are the monuments of

⁸ Von der Hardt, tom. iv., p. 397.

⁹ The precise words of this decree are as follow:—"Nec aliqua sibi fides aut promissio de jure naturali divino et humano fuerit in prejudicium Catholicæ fidei observanda." (Concil. Const., Sess. xix.—Hardouin, *Acta Concil.*, tom. viii., col. 454; Parisiis.) The meaning is, that by no law natural or divine is faith to be kept with heretics to the prejudice of the Catholic faith. This doctrine was promulgated by the third Lateran Council (Alexander III., 1167), decreed by the Council of Constance, and virtually confirmed by the Council of Trent. The words of the third Lateran Council are—"oaths made against the interest and benefit of the Church are not so much to be considered as oaths, but as perjuries" (*non quasi juramenta sed quasi perjuria*).

¹⁰ Dupin, *Eccles. Hist.*, cent. 15, chap. 7, p. 121. Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 793. Bonnechose, *Reformers before the Reformation*, vol. i., pp. 191, 192.

¹¹ Bonnechose, vol. i., pp. 243–248.

his infamy. The bonds of the other are the badges of his virtue. They invest their wearer with a lustre which is lacking to the diadem of Sigismund.

The Council was only the more intent on condemning Huss, that it had already condemned Pope John. It instinctively felt that the deposition of the Pontiff was a virtual justification of the Reformer, and that the world would so construe it. It was minded to avenge itself on the man who had compelled it to lay open its sores to the world. It felt, moreover, no little pleasure in the exercise of its newly-acquired prerogative of infallibility: a Pope had fallen beneath its stroke, why should a simple priest defy its authority?

The Council, however, delayed bringing John Huss to his trial. His two great opponents, Paletz and Causis—whose enmity was whetted, doubtless, by the discomfitures they had sustained from Huss in Prague—feared the effect of his eloquence upon the members, and took care that he should not appear till they had prepared the Council for his condemnation. At last, on the 5th of June, 1415, he was put on his trial.¹² His books were produced, and he was asked if he acknowledged being the writer of them. This he readily did. The articles of crimination were next read. Some of these were fair statements of Huss's opinions; others were exaggerations or perversions, and others again were wholly false, imputing to him opinions which he did not hold, and which he had never taught. Huss naturally wished to reply, pointing out what was false, what was perverted, and what was true in the indictment preferred against him, assigning the grounds and adducing the proofs in support of those sentiments which he really held, and which he had taught. He had not uttered more than a few words when there arose in the hall a clamour so loud as completely to drown his voice. Huss stood motionless; he cast his eyes around on the excited assembly, surprise and pity rather than anger visible on his face. Waiting till the tumult had subsided, he again attempted to proceed with his defence. He had not gone far till he had occasion to appeal to the Scriptures; the storm was that moment renewed, and with greater violence than before. Some of the Fathers shouted out accusations, others broke into peals of derisive laughter. Again Huss was silent. "He is dumb," said his enemies, who forgot that they had come there as his judges. "I am silent," said Huss, "because I am unable to make myself audible midst so great a noise." "All," said Luther, referring in his characteristic style to this scene, "all worked themselves into rage like wild boars; the bristles of their back stood on end, they bent their brows and gnashed their teeth against John Huss."¹³

The minds of the Fathers were too perturbed to be able to agree on the

¹² Lenfant, *Hist. Counc. Const.*, vol. i., p. 322. Dupin., *Eccles. Hist.*, cent. 15, chap. 7, p. 122.

¹³ Von der Hardt, tom. iv., p. 306. Lenfant, *Hist. Counc. Const.*, vol. i., p. 323. Bonnechose, *Reformers before the Reformation*, vol. ii., chap. 4. Dupin, *Eccles. Hist.*, cent. 15, chap. 7. Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 792.

course to be followed. It was found impossible to restore order, and after a short sitting the assembly broke up.

