

LIGHT FROM OLD TIMES;

OR,

Protestant Facts and Men.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION FOR OUR OWN DAYS.

BY THE LATE BISHOP

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"If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for the battle?"—1 Cor. xiv. 8.

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JOHN WYCLIF.

IT is an old and true saying, that nations sometimes know little about some of their greatest benefactors. If there ever was a man to whom this saying applies, it is John Wyclif, the forerunner and first beginner of the Protestant Reformation in this country. To Wyclif England owes an enormous debt: yet Wyclif is a man of whom most Englishmen know little or nothing.

In drawing up a few pages about this great and good man, the words of the Apostle St. Peter rise up before my mind. He says, "I think it meet to stir you up by putting you in remembrance" (2 Pet. i. 13). This is exactly what I want to do in this paper. I wish to stir up my readers, and try to make them remember and never forget the man who has been justly called "The Morning Star of the English reformation."

I. First and foremost, I shall ask you to *remember the religious condition of England in the age when Wyclif lived.*

I shall make no apology for dwelling briefly on this point. A right understanding of it lies at the very root of my whole subject. Without this it is impossible to form a correct estimate of the man about whom I am writing; of the enormous difficulties he had to contend with; and of the greatness of the work which he did.

John Wyclif was born in the north of Yorkshire, on the banks of the Tees, about the year 1324, in the reign of Edward II., and died in 1384, in the reign of Richard II., more than five hundred years ago. So you will remember that he was born at least a hundred years before the invention of printing, and died about a hundred years before the great German Reformer, Martin Luther, was born. These two facts alone should never be forgotten.

The three centuries immediately preceding our English Reformation, in the middle of which Wyclif lived, were probably the darkest period in the history of English Christianity. It was a period when the Church of this land was thoroughly, entirely, and completely Roman Catholic—when the Bishop of Rome was the spiritual head of the Church—when Romanism reigned supreme from the Isle of Wight to Berwick-on-Tweed, and from the Land's End to the North Foreland, and ministers and people were all alike Papists. It is no exaggeration to say that for these three centuries before the Reformation, Christianity in England seems to have been buried under a mass of ignorance, superstition, priestcraft, and immorality. The likeness between the religion of this period and that of the apostolic age was so small, that if St. Paul had risen from the dead he would hardly have called it Christianity at all?

Such were the days when Wyclif lived. Such were the difficulties which he had to encounter. I charge my readers not to forget them. The man who could do the

work he did, and leave the mark that he left on his generation, must have been no common man. I go further: he must have been a servant of Christ, of rare grace and gifts, and singularly filled with the Holy Ghost. I say he is a man worthy of all honour, and we do well to keep him in remembrance.

II. Let me now turn from Wyclif's time to *Wyclif's work*.

That Wyclif did a great work in a very dark day—that he made a deep impression on his generation—that he was felt and acknowledged to be “a power” in England both by Church and Parliament, for some twenty-five years, is simple matter of history which no well-read person can deny.

But there is much obscurity about his early life. We know nothing of his first schools and schoolmasters, and can only guess that he may have picked up the first rudiments of his education at Eggleston Priory, on the Tees. But we do know that he went to Oxford between 1335 and 1340, and profited so much by the instruction he got there that he obtained a very high reputation as one of the most learned men of his day. He was made Master of Balliol in 1361, and was afterwards connected with Queen's, Merton, and Canterbury Hall. From that date for about twenty years, when he retired to Lutterworth, Oxford seems to have been his head-quarters, though he evidently was often in London. Lecturing, preaching, writing both for learned and unlearned, arguing, controversy, appear to have been the diet of his life. But we have no minute and systematic account of his life from the pen of any contemporary biographer. How he first obtained his sound theological views—whether he learned anything from Archbishop Bradwardin, who preceded him—whether he was intimate with Fitzralph of Armagh, Chancellor of Oxford, or the famous Grostète, Bishop of Lincoln—who, in short, were his helpers and fellow-labourers, or whether he had none and stood alone—on all these points we know little or nothing. It is useless, however, to complain, as there was no printing in Wyclif's day, and few could read or write. I shall not waste time in guessing, but shall content myself with mentioning four facts which are beyond controversy, and pointing out four reasons why Wyclif's name should always be honoured in England.

(a) For one thing, we should gratefully remember that Wyclif was *one of the first Englishmen who maintained the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice*. The proof of this is to be seen so continually in his writings, that I shall not attempt to supply quotations. The Bible comes to the front in all his remains.

