

THE HISTORY  
OF  
PROTESTANTISM

BY THE  
REV. J. A. WYLIE, LL.D.

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 V.

### THE FRIARS VERSUS THE GOSPEL IN ENGLAND.

The Joy of the Friars—Wicliffe Resumes the Battle—Demands the Abolition of the Orders—The Arrogance of the Friars—Their Luxury—Their Covetousness—Their Oppression of the Poor—The Agitation in England—Questions touching the Gospel raised thereby—Is it from the Friar or from Christ that Pardon is to be had?—Were Christ and the Apostles Mendicants?—Wicliffe's Tractate, *Objections to Friars*—It launches him on his Career as a Reformer—Preaches in this Tractate the Gospel to England—Attack on the Power of the Keys—No Pardon but from God—Salvation without Money.

THE joy of the friars when they heard that their enemy was dead was great; but it was of short duration. The same year in which the archbishop died (1360) Wicliffe stood up and began that opposition to the Mendicants which he maintained more or less to the very close of his life. "John Wicliffe," says an unknown writer, "the singular ornament of his time, began at Oxford in the year of our Lord 1360, in his public lectures, to correct the abuses of the clergy, and their open wickedness, King Edward III. being living, and continued secure a most valiant champion of the truth among the tyrants of Sodom."<sup>1</sup>

Wicliffe saw deeper into the evil than Armachanus had done. The very institution of the order was unscriptural and corrupt, and while it existed, nothing, he felt, but abuse could flow from it; and therefore, not content, as his predecessor would have been, with the reformation of the order, he demanded its abolition. The friars, vested in an independent jurisdiction by the Pope, were overriding the canons and regulations of Oxford, where their headquarters were pitched; they were setting at defiance the laws of the State; they were inveigling young children into their "rotten habit;" they were perambulating the country; and while they would allow no one but themselves to preach, their sermons were made up, Wicliffe tells us, "of fables, chronicles of the world, and stories from the siege of Troy."

The Pope, moreover, had conferred on them the right of shriving men; and they performed their office with such a hearty good-will, and gave absolution on terms so easy, that malefactors of every description flocked to them for pardon, and the consequence was a frightful increase of immorality and crime.<sup>2</sup> The alms which ought to have been given to the "bed-rid, the feeble, the crooked," they intercepted and devoured. In flagrant contempt of the de-

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<sup>1</sup> MS. in Hyper. Bodl., 163; *apud* Lewis, *Life of Wiclif* p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> "I have in my diocese of Armagh," says the Archbishop and Primate of Ireland, Armachanus, "about 2,000 persons, who stand condemned by the censures of the Church denounced every year against murderers, thieves, and such-like malefactors, of all which number scarce fourteen have applied to me or to my clergy for absolution; yet they all receive the Sacraments, as others do, because they are absolved, or pretend to be absolved, by friars." (Fox, *Acts and Mon.*)

clared intention of their founder, and their own vow of poverty, their hoards daily increased. The wealth thus gathered they expended in palatial buildings, in sumptuous tables, or other delights, or they sent it abroad to the impoverishing of the kingdom. Not the money only, but the secrets of the nation they were suspected of discovering to the enemies of the realm. To obey the Pope, to pray to St. Francis, to give alms to the friar, were the sum of all piety. This was better than all learning and all virtue, for it could open the gates of heaven. Wicliffe saw nothing in the future, provided the Mendicants were permitted to carry on their trade, but the speedy ruin of both Church and State.

The controversy on which Wicliffe now entered was eminently wholesome—wholesome to himself and to the nation. It touched the very foundations of Christianity, and compelled men to study the nature of the Gospel. The Mendicants went through England, selling to men the pardons of the Pope. Can our sins be forgiven for a little money? men were led to ask. Is it with Innocent or with God that we have to do? This led them to the Gospel, to learn from it the ground of the acceptance of sinners before God. Thus the controversy was no mere quarrel between the regulars and the seculars; it was no mere collision between the jurisdiction of the Oxford authorities and the jurisdiction of the Mendicants; the question was one between the Mendicants and the Gospel. Is it from the friars or from Jesus Christ that we are to obtain the forgiveness of our sins? This was a question which the England of that age eminently needed to have stirred.

