

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 VII.

### PERSECUTION OF WICLIFFE BY THE POPE AND THE HIERARCHY.

Wicliffe's Writings Examined—His Teaching submitted to the Pope—Three Bulls issued against him—Cited to appear before the Bishop of London—John of Gaunt Accompanies him—Portrait of Wicliffe before his Judges—Tumult—Altercation between Duke of Lancaster and Bishop of London—The Mob Rushes in—The Court Broken up—Death of Edward III.—Meeting of Parliament—Wicliffe Summoned to its Councils—Question touching the Papal Revenue from English Sees submitted to him—Its Solution—England coming out of the House of Bondage.

THE man who was the mainspring of a movement so formidable to the Papacy must be struck down. The writings of Wicliffe were examined. It was no difficult matter to extract from his works doctrines which militated against the power and wealth of Rome. The Oxford professor had taught that the Pope has no more power than ordinary priests to excommunicate or absolve men; that neither bishop nor Pope can validly excommunicate any man, unless by sin he has first made himself obnoxious to God; that princes cannot give endowments in perpetuity to the Church; that when their gifts are abused they have the right to recall them; and that Christ has given no temporal lordship to the Popes, and no supremacy over kings. These propositions, culled from the tracts of the Reformer, were sent to Pope Gregory XI.<sup>1</sup>

These doctrines were found to be of peculiarly bad odour at the Papal court. They struck at a branch of the Pontifical prerogative on which the holders of the tiara have always put a special value. If the world should come to be of Wicliffe's sentiments, farewell to the temporal power of the Popes, the better half of their kingdom. The matter portended a terrible disaster to Rome, unless prevented in time. For broaching a similar doctrine, Arnold of Brescia had done expiation amid the flames. Wicliffe had been too long neglected; he must be immediately attended to.

Three separate bulls were drafted on the same day, May 22nd, 1377,<sup>2</sup> and dispatched to England. These bulls hinted surprise at the supineness of the English clergy in not having ere now crushed this formidable heresy which was springing up on their soil, and they commanded them no longer to delay, but to take immediate steps for silencing the author of that heresy. One of the bulls was addressed to Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Wil-

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 557. Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, pp. 46–48. Wicliffe's adversaries sent nineteen articles enclosed in a letter to the Pope, extracted from his letters and sermons. See in Lewis the copy which Sir Henry Spelman has put in his collection of the English Councils.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 49.

liam Courtenay, Bishop of London; the second was addressed to the king, and the third to the University of Oxford. They were all of the same tenor. The one addressed to the king dwelt on the greatness of England, “as glorious in power and richness, but more illustrious for the piety of its faith, and for its using to shine with the brightness of the sacred page.”<sup>3</sup> The Scriptures had not yet been translated into the vernacular tongue, and the Papal compliment which turns on this point is scarcely intelligible.

The university was commanded to take care that tares did not spring up among its wheat, and that from its chairs propositions were not taught “detestable and damnable, tending to subvert the state of the whole Church, and even of the civil government.” The bull addressed to the bishops was expressed in terms still more energetic. The Pope could not help wishing that the Rector of Lutterworth and Professor of Divinity “was not a master of errors, and had run into a kind of detestable wickedness, not only and openly publishing, but also vomiting out of the filthy dungeon of his breast divers professions, false and erroneous conclusions, and most wicked and damnable heresies, whereby he might defile the faithful sort, and bring them from the right path headlong into the way of perdition.” They were therefore to apprehend the said John Wicliffe, to shut him up in prison, to send all proofs and evidence of his heresy to the Pope, taking care that the document was securely sealed, and entrusted to a faithful messenger, and that meanwhile they should retain the prisoner in safe custody, and await further instructions. Thus did Pope Gregory throw the wolf’s hide over Wicliffe, that he might let slip his Dominicans in full cry upon his track.<sup>4</sup>