Some Bohemian noblemen, among whom was Baron de Chlum, the steady and most affectionate friend of the Reformer, had been witnesses of the tumult. They took care to inform Sigismund of what had passed, and prayed him to be present at the next sitting, in the hope that, though the Council did not respect itself, it would yet respect the emperor.

After a day's interval the Council again assembled. The morning of that day, the 7th June, was a memorable one. An all but total eclipse of the sun astonished and terrified the venerable Fathers and the inhabitants of Constance. The darkness was great. The city, the lake, and the surrounding plains were buried in the shadow of portentous night. This phenomenon was remembered and spoken of long after in Europe. Till the inauspicious darkness had passed the Fathers did not dare to meet. Towards noon the light returned, and the Council assembled in the hall of the Franciscans, the emperor taking his seat in it. John Huss was led in by a numerous body of armed men.¹⁴

Sigismund and Huss were now face to face. There sat the emperor, his princes, lords, and suite crowding round him; there, loaded with chains, stood the man for whose safety he had put in pledge his honour as a prince and his power as emperor. The irons that Huss wore were a strange commentary, truly, on the imperial safe-conduct. Is it thus, well might the prisoner have said, is it thus that princes on whom the oil of unction has been poured, and Councils which the Holy Ghost inspires, keep faith? But Sigismund, though he could not be insensible to the silent reproach which the chains of Huss cast upon him, consoled himself with his secret resolve to save the Reformer from the last extremity. He had permitted Huss to be deprived of liberty, but he would not permit him to be deprived of life. But there were two elements he had not taken into account in forming this resolution. The first was the unyielding firmness of the Reformer, and the second was the ghostly awe in which he himself stood of the Council; and so, despite his better intentions, he suffered himself to be dragged along on the road of perfidy and dishonour, which he had meanly entered, till he came to its tragic end, and the imperial safe-conduct and the martyr's stake had taken their place, side by side, ineffaceably, on history's eternal page.

Causis again read the accusation, and a somewhat desultory debate ensued between Huss and several doctors of the Council, especially the celebrated Peter d'Ailly, Cardinal of Cambrai. The line of accusation and defence has been sketched with tolerable fulness by all who have written on the Council. After comparing these statements it appears to us that Huss differed from the Church

¹⁴ Lenfant, *Hist. Counc. Const.*, vol. i., p. 323. Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 792. Bonnechose, vol. ii., chap. 4.

of Rome not so much on dogmas as on great points of jurisdiction and policy. These, while they directly attacked certain of the principles of the Papacy, tended indirectly to the subversion of the whole system—in short, to a far greater revolution than Huss perceived, or perhaps intended. He appears to have believed in transubstantiation;¹⁵ he declared so before the Council, although in stating his views he betrays ever and anon a revulsion from the grosser form of the dogma. He admitted the Divine institution and office of the Pope and members of the hierarchy, but he made the efficacy of their official acts dependent on their spiritual character. Even to the last he did not abandon the communion of the Roman Church. Still it cannot be doubted that John Huss was essentially a Protestant and a Reformer. He held that the supreme rule of faith and practice was the Holy Scriptures; that Christ was the Rock on which our Lord said He would build His Church; that “the assembly of the Predestinate is the Holy Church, which has neither spot nor wrinkle, but is holy and undefiled; the which Jesus Christ calleth His own;” that the Church needed no one visible head on earth, that it had none such in the days of the apostles; that nevertheless it was then well-governed, and might be so still although it should lose its earthly head; and that the Church was not confined to the clergy, but included all the faithful. He maintained the principle of liberty of conscience so far as that heresy ought not to be punished by the magistrate till the heretic had been convicted out of Holy Scripture. He appears to have laid no weight on excommunications and indulgences, unless in cases in which manifestly the judgment of God went along with the sentence of the priest. Like Wicliffe he held that tithes were simply alms, and that of the vast temporal revenues of the clergy that portion only which was needful for their subsistence was rightfully theirs, and that the rest belonged to the poor, or might be otherwise distributed by the civil authorities.¹⁶ His theological creed was only in course of formation. That it would have taken more definite form—that the great doctrines of the Reformation would have come out in full light to his gaze, diligent student as he was of the Bible—had his career been prolonged, we cannot doubt. The formula of “justification by faith alone”—the foundation of the teaching of Martin Luther in after days—we do not find in any of the defences or letters of Huss; but if he did not know the terms he had learned the doctrine, for when he comes to die, turning away from Church, from saint, from all human intervention, he casts himself simply upon the infinite mercy and love of the Saviour. “I submit to the correction of our Divine Master, and I put my trust in His infinite mercy.”¹⁷ “I commend you,” says he, writing to the people of Prague, “to the merciful Lord Jesus Christ, our true