The importance of this great principle can never be overrated. It lies at the very foundation of Protestant Christianity. It is the back-bone of the Articles of the Church of England and of every sound Church in Christendom. The true Christian was intended by Christ to prove all things by the Word of God, all churches, all

ministers, all teaching, all preaching, all doctrines, all sermons, all writings, all opinions, all practices. These are his marching orders. Prove all by the Word of God; measure all by the measure of the Bible; compare all with the standard of the Bible; weigh all in the balances of the Bible; examine all by the light of the Bible; test all in the crucible of the Bible. That which can abide the fire of the Bible, receive, hold, believe, and obey. That which cannot abide the fire of the Bible, reject, refuse, repudiate, and cast away. This is the standard which Wyclif raised in England. This is the flag which he nailed to the mast. May it never be lowered!

All this sounds so familiar to our ears that we do not realize its value. Five hundred years ago, the man who took up this ground was a bold man, and stood alone. Let us never forget that one of the first to set down his foot upon this principle was John Wyclif.

(b) For another thing, let us gratefully remember that Wyclif *was one of the first Englishmen who attacked and denounced the errors of the Church of Rome.* The sacrifice of the Mass and Transubstantiation, the ignorance and immorality of the priesthood, the tyranny of the See of Rome, the uselessness of trusting to other mediators than Christ, the dangerous tendency of the confessional,—all these and other kindred doctrines will be found unsparingly exposed in his writings. On all these points he was a thorough Protestant Reformer, a century and a half before the Reformation.

Well would it be for England if men saw this subject in the present day as clearly as Wyclif did. Unhappily, nowadays, the edge of the old British feeling about Protestantism seems blunted and dull. Some profess to be tired of all religious controversy, and are ready to sacrifice God's truth for the sake of peace. Some look on Romanism as simply one among many English forms of religion, and neither worse nor better than others. Some try to persuade us that Romanism is changed, and is not nearly so bad as it used to be. Some boldly point to the faults of Protestants, and loudly cry that Romanists are quite as good as ourselves. Some think it fine and liberal to maintain that we have no right to think any one wrong who is in earnest about his creed. And yet the two great historical facts, (a) that ignorance, immorality, and superstition reigned supreme in England 400 years ago under Popery; (b) that the Reformation was the greatest blessing God ever gave to this land,—both these are facts which no one but a Papist ever thought of disputing fifty years ago! In the present day, alas, it is convenient and fashionable to forget them! In short, at the rate we are going, I shall not be surprised if it is soon proposed to repeal the Act of Settlement, and to allow the Crown of England to be worn by a Papist.

If we are to put the clock back, and get behind the Reformation, as some coolly propose, I trust we shall not stop at Henry VIII., or VII., or VI., but go back to

consult Wyclif.

(c) For another thing, let us gratefully remember that Wyclif *was one of the first, if not the very first, Englishmen who revived the apostolic ordinance of preaching*. The “poor priests,” as they were called, whom he sent about the country to teach, were one of the greatest benefits which he conferred on his generation. They sowed the seed of thoughts among the people which were never entirely forgotten, and, I believe, paved the way for the Reformation.

If Wyclif had never done anything but this for England, I believe that this alone would entitle him to our deep thankfulness. I maintain firmly that the first, foremost, and principal work of the minister is to be a preacher of God’s Word.

I say this emphatically, because of the time in which we live, and the peculiar dangers of the Christian warfare in our own land. I believe that the pretended “sacerdotalism” of ministers is one of the oldest and most mischievous errors which has ever plagued Christendom. Partly from an ignorant hankering after the priesthood of the Mosaic Dispensation, which passed away when Christ died; partly from the love of power and dignity, which is natural to ministers, as much as to other men; partly from the preference of unconverted worshippers for a supposed priest and mediator whom they can see, rather than one in heaven whom they cannot see; partly from the general ignorance of mankind before the Bible was printed and circulated; partly from one cause and partly from another, there has been an incessant tendency throughout the last eighteen centuries to exalt ministers to an unscriptural position, and to regard them as priests and mediators between God and man, rather than as preachers of God’s Word.

I charge my readers to remember this. Stand fast on old principles. Do not forsake the old paths. Let nothing tempt you to believe that multiplication of forms and ceremonies, constant reading of liturgical services, or frequent communions, will ever do so much good to souls as the powerful, fiery, fervent preaching of God’s Word. Daily services without sermons may gratify and edify a few handfuls of believers, but they will never reach, draw, attract, or arrest the great mass of mankind. If men want to do good to the multitude, if they want to reach their hearts and consciences, they must walk in the steps of Wyclif, Latimer, Luther, Chrysostom, and St. Paul. They must attack them through their ears; they must blow the trumpet of the everlasting Gospel loud and long; they must preach the Word.