The zeal of the bishops anticipated the orders of the Pope. Before the bulls had arrived in England the prosecution of Wicliffe was begun. At the instance of Courtenay, Bishop of London, Wicliffe was cited to appear on the 19th of February, 1377, in Our Lady’s Chapel in St. Paul’s, to answer for his teaching. The rumour of what was going on got wind in London, and when the day came a great crowd assembled at the door of St. Paul’s. Wicliffe, attended by two powerful friends—John, Duke of Lancaster, better known as John of Gaunt, and Lord Percy, Earl Marshal of England—appeared at the skirts of the assemblage. The Duke of Lancaster and Wicliffe had first met, it is probable, at Bruges, where it chanced to both to be on a mission at the same time. Lancaster held the Reformer in high esteem, on political if not on religious grounds. Favouring his opinions, he resolved to go with him and show him countenance before the tribunal of the bishops. “Here stood Wicliffe in the presence of his judges, a meagre form dressed in a long light mantle of black cloth, similar to those worn at this day by doctors, masters, and students in

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Fox, *Acts and Mon.* vol. i., p. 563. Lewis, *Life of Wiclif* pp. 50, 51.

Cambridge and Oxford, with a girdle round the middle; his face, adorned with a long thick beard, showed sharp bold features, a clear piercing eye, firmly closed lips, which bespoke decision; his whole appearance full of great earnestness, significance, and character.”<sup>5</sup>

But the three friends had found it no easy matter to elbow their way through the crowd. In forcing a passage something like an uproar took place, which scandalised the court. Percy was the first to make his way into the Chapel of Our Lady, where the clerical judges were assembled in their robes and insignia of office.

“Percy,” said Bishop Courtenay, sharply—more offended, it is probable, at seeing the humble Rector of Lutterworth so powerfully befriended, than at the tumult which their entrance had created—“if I had known what masteries you would have kept in the church, I would have stopped you from coming in hither.”

“He shall keep such masteries,” said John of Gaunt, gruffly, “though you say nay.”

“Sit down, Wicliffe,” said Percy, having but scant reverence for a court which owed its authority to a foreign power—“sit down; you have many things to answer to, and have need to repose yourself on a soft seat.”

“He must and shall stand,” said Courtenay, still more chafed; “it is unreasonable that one on his trial before his ordinary should sit.”

“Lord Percy’s proposal is but reasonable,” interposed the Duke of Lancaster; “and as for you,” said he, addressing Bishop Courtenay, “who are grown so arrogant and proud, I will bring down the pride not of you alone, but that of all the prelacy in England.”

To this menace the bishop calmly replied “that his trust was in no friend on earth, but in God.” This answer but the more inflamed the anger of the duke, and the altercation became yet warmer, till at last John of Gaunt was heard to say that “rather than take such words from the bishop, he would drag him out of the court by the hair of the head.”

It is hard to say what the strife between the duke and the bishop might have grown to, had not other parties suddenly appeared upon the scene. The crowd at the door, hearing what was going on within, burst the barrier, and precipitated itself *en masse* into the chapel. The angry contention between Lancaster and Courtenay was instantly drowned by the louder clamours of the

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<sup>5</sup> Lechler, *Johann von Wiclif* vol. i., p. 370. In 1851 a remarkable portrait of Wicliffe came to light in possession of a family named Payne, in Leicester. It is a sort of palimpsest. The original painting of Wicliffe, which seems to have come down from the fifteenth century, had been painted over before the Reformation, and changed into the portrait of an unknown Dr. Robert Langton; the original was discovered beneath it, and this represents Wicliffe in somewhat earlier years, with fuller and stronger features than in the other and commonly known portraits. (*British Quarterly Review*, Oct., 1858.)

mob. All was now confusion and uproar. The bishops had pictured to themselves the humble Rector of Lutterworth standing meekly if not tremblingly at their bar. It was their turn to tremble. Their citation, like a dangerous spell which recoils upon the man who uses it, had evoked a tempest which all their art and authority were not able to allay. To proceed with the trial was out of the question. The bishops hastily retreated; Wicliffe returned home; “and so,” says one, “that council, being broken up with scolding and brawling, was dissolved before nine o’clock.”<sup>6</sup>