¹⁵ Lenfant, *Hist. Council. Const.*, vol. i., pp. 323, 324.

¹⁶ The articles condemned by the Council are given in full by Hardouin, *Acta Concil.*, tom. viii., pp. 410–421.

¹⁷ Epist. xx.

God, and the Son of the immaculate Virgin Mary, who hath redeemed us by His most bitter death, without all our merits, from eternal pains, from the thralldom of the devil, and from sin.”¹⁸

The members of the Council instinctively felt that Huss was not one of them; that although claiming to belong to the Church which they constituted, he had in fact abandoned it, and renounced its authority. The two leading principles which he had embraced were subversive of their whole jurisdiction in both its branches, *spiritual* and *temporal*. The first and great authority with him was. Holy Scripture; this struck at the foundation of the spiritual power of the hierarchy; and as regards their temporal power he undermined it by his doctrine touching ecclesiastical revenues and possessions. From these two positions neither sophistry nor threats could make him swerve. In the judgment of the Council he was in rebellion. He had transferred his allegiance from the Church to God speaking in His Word. This was his great crime. It mattered little in the eyes of the assembled Fathers that he still shared in some of their common beliefs; he had broken the great bond of submission; he had become the worst of all heretics; he had rent from his conscience the shackles of the infallibility; and he must needs, in process of time, become a mere avowed and dangerous heretic than he was at that moment, and accordingly the mind of the Council was made up—John Huss must undergo the doom of the heretic.

Already enfeebled by illness, and by his long imprisonment—for “he was shut up in a tower, with fetters on his legs, that he could scarce walk in the day-time, and at night he was fastened up to a rack against the wall hard by his bed”¹⁹—he was exhausted and worn out by the length of the sitting, and the attention demanded to rebut the attacks and reasonings of his accusers. At length the Council rose, and Huss was led out by his armed escort, and conducted back to prison. His trusty friend, John de Chlum, followed him, and embracing him, bade him be of good cheer. “Oh, what a consolation to me, in the midst of my trials,” said Huss in one of his letters, “to see that excellent nobleman, John de Chlum, stretch forth the hand to me, miserable heretic, languishing in chains, and already condemned by every one.”²⁰

In the interval between Huss’s second appearance before the Council, and the third and last citation, the emperor made an ineffectual attempt to induce the Reformer to retract and abjure. Sigismund was earnestly desirous of saving his life, no doubt out of regard for Huss, but doubtless also from a regard to his own honour, deeply at stake in the issue. The Council drew up a form of

¹⁸ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 824. Lenfant, *Hist. Counc. Const.*, vol. i., bk. iii.

¹⁹ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 793.

