

from John Foxe's "Book of Martyrs"  
(1889 edition)

*AN ACCOUNT OF WICKLIFFE AND HIS DOCTRINES.*

The first serious attempts made in England towards the reformation of the church took place in the reign of Edward III about A.D. 1350, when the morning star of that glorious day arose in our hemisphere—John WICKLIFFE. He was public reader of divinity in the university of Oxford, and, by the learned of his day, was accounted most deeply versed in theology and all kinds of philosophy. This even his adversaries allowed. Walden, his bitterest enemy, writing to pope Martin, says, that he was astonished at his most strong arguments, with the places of authority which he had gathered, with the vehemency and force of his reasons. At his appearing, the greatest darkness pervaded the church. Little but the name of Christ remained among the Christians, while his true and lively doctrine was as far unknown unto the most part, as his name was common unto all men. As touching faith, consolation, the end and use of the law, the office of Christ, of our impotency and weakness, of the Holy Ghost, of the greatness and strength of sin, of true works, grace, and free justification by faith, wherein consisteth and resteth the sum and matter of our profession, there was scarcely the mention of a word. Scripture, learning, and divinity, were known but to a few, and in the schools only, and there it was turned and converted almost entirely into sophistry. Instead of Peter and Paul, men occupied their time in studying Aquinas and Scotus, and the master of sentences. The world leaving and forsaking the lively power of God's spiritual word and doctrine, was altogether led and blinded with outward ceremonies and human traditions, wherein the whole scope, in a manner, of all Christian perfection did consist and depend. In these was all the hope of obtaining salvation fully fixed: hereunto all things were attributed. Scarcely any other thing was seen in the temples or churches, taught or spoken of in sermons, or finally intended or gone about in their whole life, but only heaping up of certain shadowed ceremonies upon ceremonies; and the people were taught to worship no other thing but that which they saw, and almost all they saw they worshipped.

The Christian faith was at that time counted none other thing but that every man should know that Christ once suffered, that is to say, that all men should know and understand that thing which the devils themselves also knew. Hypocrisy was substituted for holiness. All men were so

addicted to outward shows that even they who professed the most absolute and singular knowledge of the scriptures, scarcely understood any other thing. And this did evidently appear, not only in the common sort of doctors and teachers, but also in the very heads of the church, whose whole religion and piety consisted in observing days, meats, and raiment, and such like rhetorical circumstances, as of place, time, person, &c. Hence sprang so many sorts and fashions of vestures and garments; so many differences of colours and meats, with so many pilgrimages to several places, as though St. James at Compostella could do that which Christ could not do at Canterbury; or else that God were not of like power and strength in every place, or could not be found but as being sought for by running hither and thither. Then the holiness of the whole year was put off unto the Lent season. No country or land was counted holy, but only Palestine, where Christ had walked himself with his human feet. Such was the blindness of that time, that men strove and fought for the material cross at Jerusalem, as it had been for the chief strength of our faith. The Romish champions never ceased, by writings, admonishing and counselling, yea, and by quarrelling, to move and stir up princes to war and battle, even as though the faith and belief of the gospel were of small force or little effect without that wooden appendage. This was the cause of the expedition of king Richard unto Jerusalem; who being taken in the journey, and delivered unto the emperor, could scarcely be ransomed home again for thirty thousand marks.

Wickliffe boldly published his belief with regard to the several articles of religion, in which he differed from the common doctrine. Pope Gregory XI, hearing this, condemned some of his tenets, and commanded the archbishop of Canterbury, and the bishop of London, to oblige him to subscribe the condemnation of them; and in case of refusal to summon him to Rome. This commission could not easily be executed, Wickliffe having great friends, the chief of whom was John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, who enjoyed very great power, and was resolved to protect him. The archbishop holding a synod at St. Paul's, Wickliffe appeared, accompanied by the duke of Lancaster and lord Percy, marshal of England, when a dispute arising, whether Wickliffe should answer sitting or standing, the duke of Lancaster proceeded to threats, and gave the bishop very hard words. The people present thinking the bishop in danger, sided with him, so that the duke and the earl-marshal thought it prudent to retire, and to take Wickliffe with them.