The issues of the affair were favourable to the Reformation. The hierarchy had received a check, and the cause of Wicliffe began to be more widely discussed and better understood by the nation. At this juncture events happened in high places which tended to shield the Reformer and his opinions. Edward III., who had reigned with glory, but lived too long for his fame, now died (June 21st, 1377). His yet more renowned son, the Black Prince, had preceded him to the grave, leaving as heir to the throne a child of eleven years, who succeeded on his grandfather’s death, under the title of Richard II. His mother, the dowager Princess of Wales, was a woman of spirit, friendly to the sentiments of Wicliffe, and not afraid, as we shall see, to avow them. The new sovereign, two months after his accession, assembled his first Parliament. It was composed of nearly the same men as the “Good Parliament” “which had passed such stringent edicts against the “provisions” and other usurpations of the Pope. The new Parliament was disposed to carry the war against the Papacy a step farther than its predecessor had done. It summoned Wicliffe to its councils. His influence was plainly growing. The trusted commissioner of princes, the counsellor of Parliaments, he had become a power in England. We do not wonder that the Pope singled him out as the man to be struck down.

While the bulls which were meant to crush the Reformer were still on their way to England, the Parliament unequivocally showed the confidence it had in his wisdom and integrity, by submitting the following question to him: “Whether the Kingdom of England might not lawfully, in case of necessity, detain and keep back the treasure of the Kingdom for its defence, that it be not carried away to foreign and strange nations, the Pope himself demanding and requiring the same, under pain of censure.”

This appears a very plain matter to us, but our ancestors of the fourteenth century found it encompassed with great difficulties. The best and bravest of England at that day were scared by the ghostly threat with which the Pope accompanied his demand, and they durst not refuse it till assured by Wicliffe that it was a matter in which the Pope had no right to command, and in which they

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<sup>6</sup> Fox, *Acts and Mon.* Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, pp. 56–58. Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. i., pp. 338, 339. Hanna, *Wicliffe and the Huguenots*, p. 83. Hume, Rich. II., Miscell. Trans.

incurred no sin and no danger by disobedience. Nothing could better show the thralldom in which our fathers were held, and the slow and laborious steps by which they found their way out of the house of their bondage.

But out of what matter did the question now put to Wicliffe arise? It related to an affair which must have been peculiarly irritating to Englishmen. The Popes were then enduring their "Babylonish captivity," as they called their residence at Avignon. All through the reign of Edward III., the Papacy, banished from Rome, had made its abode on the banks of the Rhone. One result of this was that each time the Papal chair became vacant it was filled with a Frenchman. The sympathies of the French Pope were, of course, with his native country, in the war now waging between France and England, and it was natural to suppose that part at least of the treasure which the Popes received from England went to the support of the war on the French side. Not only was the country drained of its wealth, but that wealth was turned against the country from which it was taken. Should this be longer endured? It was generally believed that at that moment the Pope's collectors had a large sum in their hands ready to send to Avignon, to be employed, like that sent already to the same quarter, in paying soldiers to fight against England. Had they not better keep this gold at home? Wicliffe's reply was in the affirmative, and the grounds of his opinion were briefly and plainly stated. He did not argue the point on the canon law, or on the law of England, but on that of nature and the Bible. God, he said, had given to every society the power of self-preservation; and any power given by God to any society or nation may, without doubt, be used for the end for which it was given. This gold was England's own, and might unquestionably be retained for England's use and defence. But it might be objected, Was not the Pope, as God's vice-regent, supreme proprietor of all the temporalities, of all the sees and religious corporations in Christendom? It was on the ground of his temporal supremacy that he demanded this money, and challenged England at its peril to retain it. But who, replied the Reformer, gave the Pope this temporal supremacy? I do not find it in the Bible. The Apostle Peter could give the Pope only what he himself possessed, and Peter possessed no temporal lordship. The Pope, argued Wicliffe, must choose between the apostleship and the kingship; if he prefers to be a king, then he can claim nothing of us in the character of an apostle; or should he abide by his apostleship, even then he cannot claim this money, for neither Peter nor any one of the apostles ever imposed a tax upon Christians; they were supported by the free-will offerings of those to whom they ministered. What England gave to the Papacy she gave not as a tribute, but as alms. But alms could not be righteously demanded unless when the claimant was necessitous. Was the Papacy so? Were not its coffers overflowing? Was not England the poorer of the two? Her necessities were great, occasioned by a two-fold drain, the exactions of the Popes and the burdens of the war. Let charity, then, begin at home,

and let England, instead of sending her money to these poor men of Avignon, who are clothed in purple and fare sumptuously every day, keep her own gold for her own uses. Thus did the Reformer lead on his countrymen, step by step, as they were able to follow.