

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.

THE BATTLE OF THE PARLIAMENT WITH THE POPE.

Résumé of Political Progress—Foreign Ecclesiastics appointed to English Benefices—Statutes of Provisors and Præmunire meant to put an End to the Abuse—The Practice still Continued—Instances—Royal Commissioners sent to Treat with the Pope concerning this Abuse—Wicliffe chosen one of the Commissioners—The Negotiation a Failure—Nevertheless of Benefit to Wicliffe by the Insight it gave him into the Papacy—Arnold Garnier—The “Good Parliament”—Its Battle with the Pope—A Greater Victory than Crecy—Wicliffe waxes Bolder—Rage of the Monks.

WE have already spoken of the encroachments of the Papal See on the independence of England in the thirteenth century; the cession of the kingdom to Innocent III. by King John; the promise of an annual payment to the Pope of a thousand marks by the English king; the demand preferred by Urban V. after payment of this tribute had lapsed for thirty-five years; the reply of the Parliament of England, and the share Wicliffe had in the resolution to which the Lords temporal and spiritual came to refuse the Papal impost. We have also said that the opposition of Parliament to the encroachments of the Popes on the liberties of the kingdom did not stop at this point, that several stringent laws were passed to protect the rights of the crown and the property of the subjects, and that more especially the Statutes of Provisors and Præmunire were framed with this view. The abuses which these laws were meant to correct had long been a source of national irritation. There were certain benefices in England which the Pope, in the plenitude of his power, reserved to himself. These were generally the more wealthy livings. But it might be inconvenient to wait till a vacancy actually occurred, accordingly the Pope, by what he termed a *provisor*, issued an appointment beforehand. The rights of the chapter, or of the crown, or whoever was patron, were thus set aside, and the legal presentee must either buy up the provisor, or permit the Pope's nominee, often a foreigner, to enjoy the benefice. The very best of these dignities and benefices were enjoyed by Italians, Frenchmen, and other foreigners, who were, says Lewis, “some of them mere boys; and not only ignorant of the English language, but even of Latin, and who never so much as saw their churches, but committed the care of them to those they could get to serve them the cheapest; and had the revenues of them remitted to them at Rome or elsewhere, by their proctors, to whom they let their tithes.”¹ It was to check this abuse that the Statute of Provisors was passed; and the law of Præmunire, by which it was followed, was intended to fortify it, and effectually to close the drain of the nation's wealth by forbidding anyone to bring into the kingdom any bull or letter of the Pope appointing to an English

¹ Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, chap. 3, p. 31.

benefice.

The grievances were continued nevertheless, and became even more intolerable. The Parliament addressed a new remonstrance to the king, setting forth the unbearable nature of these oppressions, and the injury they were doing to the royal authority, and praying him to take action on the point. Accordingly, in 1373, the king appointed four commissioners to proceed to Avignon, where Pope Gregory XI. was residing, and laying the complaints of the English nation before him, request that for the future he would forbear meddling with the reservations of benefices. The ambassadors were courteously received, but they could obtain no redress.² The Parliament renewed their complaint and request that “remedy be provided against the provisions of the Pope, whereby he reaps the first-fruits of ecclesiastical dignities, the treasure of the realm being thereby conveyed away, which they cannot bear.” A Royal Commission was issued in 1371 to inquire into the number of ecclesiastical benefices and dignities in England held by aliens, and to estimate their exact value. It was found that the number of livings in the hands of Italians, Frenchmen, and other foreigners was so great that, says Fox, “were it all set down, it would fill almost half a quire of paper.”³ The clergy of England was rapidly becoming an alien and a merely nominal one. The sums drained from the kingdom were immense.

The king resolved to make another attempt to arrange this matter with the Papal court. He named another commission, and it is an evidence of the growing influence of Wicliffe that his name stands second on the list of these delegates. The first named is John, Bishop of Bangor, who had served on the former commission; the second is John de Wicliffe, S.T.P. The names that follow are John Guter, Dean of Sechow; Simon de Moulton, LL.D.; William de Burton, Knight; Robert Bealknap, and John de Henyngton.⁴

The Pope declined receiving the king’s ambassadors at Avignon. The manners of the Papal court in that age could not bear close inspection. It was safer that foreign eyes should contemplate them from a distance. The Pope made choice of Bruges, in the Netherlands, and thither he sent his nuncios to confer with the English delegates.⁵ The negotiation dragged on for two years: the result was a compromise; the Pope engaging, on his part, to desist from the reservation of benefices; and the king promising, on his, no more to confer them by his writ “quare impedit.” This arrangement left the power of the Pope over the benefices of the Church of England at least equal to that of the

² Barnes, *Life of King Edward III.*, p. 864. Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 32.

³ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 561. Fox gives a list of the benefices, with the names of the incumbents and the worth of their sees. (See pp. 561, 562.)

⁴ Barnes, *Life of King Edward III.*, p. 866. Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 33.

⁵ Bruges was then a large city of 200,000 inhabitants; the seat of important industries, trade, wealth, municipal freedom, and political power.

sovereign. The Pope did not renounce his right, he simply abstained from the exercise of it—tactics exceedingly common and very convenient in the Papal policy—and this was all that could be obtained from a negotiation of two years. The result satisfied no one in England: it was seen to be a hollow truce that could not last; nor indeed did it, for hardly had the commissioners returned home, when the Pope began to make as free with English benefices and their revenues as though he had never tied his hands by promise or treaty.⁶

There is cause, indeed, to suspect that the interests of England were betrayed in this negotiation. The Bishop of Bangor, on whom the conduct of the embassy chiefly devolved, on his return home was immediately translated to the See of Hereford, and in 1389 to that of St. David's. His promotion, in both instances the result of Papal provisors, bore the appearance of being the reward of subserviency. Wicliffe returned home in disgust at the time which had been wasted, and the little fruit which had been obtained. But these two years were to him far from lost years. Wicliffe had come into communication with the Italian, Spanish, and French dignitaries of the Church, who enjoyed the confidence of the Pope and the cardinals. There was given him an insight into a circle which would not have readily opened to his view in his own country. Other lessons too he had been learning, unpleasant no doubt, but most important. He had not been so far removed from the Papal court but he could see the principles that reigned there, and the motives that guided its policy. If he had not met the Pope he had met his representatives, and he had been able to read the master in his servants; and when he returned to England it was to proclaim on the house-tops what before he had spoken in the closet. Avarice, ambition, hypocrisy, these were the gods that were worshipped in the Roman curia—these were the virtues that adorned the Papal throne.

So did Wicliffe proclaim. In his public lectures he now spoke of the Pope as “Antichrist, the proud worldly priest of Rome, and the most cursed of clippers and purse-kervers.” And in one of his tracts that remain he thus speaks:—“They [the Pope and his collectors] draw out of our land poor men's livelihood, and many thousand marks by the year, of the king's money, for Sacraments and spiritual things, that is cursed heresy of simony, and maketh all Christendom assent and maintain his heresy. And certes [truly] though our realm had a huge hill of gold, and never other man took thereof but only this proud worldly priest's collector, by process of time this hill must be spende; for he taketh ever money out of our land, and sendeth nought again but God's curse for his simony.”⁷ Soon after his return from Bruges, Wicliffe was appointed to the rectorship of Lutterworth, in Leicestershire, and as this preferment came not from the Pope but the king, it may be taken as a sign of

⁶ Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 34. Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol i., pp. 326, 327.

⁷ *Great Sentence of Curse Expounded*, c. 21; MSS. *apud* Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*.

the royal approval of his conduct as a commissioner, and his growing influence at the court.

The Parliament, finding that the negotiation at Bruges had come to nothing, resolved on more decisive measures. The Pope took advantage of the king's remissness in enforcing the statutes directed against the Papal encroachments, and promised many things, but performed nothing. He still continued to appoint aliens to English livings, notwithstanding his treaties to the contrary. If these usurpations were allowed, he would soon proceed to greater liberties, and would appoint to secular dignities also, and end by appropriating as his own the sovereignty of the realm. It was plain to the Parliament that a battle must be fought for the country's independence, and there were none but themselves to fight it. They drew up a bill of indictment against the Papal usurpations. In that document they set forth the manifold miseries under which the country was groaning from a foreign tyranny, which had crept into the kingdom under spiritual pretexts, but which was rapaciously consuming the fruits of the earth and the goods of the nation. The Parliament went on to say that the revenue drawn by the Pope from the realm was five times that which the king received; that he contrived to make one and the same dignity yield him six several taxes; that to increase his gains he frequently shifted bishops from one see to another; that he filled livings with ignorant and unworthy persons, while meritorious Englishmen were passed over, to the great discouragement of learning and virtue; that everything was venal in "the sinful city of Rome;" and that English patrons, corrupted by this pestilential example, had learned to practise simony without shame or remorse; that the Pope's collector had opened an establishment in the capital with a staff of officers, as if it were one of the great courts of the nation, "transporting yearly to the Pope twenty thousand marks, and most commonly more; "that the Pope received a richer revenue from England than any prince in Christendom drew from his kingdom; that this very year he had taken the first-fruits of all benefices; that he often imposed a special tax upon the clergy, which he sometimes expended in subsidising the enemies of the country; that "God hath given His sheep to the Pope to be pastured, and not shorn and shaven;" that "therefore it would be good to renew all the statutes against provisions from Rome," and that "no Papal collector or proctor should remain in England, upon pain of life and limb; and that no Englishman, on the like pain, should become such collector or proctor, or remain at the court of Rome."⁸