Soon after this an insurrection ensued, some incendiaries spreading a report that the duke of Lancaster had persuaded the king to take away the

privileges of the city of London; which fired the people to such a degree that they broke open the Marshalsea, and freed all the prisoners; and not contented with this, a number of them went to the duke's palace in the Savoy, when missing his person, they plundered his house, and dragged his armour and weapons through the streets. For this outrage the duke of Lancaster caused the lord mayor and aldermen to be turned out, imagining that they had not used their authority to quell the mutineers. After this, the bishops meeting a second time, Wickliffe explained to them his sentiments with regard to the sacrament of the eucharist, in opposition to the belief of the Romanists; for which the bishops only enjoined him silence, not daring at that time to go to greater lengths.

A circumstance remarkably providential occurred at this period, which greatly tended to facilitate the cause of truth. This was a wide schism in the church of Rome. After the death of pope Gregory XI, who, in the midst of his anxiety to crush Wickliffe and his doctrines, was removed from his mortal career, the rise of the schism took place. Urban VI, who succeeded to the papal chair, was so proud and insolent to his cardinals, to dukes, princes, and queens, and so determined to advance his nephews and kindred, to the injury of princes, that the greatest number of his cardinals and courtiers gradually shrunk from him, and set up another French pope against him, named Clement, who reigned eleven years. After him Benedictus XIII was elected, who reigned twenty-six years. On the contrary side, Urban VI. succeeded Boniface IX, Innocentius VIII, Gregory XII, Alexander V and John XIII. Concerning this miserable schism, it would require another Iliad to comprehend in order all its circumstances and tragical parts; what trouble in the whole church, what parts taking in every country, what apprehending and imprisoning of priests and prelates taken by land and sea, and what shedding of blood followed in consequence. Otho, duke of Brunswick and prince of Tarentum, were taken and murdered. Joan his wife, queen of Jerusalem and Sicilia, who before had sent to pope Urban, in addition to other gifts at his coronation, 40,000 ducats in pure gold, was by the said Urban committed to prison, and there strangled. Cardinals were racked without mercy, and tormented on gibbets, rather than instantly put to death. Battles were fought between the two popes, whereof 5000 on the one side were slain, besides the number of them which were taken prisoners. The cardinals were beheaded on one day, after long torments. The bishop of Aquilonensis, being suspected by pope Urban for not riding faster with the pope, his horse not being good, was slain by the pope sending his soldiers to cut him in pieces. Thus did these demons in human form

continue to torment one another for the space of thirty-nine years, until the council of Constance somewhat appeased their wrath.

Wickliffe paid less regard to the injunctions of the bishops than to his duty to God, continued to promulgate his doctrines, and gradually to unveil the truth to the eyes of men. He wrote several works, which, as may be supposed, gave great alarm and offence to the existing clergy. But by the protection of the duke of Lancaster, he was secure from their malice. He translated the Bible into English, which, amidst the ignorance of the time, had the effect of the sun breaking forth in a dark night. To this Bible he prefixed a bold preface, wherein he reflected on the bad lives of the clergy, and condemned the worship of saints, images, and the corporeal presence of Christ in the sacrament; but what offended his enemies most was his exhorting all people to read the Scriptures, in which testimonies against those corruptions appeared so strongly, that the only way to prevent their being blazoned to the world was not to permit the sacred writings to be translated or known.

About the same time fell a dissension in England between the people and the nobility, which did not a little disturb the commonwealth. In this tumult Simon of Sudbury, archbishop of Canterbury, was taken by the people and beheaded. In his place succeeded William Courtenay, who was no less diligent than his predecessor had been in doing his utmost to root out heretics. Notwithstanding this formidable opposition Wickliffe's sect increased privily, and daily grew to greater force, until the time that William Barton, vice-chancellor of Oxford, had the whole rule of that university, who, calling together eight monastical doctors, and four others, with the consent of the rest of his affinity, put the common seal of the university to an edict, declaring unto every man, and threatening them under a grievous penalty, that none should hereafter associate themselves with any of Wickliffe's favourers. Unto Wickliffe himself he threatened the greater excommunication, and farther imprisonment, unless after three days canonical admonition or warning he did repent and amend; which when Wickliffe understood, forsaking the pope and all the clergy, he thought to appeal unto the king: but the duke of Lancaster interposing forbade him; whereby, being beset with troubles and vexations, as it were in the midst of the waves, he was forced again to make confession of his doctrine; in which confession, to avoid the rigour of things, he by qualifying his assertions, mitigated the severity he would otherwise have met with.

