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 VIII.

WICLIFFE AND HUSS COMPARED IN THEIR THEOLOGY, THEIR CHARACTER, AND THEIR LABOURS.

Wicliffe and Huss, Representatives of their Epoch: the Former the Master, the Latter the Scholar—Both Acknow­ledge the Scriptures to be Supreme Judge and Authority, but Wicliffe more Completely—True Church lies in the “Totality of the Elect”—Wicliffe Fully and Huss more Feebly Accept the Truth of the Sole Mediatorship of Christ—Their Views on the Doctrine of the Sacraments—Lechler’s Contrast between Wicliffe and Huss.

Before advancing to the history of Jerome, let us glance back on the two great men, representa­tives of their epoch, who have passed before us, and note the relations in which they stand to each other. These relations are such that the two always, come up together. The years which divide them are annihilated. Everywhere in the history—in the hall of the University of Prague, in the pulpit of the Bethlehem Chapel, in the council chamber of Constance—these two figures, Wicliffe and Huss, are seen standing side by side.

Wicliffe is the master, and Huss the scholar. The latter receives his opinions from the former— not, however, without investigation and proof—and he incorporates them with himself, so to speak, at the cost of a severe mental struggle. “Both men,” says Lechler, “place the Word of God at the foundation of their system, and acknowledge the Holy Scriptures as the supreme judge and authority. Still they differ in many respects. Wicliffe reached his principle gradually, and with laborious effort, whilst Huss accepted it, and had simply to hold it fast, and to establish it.”[[1]](#footnote-1) To Wicliffe the principle was an independent conquest, to Huss it came as a possession which another had won. The opinions of Wicliffe on the head of the sole authority of Scripture were sharply defined, and even received great prominence, while Huss never so clearly defined his sentiments nor gave them the same large place in his teaching. Wicliffe, moreover, repudiated the limitary idea that Scripture was to be interpreted according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers, and held that the Spirit makes known the true sense of the Word of God, and that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture. Huss, on the other hand, was willing to receive the Scriptures as the Holy Ghost had given wisdom to the Fathers to explain them.

“Both Wicliffe and Huss held that ‘the true Church lies in nothing else than the totality of the elect.’ His whole conceptions and ideas of the Church, Huss has derived from no other than the great English Reformer. Wicliffe based the whole of his Church system upon the eternal purposes of God respecting the elect, building up from the foundations, and making his whole plan sublimely accordant with the nature of God, the constitution of the universe, and the divine government of all things. Huss’s conception of the Church lay more on the surface, and the relations between God and His people were with him those of a disciple to his teacher, or a servant to his master.”

As regards the function of Christ as the one Mediator between God and man, Huss was at one with Wicliffe. The English Reformer carried out his doctrine, with the strength and joy of a full conviction, to its logical issue, in the entire repudia­tion of the veneration and intercession of the saints. Huss, on the other hand, grasping the glorious truth of Christ’s sole mediatorship more feebly, was never able to shake himself wholly free from a de­pendence on the intercession and good offices of the glorified.

Nor were the views of Huss on the doctrine of the Sacraments nearly so well defined or so accord­ant with Scripture as those of Wicliffe; and, as has been already said, he believed in transubstantiation to the end. On the question of the Pope’s authority he more nearly approximated Wicliffe’s views; Huss denied the divine right of the Bishop of Rome to the primacy of the Church, and wished to restore the original equality which he held existed among the bishops of the Church. Wicliffe would have gone farther; equality among the4 priests and not merely among the bishops would alone have con­tented him.

Lechler has drawn with discriminating hand a contrast between these two men. The power of their intellect, the graces of their character, and the achievements of their lives are finely and sharply brought out in the contrasted lights of the following comparison :—

“Huss is indeed not a primitive, creative, origi­nal genius like Wicliffe, and as a thinker neither speculatively inclined nor of systematic talent. In the sphere of theological thinking Wicliffe is a kingly spirit, of an inborn power of mind, and through unwearied mental labour gained the po­sition of a leader of thought; whilst Huss appears as a star of the second magnitude, and planet-like revolves around Wicliffe as his sun. Both indeed circle round the great central Sun, which is Christ Himself. Further, Huss is not a character like Wicliffe, twice tempered and sharp as steel—an inwardly strong nature, going absolutely straight forward, without looking on either side, following only his conviction, and carrying it out logically and energetically to its ultimate consequences, sometimes even with a ruggedness and harshness which wounds and repulses. In comparison with Wicliffe, Huss is a somewhat soft personality, finely strung, more receptively and passively in­clined than with a vocation for independent power and heroic conquest. Nevertheless, it is not to be inferred that he was a weakling, a characterless, yielding personality. With softness and tender­ness of soul it is quite possible to combine a moral toughness, an immutable faith, an unbending firm­ness, forming a union of qualities which exerts an attractive and winning influence, nay, challenges the highest esteem and veneration.

“Added to this is the moral purity and unsel­fishness of the man who exercised an almost ascetic severity towards himself; his sincere fear of God, tender conscientiousness, and heart-felt piety, where­by he cared nothing for himself or his own honour, but before all put the honour of God and his Saviour, and next to that the honour of his fatherland, and the unblemished reputation for orthodox piety of his countrymen. In honest zeal for the cause of God and Jesus Christ, both men—Wicliffe and Huss—stand on the same footing. Only in Wicliffe’s case the zeal was of a more fiery, manly, energetic kind, whilst in Huss it burned with a warm, silent glow, in union with almost feminine tenderness, and fervent faith and endurance. And this heart, with all its gentleness, unappalled by even the most terrible death, this unconquerable, this all-overcoming patience of the man in his con­fession of evangelical truth, won for him the affec­tions of his contemporaries, and made the most lasting impression upon his own times and on suc­ceeding generations. If Wicliffe was surpassingly a man of understanding, Huss was surpassingly a man of feeling; not of a genial disposition like Luther, but rather of a deep, earnest, gentle nature. Further, if Wicliffe was endowed with a powerful, resolute, manly, energetic will, Huss was gifted with a true, earnest, enduring will. I might say Wicliffe was a man of God, Huss was a child of God; both, however, were heroes in God’s host, each according to the gifts which the Spirit of God had lent them, and in each these gifts of mind were used for the good of the whole body. Measured by an intellectual standard, Huss was certainly not equal to Wicliffe; Wicliffe is by far the greater; he overtops by a head not only other men, but also even a Huss. Despite that, however, John Huss, as far as his character was concerned, for his true noble personality, his conscientious piety, his con­quering inviolable faith in the midst of suffering and oppression, was in all respects a worthy follower of Wicliffe, a worthy representative upon the Continent of Europe of the evangelical principle, and of Wicliffe’s true, fearless idea of reform, which so loftily upheld the honour of Christ.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Lechler, *Johann von Wiclif,* vol. ii., p. 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lechler, *Johann von Wictif.* vol. ii., pp. 269, 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)