(d) Last in order, but first in importance, *let us ever gratefully remember that Wyclif was the first Englishman who translated the Bible into the English language*, and thus enabled it to be understood by the people.

The difficulty of this work was probably something of which we can form no conception at this day. There were probably few, very few, that could help the translator in any way. There was no printing, and the whole book had to be labo-

riously written in manuscript, and by written manuscript alone could copies be multiplied. To inspect the machinery and apparatus of our blessed Bible Society in Blackfriars, and then to think of the stupendous toil which Wyclif must have gone through, is enough to take one's breath away. But with God's help nothing is impossible. The work was done, and hundreds of copies were circulated. In spite of every effort to suppress the book, and the destruction of it by time, fire, and unfavourable hands, no less than 170 complete copies were found extant when it was reprinted at Oxford some 40 years ago, and no doubt many more are in existence.

The good that was done by the translation of the Bible will probably never be known till the last day, and I shall not attempt to form any conjecture about it. But I shall never hesitate to assert that if there is any one fact more incontrovertibly proved than another it is this, that the possession by a people of the Bible in their own language is the greatest possible national blessing.

Five hundred years have passed away since the first translator of the English Bible was laid in his grave. I ask any one this day to look at the map of the world and see what a tale it tells about the value of a free and widely circulated Bible.

Which are the countries where the greatest amount of ignorance, superstition, immorality, and tyranny is to be found at this very moment? The countries in which the Bible is a forbidden or neglected book—such countries as Italy and Spain, and the South American States. Which are the countries where liberty, and public and private morality have attained the highest pitch? The countries where the Bible is free to all, like England, Scotland, and the United States. Yes! when you know how a nation deals with the Bible, you may generally know what a nation is. O that the rulers of some nations did but know that a free Bible is the grand secret of national prosperity, and that the surest way to make subjects orderly and obedient is to allow a free passage to the living waters of God's Word! O that the people of some countries did but see that a free Bible is the beginning of all real freedom, and that the first liberty they should seek after is liberty for the apostles and prophets—liberty to have a Bible in every house, and a Bible in every hand! Well said Bishop Hooper, "God in heaven and king on earth have no greater friend than the Bible." It is a striking fact, that when British Sovereigns are crowned, they are publicly presented with the Bible, and told, "This book is the most valuable thing the world affords."

This is the book on which the well-being of nations has always hinged, and with which the best interests of every nation in Christendom at this moment are inseparably bound up. Just in proportion as the Bible is honoured or not, light or darkness, morality or immorality, true religion or superstition, liberty or despotism, good laws or bad, will be found in a land. Come with me and open the pages of history, and you will read the proof of these assertions in time past. Read it in

the history of Israel under the kings. How great was the wickedness that then prevailed! But who can wonder? The law of the Lord had been completely lost sight of, and was found in the days of Josiah in a corner of the temple.—Read it in the history of the Jews in our Lord Jesus Christ's time. How awful the picture of Scribes and Pharisees, and their religion! But who can wonder? The Scripture was “made void” by man's traditions.—Read it in the history of the Church of Christ in the Middle Ages. What can be worse than the accounts we have of ignorance and superstition? But who can wonder? The times might well be dark, when men had not the light of the Bible.

The plain truth is this, the Bible is the parent of free thought and mental activity. It is a curious fact, that the British and Foreign Bible House and the British *Times* offices are almost side by side!

Which are the Churches on earth which are producing the greatest effect on mankind? The Churches in which the Bible is exalted. Which are the parishes in England and Scotland where religion and morality have the strongest hold? The parishes in which the Bible is most circulated and read. Who are the ministers in England who have the most real influence over the minds of the people? Not those who are ever crying “Church! Church!” but those who are faithfully preaching the Word. A Church which does not honour the Bible is as useless as a body without life, or a steam engine without fire. A minister who does not honour the Bible is as useless as a soldier without arms, a builder without tools, a pilot without compass, or a messenger without tidings. It is cheap and easy work for Roman Catholics, Neologians, and friends of secular education, to sneer at those who love the Bible; but the Romanist, the Neologian, and the friends of mere secular education, have never yet shown us one New Zealand, one Tinnevelly, one Sierra Leone, as the fruit of their principles. They only can do that who honour the Bible. These are the works of the Word, and the proofs of its power.