In consequence of Wickliffe's translation of the Bible and of his preface, his followers greatly multiplied. Many of them, indeed, were not

men of learning; but being wrought upon by the conviction of plain reason, this determined them in their persuasion. In a short time his doctrines made great progress, being not only espoused by vast numbers of the students of Oxford, but also by the great men at court, particularly by the duke of Lancaster and lord Percy, together with several young and well educated gentlemen. Hence Wickliffe may be considered as the great founder of the reformation in this kingdom. He was of Merton college in Oxford, where he took his doctor's degree, and became so eminent for his fine genius and great learning, that Simon Islip, archbishop of Canterbury, having founded Canterbury college, now Christ Church, in Oxford, appointed him rector: which employment he filled with universal approbation, till the death of the archbishop. Langhalm, successor to Islip, being desirous of favouring the monks, and introducing them into the college, attempted to remove Wickliffe, and to put one Woodhall, a monk, in his room. But the fellows of the college would never consent to this, they loving their old rector; but this affair being afterwards carried to Rome, Wickliffe was deprived in favour of Woodhall. However, this no ways lessened the reputation of the reformer, every one perceiving it was a general affair, and that the monks did not so much strike at Wickliffe's person, as at all the secular priests who were members of the college. And indeed, they were all turned out to make room for the monks. Shortly after he was presented to the living of Lutterworth, in the county of Leicester, and he there published, in his sermons and writings, certain opinions, which were judged new, because contrary to the received doctrine of those days. It must be observed, that his most bitter enemies never charged him with any immorality. This great man was left in quiet at Lutterworth till his death, which happened December 31, 1385. But after his body had lain in the grave forty-one years, his bones were taken up by decree of the synod of Constance, publicly burnt, and his ashes thrown into the river near the town. This condemnation of his doctrine did not prevent its spreading all over the kingdom, and with such success that, according to Spelman, two men could not be found together, and one not a Lollard or Wickliffite.

The following are among the articles of Wickliffe which were condemned as heretical:—The substance of material bread and wine doth remain in the sacrament of the altar after the consecration—The accidents do not remain without the subjects in the same sacrament, after the consecration—Christ is not in the sacrament of the altar truly and really, in his proper and corporeal person—If a bishop or a priest be in deadly sin, he doth not ordain, consecrate, nor baptize—If a man be duly and

truly contrite and penitent, all exterior and outer confession is but superfluous and unprofitable unto him—It is not found or established by the gospel that Christ did make or ordain mass—If the pope be a reprobate and evil man, and consequently a member of the devil, he hath no power by any manner of means given unto him over faithful Christians—Since the time of Urban VI. there is none to be received for pope, but every man is to live after the manner of the Greeks, under his own law—It is against the Scripture, that ecclesiastical ministers should have any temporal possessions—No prelate ought to excommunicate any man except he knew him first to be excommunicate of God, who doth so excommunicate any man, is thereby himself either a heretic or excommunicated—All such who leave off preaching or hearing the word of God, or preaching of the gospel for fear of excommunication, they are already excommunicated, and in the day of judgment shall be counted as traitors unto God—It is lawful for any man, either deacon or priest, to preach the word of God without authority or licence of the apostolic see or any other of his catholics—So long as a man is in deadly sin, he is neither bishop nor prelate in the church of God.

Wickliffe had written divers works, which in the year 1410 were burnt at Oxford, the abbot of Shrewsbury being then commissary. And not only in England, but also in Bohemia likewise, his books were set on fire by one Subinicus, archbishop of Prague, who made diligent inquisition for all the reformer had written. The number of the volumes composed and transcribed, said to have been destroyed, were most excellently and richly adorned with bosses of gold, and embellished coverings, being about the number of two hundred. But among all that he wrote no piece is more interesting for its size than the following letter, which he addressed to pope Urban VI. in the year 1382.

“Verily I do rejoice to open and declare unto every man the faith which I do hold, and specially unto the bishop of Rome; the which forasmuch as I do suppose to be sound and true, he will most willingly confirm my said faith, or, if it be erroneous, amend the same.