The arguments, too, by which the friars endeavoured to cover the lucrative trade they were driving, helped to import a salutary element into the controversy. They pleaded the sanction of the Saviour for their begging. Christ and the apostles, said they, were mendicants, and lived on alms.<sup>3</sup> This led men to look into the New Testament, to see if this really were so. The friars had made an unwitting appeal to the right of private judgment, and advertised a book about which, had they been wise for their own interests, they would have been profoundly silent. Wicliffe, especially, was led to the yet closer study of the Bible. The system of truth in Holy Scripture revealed itself more and more to him; he saw how widely the Church of Rome had departed from the Gospel of Christ, and what a gulf separated salvation by the blood of the Lamb from salvation by the pardons of the Pope. It was now that the Professor of Divinity in Oxford rose up into the Reformer of England—the great pioneer and founder of the Reformation of Christendom.

About this time he published his *Objections to Friars*, which fairly launched him on his career as a Reformer. In this tractate he charges the friars with “fifty heresies and errors, and many more, if men will seek them well

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<sup>3</sup> Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., p. 288.

out.”<sup>4</sup> Let us mark that in this tract the Reformer does not so much dispute with the friars as preach the Gospel to his countrymen. “There cometh,” says Wicliffe, “no pardon but of God.” “The worst abuses of these friars consist in their pretended confessions, by means of which they affect, with numberless artifices of blasphemy, to purify those whom they confess, and make them clear from all pollution in the eyes of God, setting aside the commandments and satisfaction of our Lord.” “There is no greater heresy than for a man to believe that he is absolved from his sins if he give money, or if a priest lay his hand on this head, and say that he absolveth thee; for thou must be sorrowful in thy heart, and make amends to God, else God absolveth thee not.” “Many think if they give a penny to a pardoner, they shall be forgiven the breaking of all the commandments of God, and therefore they take no heed how they keep them. But I say this for certain, though thou have priests and friars to sing for thee, and though thou, each day, hear many masses, and found churches and colleges, and go on pilgrimages all thy life, and give all thy goods to pardoners, this will not bring thy soul to heaven.” “May God of His endless mercy destroy the pride, covetousness, hypocrisy, and heresy of this feigned pardoning, and make men busy to keep His commandments, and to set fully their trust in Jesus Christ.”

“I confess that the indulgences of the Pope, if they are what they are said to be, are a manifest blasphemy. The friars give a colour to this blasphemy by saying that Christ is omnipotent, and that the Pope is His plenary vicar, and so possesses in everything the same power as Christ in His humanity. Against this rude blasphemy I have elsewhere inveighed. Neither the Pope nor the Lord Jesus Christ can grant dispensations or give indulgences to any man, except as the Deity has eternally determined by His just counsel.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus did John Wicliffe, with the instincts of a true Reformer, strike at that ghostly principle which serves the Pope as the foundation-stone of his kingdom. Luther’s first blows were in like manner aimed at the same principle. He began his career by throwing down the gauntlet to the pardon-mongers of Rome. It was “the power of the keys” which gave to the Pope the lordship of the conscience; for he who can pardon sin—open or shut the gate of Paradise—is God to men. Wicliffe perceived that he could not shake into ruin that great fabric of spiritual and temporal power which the Pontiffs had reared, and in which, as within a vast prison-house, they kept immured the souls and bodies of men, otherwise than by exploding the false dogma on which it was founded. It was this dogma therefore, first of all, which he challenged. Think not, said he, in effect, to his countrymen, that God has given “the keys” to Innocent of Rome; think not that the friar carries heaven in his wallet; think not

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> See Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, chap. 2. Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*. Also *Wicliffe and the Huguenots*, by the Rev. Dr. Hanna, pp. 61–63; Edin., 1860.

that God sends his pardons wrapped up in those bits of paper which the Mendicants carry about with them, and which they sell for a piece of silver. Listen to the voice of the Gospel: “Ye are not redeemed with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, the Lamb without blemish and without spot.” God pardons men without money and without price. Thus did Wicliffe begin to preach “the acceptable year of the Lord,” and to proclaim “liberty to the captive, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”