This is the book to which the civilized world is indebted for many of its best and most praiseworthy institutions. Few probably are aware how many are the good things that men have adopted for the public benefit, of which the origin may be clearly traced up to the Bible. It has left lasting marks wherever it has been received. From the Bible are drawn many of the best laws by which society is kept in order. From the Bible has been obtained the standard of morality about truth, honesty, and the relations of man and wife, which prevails among Christian nations, and which—however feebly respected in many cases—makes so great a difference between Christians and heathen. To the Bible we are indebted for that most merciful provision for the poor man, the Sabbath day. To the influence of the Bible we owe nearly every humane and charitable institution in existence. The sick, the poor, the aged, the orphan, the lunatic, the idiot, the blind, were seldom or never thought of before the Bible leavened the world. You may search in vain

for any record of institutions for their aid in the histories of Athens or of Rome. Alas, many sneer at the Bible, and say the world would get on well enough without it, who little think how great are their own obligations to the Bible. Little does the infidel think, as he lies sick in some of our great hospitals, that he owes all his present comforts to the very Book he affects to despise. Had it not been for the Bible, he might have died in misery, uncared for, unnoticed, and alone. Verily, the world we live in is fearfully unconscious of its debts. The last day alone, I believe, will tell the full amount of benefit conferred upon it by the Bible. This is the book which John Wyclif was the first to translate, and give to Englishmen in their own mother tongue. I repeat, that if he had done nothing else he would deserve to be gratefully remembered by every English Christian, every English patriot, and every English Churchman.

Such are the four leading reasons for which the memory of John Wyclif ought to be had in honour.

I do not tell you that this great man had no weak points, and held no disputable opinions, and was sound on every theological doctrine. I say nothing of the kind. He lived in a twilight age, and had to work out many a problem in divinity without the slightest help from man. He wrote much, and wrote perhaps hastily; and I do not pretend to endorse all that he wrote. Like Luther and Cranmer, at the beginning he was not clear on all points. But when I consider his solitary, isolated, difficult position, I only wonder that he was as free from error as he was. One fact far outweighs all his alleged defects. That fact is that he was the first translator of the Bible into the English tongue. How he escaped without a violent death, and finally died quietly in his bed at Lutterworth, is a miracle indeed. But it is evident to my mind that God protected him in a miraculous way. "The earth helped the woman." It was God who raised up John of Gaunt and the Princess of Wales to favour him. It was God who sent the earthquake which broke up a London Synod, when it was about to condemn him. It was God who inclined the University of Oxford to give him support.

The Council of Constance had not yet set the example of burning heretics. The Council of Trent had not yet crystallised and formulated all Popish doctrine. But above all, I see the hand of God over Wyclif—the hand of Him who said, "When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes his enemies to be at peace with him." Yes! the hand over Wyclif was the crucified hand of Him who said to the apostles, "I am with you always;" the hand of Him who said to Paul at Corinth, "Speak, and hold not thy peace; I am with thee. No man shall set on thee to hurt thee." He was immortal till his work was done.

Let me now bring this paper to a conclusion by pointing out some practical conclusions to which the whole subject ought to lead us.

(1) Let us then resolve to rally round Wyclif's first principles, and grasp them more firmly than we have done of late years. The supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture, the absolute necessity of watching and resisting the dangerous pretensions of the Church of Rome, the immense importance of preaching God's Word,—these are a basis on which all Protestant Englishmen ought to unite, and work heartily.

(2) Let us learn the astonishing power and influence which one man possesses if he comes forward boldly for Christ, and has the courage of his opinions. One Moses, one Elijah, one John the Baptist, one Paul at Corinth, one Savonarola at Florence, one Luther in Germany, one Zwingli, one Wesley, one Whitefield, one Romaine in London, set thousands thinking and shook a sleeping world. We want more boldness among the friends of truth. There is far too much tendency to sit still, and wait for committees, and number our adherents. We want more men who are not afraid to stand alone, as Wyclif did.

(3) Finally, let us not forget that the Lord God of John Wyclif is not dead but alive. Men change. Something new is the cry of the day. Freer handling of Scripture! Broader and looser theology! This is what many long to see. But we want nothing better than the old Gospel, if we wish to do good. Jesus Christ never changes. At the end of five hundred years He is still the same. He did not fail the Rector of Lutterworth, and He will not fail us if we walk in His steps.