“First, I suppose that the gospel of Christ is the whole body of God’s law; and that Christ which did give that same law himself, I believe to be a very man, and in that point, to exceed the law of the gospel, and all other parts of the scripture. Again, I do give and hold the bishop of Rome, forasmuch as he is the vicar of Christ here in earth, to be bound most of all other men unto that law of the gospel. For the greatness among Christ’s disciples did not consist in worldly dignity or honours, but in the near and exact following of Christ in his life and manners: whereupon I do gather

out of the heart of the law of the Lord, that Christ for the time of his pilgrimage here was a most poor man, abjecting and casting off all worldly rule and honour, as appeareth by the gospel of St. Matthew, the eighth chapter, and the second of the Corinthians, the eighth chapter.

“Hereby I do fully gather, that no faithful man ought to follow either the pope himself, or any of the holy men, but in such points as they have followed the Lord Jesus Christ. For Peter and the sons of Zebedee, by desiring worldly honour, contrary to the following of Christ’s steps, did offend, and therefore in those errors they ought not to be followed.

“Hereof I do gather, as a counsel, that the pope ought to leave unto the secular power all temporal dominion and rule, and thereunto effectually to move and exhort his whole clergy; for so did Christ, and especially by his apostles. Wherefore if I have erred in any of these points, I will most humbly submit myself unto correction, even by death if necessity so require; and if I could labour according to my will or desire in mine own person, I would surely present myself before the bishop of Rome; but the Lord hath otherwise visited me to the contrary, and hath taught me rather to obey God than man. Forsomuch then as God hath given unto the pope just and true evangelical instincts, we ought to pray that they be not extinguished by any subtle or crafty device.

“And that the pope and cardinals be not moved to do any thing contrary unto the law of the Lord. Wherefore let us pray unto our God, that he will so stir up our pope Urban VI as he began, that he with his clergy may follow the Lord Jesus Christ in life and manners; and that they may teach the people effectually; and that they likewise may faithfully follow them in the same. And let us specially pray that your pope may be preserved from all malign and evil counsel, which we do know that evil and envious men of his household would give him. And seeing the Lord will not suffer us to be tempted above our power, much less then will he require of any creature to do that thing which they are not able; forsomuch as that is the plain condition and manner of antichrist.”

In the council of the Lateran, a decree was made with regard to heretics, which required all magistrates to extirpate them upon pain of forfeiture and deposition. The canons of this council being received in England, the prosecution of heretics became a part of the common law; and a writ, styled *de heretico comburendo*, was issued under king Henry IV for burning them upon their conviction; after which special statutes were made, which commenced under Richard II, about the year 1390. The first made was assented to only by the lords; but the king sanctioned it without the concurrence of the commons. Yet the utmost extent of the

severity in this was, that writs should be issued to the laws of the church. It appears that those heretics were, at this time, very numerous, that they wore a peculiar habit, preached in churches and many other places against the existing faith, and refused to pay obedience to ecclesiastical censures.

On the accession of Henry IV to the crown in 1399, as he owed it in a great measure to the clergy, he passed an act against all who should presume to preach without the bishop's licence, or against the established church. It was enacted that all transgressors of this kind should be imprisoned, and be brought to trial within three months. If upon conviction they offered to abjure, and were not relapsed, they were to be imprisoned and fined at pleasure; but if they refused to abjure, or were relapsed, they were to be delivered over to the secular arm; and the magistrates were to burn them in some public place. About this time William Sautre, parish priest of St. Osith in London, being condemned as a relapse, and degraded by Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, a writ was issued, wherein burning is called the common punishment, and referred to the customs of other nations. This was the first example of that cruel punishment in this kingdom.

The clergy, alarmed lest the doctrines of Wickliffe should ultimately become established, used every exertion in their power to check them in the reign of Richard II. The bishops obtained a general licence to imprison heretics without being obliged to procure a special order from court, which however the House of Commons caused to be revoked. But as the fear of imprisonment could not check the evil dreaded by the bishops, Henry IV, whose particular object was to win the affection of the clergy, earnestly recommended to parliament the concerns of the church. How reluctant soever the house of commons might be to prosecute the Lollards, the credit of the court, and the cabals of the clergy, at last obtained a most detestable act, for burning obstinate heretics; which bloody statute was not repealed till the year 1677.