²⁰ Epist. xxxii. It ought also to be mentioned that a protest against the execution of Huss was addressed to the Council of Constance, and signed by the principal nobles of Bohemia and Moravia. The original of this protest is preserved in the library of Edinburgh University.

abjuration and submission. This was laid before Huss in prison, and the mediation of common friends was employed to prevail with him to sign the paper. The Reformer declared himself ready to abjure those errors which had been falsely imputed to him, but as regarded those conclusions which had been faithfully deduced from his writings, and which he had taught, these, by the grace of God, he never would abandon. "He would rather," he said, "be cast into the sea with a mill-stone about his neck, than offend those little ones to whom he had preached the Gospel, by abjuring it."²¹ At last the matter was brought very much to this point: would he submit himself implicitly to the Council? The snare was cunningly set, but Huss had wisdom to see and avoid it. "If the Council should even tell you," said a doctor, whose name has not been preserved, "that you have but one eye, you would be obliged to agree with the Council." "But," said Huss, "as long as God keeps me in my senses, I would not say such a thing, even though the whole world should require it, because I could not say it without wounding my conscience."²² What an obstinate, self-opinionated, arrogant man! said the Fathers. Even the emperor was irritated at what he regarded as stubbornness, and giving way to a burst of passion, declared that such unreasonable obduracy was worthy of death.²³

This was the great crisis of the Reformer's career. It was as if the Fathers had said, "We shall say nothing of heresy; we specify no errors, only submit yourself implicitly to our authority as an infallible Council. Burn this grain of incense on the altar in testimony of our corporate divinity. That is asking no great matter surely." This was the fiery temptation with which Huss was now tried. How many would have yielded—how many in similar circumstances have yielded, and been lost! Had Huss bowed his head before the infallibility, he never could have lifted it up again before his own conscience, before his countrymen, before his Saviour. Struck with spiritual paralysis, his strength would have departed from him. He would have escaped the stake, the agony of which is but for a moment, but he would have missed the crown, the glory of which is eternal.

From that moment Huss had peace—deeper and more ecstatic than he had ever before experienced. "I write this letter," says he to a friend, "in prison, and with my fettered hand, expecting my sentence of death tomorrow. . . . When, with the assistance of Jesus Christ, we shall meet again in the delicious peace of the future life, you will learn how merciful God has shown Himself towards me—how effectually He has supported me in the midst of my temptations and trials."²⁴ The irritation of the debate into which the Council had dragged him was forgotten, and he calmly began to prepare for death, not dis-

²¹ Concil. Const.—Hardouin, tom. viii., p. 423.

²² Lenfant, *Hist. Counc. Const.*, vol. i., p. 361.

²³ Bonnechose, *Reformers before the Reformation*, ii. 47.

²⁴ Epist. x.

quieted by the terrible form in which he foresaw it would come. The martyrs of former ages had passed by this path to their glory, and by the help of Him who is mighty he should be able to travel by the same road to his. He would look the fire in the face, and overcome the vehemency of its flame by the yet greater vehemency of his love. He already tasted the joys that awaited him within those gates that should open to receive him as soon as the fire should loose him from the stake, and set free his spirit to begin its flight on high. Nay, in his prison he was cheered with a prophetic glimpse of the dawn of those better days that awaited the Church of God on earth, and which his own blood would largely contribute to hasten. Once as he lay asleep he thought that he was again in his beloved Chapel of Bethlehem. Envious priests were there trying to efface the figures of Jesus Christ which he had got painted upon its walls. He was filled with sorrow. But next day there came painters who restored the partially obliterated portraits, so that they were more brilliant than before. “‘Now,’ said these artists, ‘let the bishops and the priests come forth; let them efface these if they can;’ and the crowd was filled with joy, and I also.”²⁵

“Occupy your thoughts with your defence, rather than with visions,” said John de Chlum, to whom he had told his dream. “And yet,” replied Huss, “I firmly hope that this life of Christ, which I engraved on men’s hearts at Bethlehem when I preached His Word, will not be effaced; and that after I have ceased to live it will be still better shown forth, by mightier preachers, to the great satisfaction of the people, and to my own most sincere joy, when I shall be again permitted to announce His Gospel—that is, when I shall rise from the dead.”²⁶

²⁵ *Ibid.* xliv.

²⁶ Bonnechose, *Reformers before the Reformation*, ii. 24.