In February, 1372, there appeared in England an agent of the Pope, named Arnold Gamier, who travelled with a suite of servants and six horses through England, and after remaining uninterruptedly two and a half years in the

⁸ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 561. Sir Robert Cotton's *Abridgment*, p. 123. Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, pp. 34—37. Hume, *Edw. III.*, chap. 16.

country, went back to Rome with no inconsiderable sum of money. He had a royal licence to return to England, of which he afterwards made use. He was required to swear that in collecting the Papal dues he would protect the rights and interests of the crown and the country. He took the oath in 1372 in the Palace of Westminster, in presence of the councillors and dignitaries of the crown. The fears of patriots were in no way allayed by the ready oath of the Papal agent; and Wicliffe in especial wrote a treatise to show that he had sworn to do what was a contradiction and an impossibility.⁹

It was Wicliffe who breathed this spirit into the Commons of England, and emboldened them to fight this battle for the prerogatives of their prince, and their own rights as the free subjects of an independent realm. We recognise his graphic and trenchant style in the document of the Parliament. The Pope stormed when he found the gage of battle thrown down in this bold fashion. With an air of defiance he hastened to take it up, by appointing an Italian to an English benefice. But the Parliament stood firm; the temporal Lords sided with the Commons. "We will support the crown," said they, "against the tiara." The Lords spiritual adopted a like course; reserving their judgment on the ecclesiastical sentences of the Pope, they held that the temporal effects of his sentences were null, and that the Papal power availed nothing in that point against the royal prerogative.

The nation rallied in support of the Estates of the Realm. It pronounced no equivocal opinion when it styled the Parliament which had enacted these stringent edicts against the Papal bulls and agents "the Good Parliament." The Pope languidly maintained the conflict for a few years, but he was compelled ultimately to give way before the firm attitude of the nation. The statutes no longer remained a dead letter. They were enforced against every attempt to carry out the Papal appointments in England. Thus were the prerogatives of the sovereign and the independence of the country vindicated, and a victory achieved more truly valuable in itself, and more lasting in its consequences, than the renowned triumphs of Crécy and Poitiers, which rendered illustrious the same age and the same reign.

This was the second great defeat which Rome had sustained. England had refused to be a fief of the Papal See by withholding the tribute to Urban; and now, by repelling the Pontifical jurisdiction, she claimed to be mistress in her own territory. The clergy divined the quarter whence these rebuffs proceeded. The real author of this movement, which was expanding every day, was at little pains to conceal himself. Ever since his return from Bruges, Wicliffe had felt a new power in his soul, propelling him onward in this war. The unscriptural constitution and blasphemous assumptions of the Papacy had

⁹ Lechler, *Johann von Wiclif*; MSS. in the Royal Library at Vienna, No. 1,337; vol. i., p. 341.

been more fully disclosed to him, and he began to oppose it with a boldness, an eloquence, and a force of argument which he had not till now been able to wield. Through many channels was he leavening the nation—his chair in Oxford; his pulpit in Lutterworth; the Parliament, whose debates and edicts he inspired; and the court, whose policy he partly moulded. His sentiments were finding an echo in public opinion. The tide was rising. The hierarchy took the alarm. They cried for help, and the Pope espoused their cause, which was not theirs only, but his as well. “The whole glut of monks or begging friars,” says Fox, “were set in a rage or madness, which (even as hornets with their stings) did assail this good man on every side, fighting (as is said) for their altars, paunches, and bellies. After them the priests, and then after them the archbishop took the matter in hand, being then Simon Sudbury.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 556.