

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 VIII.

HIERARCHICAL PERSECUTION OF WICLIFFE RESUMED.

Arrival of the Three Bulls—Wicliffe's Anti-Papal Policy—Entirely Subversive of Romanism—New Citation—Appears before the Bishops at Lambeth—The Crowd—Its Reverent Behaviour to Wicliffe—Message from the Queen-Dowager to the Court—Dismay of the Bishops—They abruptly Terminate the Sitting—English Tumults in the Fourteenth Century compared with French Revolutions in the Nineteenth—Substance of Wicliffe's Defence—The Binding and Loosing Power.

MEANWHILE, the three bulls of the Pope had arrived in England. The one addressed to the king found Edward in his grave. That sent to the university was but coldly welcomed. Not in vain had Wicliffe taught so many years in its halls. Oxford, moreover, had too great a regard for its own fame to extinguish the brightest luminary it contained. But the bull addressed to the bishops found them in a different mood. Alarm and rage possessed these prelates. Mainly by the instrumentality of Wicliffe had England been rescued from sheer vassalage to the Papal See. It was he, too, who had put an extinguisher upon the Papal nominations, thereby vindicating the independence of the English Church. He had next defended the right of the nation to dispose of its own property, in defiance of the ghostly terrors by which the Popes strove to divert it into their own coffers. Thus, guided by his counsel, and fortified by the sanction of his name, the Parliament was marching on and adopting one bold measure after another. The penetrating genius of the man, his sterling uprightness, his cool, cautious, yet fearless courage, made the humble Rector of Lutterworth a formidable antagonist. Besides, his deep insight into the Papal system enabled him to lead the Parliament and nation of England, so that they were being drawn on unawares to deny not merely the temporal claims, but the spiritual authority also of Rome. The acts of resistance which had been offered to the Papal power were ostensibly limited to the political sphere, but they were done on principles which impinged on the spiritual authority, and could have no other issue than the total overthrow of the whole fabric of the Roman power in England. This was what the hierarchy foresaw; the arrival of the Papal bulls, therefore, was hailed by them with delight, and they lost no time in acting upon them.

The primate summoned Wicliffe to appear before him in April, 1378. The court was to sit in the archbishop's chapel at Lambeth. The substance of the Papal bulls on which the prelates acted we have given in the preceding chapter. Following in the steps of condemned heresiarchs of ancient times, Wicliffe (said the Papal missive) had not only revived their errors, but had added new ones of his own, and was to be dealt with as men deal with a "common thief." The latter injunction the prelates judged it prudent not to obey. It might be safe

enough to issue such an order at Avignon, or at Rome, but not quite so safe to attempt to execute it in England. The friends of the Reformer, embracing all ranks from the prince downward, were now too numerous to see with unconcern Wicliffe seized and incarcerated as an ordinary caitiff. The prelates, therefore, were content to cite him before them, in the hope that this would lead, in regular course, to the dungeon in which they wished to see him immured. When the day came, a crowd quite as great as and more friendly to the Reformer than that which besieged the doors of St. Paul's on occasion of his first appearance, surrounded the Palace of Lambeth, on the right bank of the Thames, opposite Westminster, where several councils had been held since the times of Anselm of Canterbury. Wicliffe now stood high in popular favour as a patriot, although his claims as a theologian and Reformer were not yet acknowledged, or indeed understood. Hence this popular demonstration in his favour.

To the primate this concourse gave anything but an assuring augury of a quiet termination to the trial. But Sudbury had gone too far to retreat. Wicliffe presented himself, but this time no John of Gaunt was by his side. The controversy was now passing out of the political into the spiritual sphere, where the stout and valorous baron, having a salutary dread of heresy, and especially of the penalties thereunto annexed, feared to follow. God was training His servant to walk alone, or rather to lean only upon Himself. But at the gates of Lambeth, Wicliffe saw enough to convince him that if the barons were forsaking him, the people were coming to his side. The crowd opened reverently to permit him to pass in, and the citizens, pressing in after him, filled the chapel, and testified, by gestures and speeches more energetic than courtly, their adherence to the cause, and their determination to stand by its champion. It seemed as if every citation of Wicliffe was destined to evoke a tempest around the judgment-seat. The primate and his peers were consulting how they might eject or silence the intruders, when a messenger entered, who added to their consternation. This was Sir Lewis Clifford, who had been dispatched by the queen-mother to forbid the bishops passing sentence upon the Reformer. The dismay of the prelates was complete, and the proceedings were instantly stopped. "At the wind of a reed shaken," says Walsingham, who describes the scene, "their speech became as soft as oil, to the public loss of their own dignity, and the damage of the whole Church. They were struck with such a dread, that you would think them to be as a man that heareth not, and in whose mouth are no reproofs."¹ The only calm and self-possessed man in all that assembly was Wicliffe. A second time he returned unhurt and uncondemned from the tribunal of his powerful enemies. He had been snatched up and carried away, as it were, by a whirlwind.

¹ Walsingham, *Hist. Anglia*, p. 205.

A formidable list of charges had been handed to Wicliffe along with his citation. It were tedious to enumerate these; nor is it necessary to go with any minuteness into the specific replies which he had prepared, and was about to read before the court when the storm broke over it, which brought its proceedings so abruptly to a close. But the substance of his defence it is important to note, because it enables us to measure the progress of the Reformer's own emancipation: and the stages of Wicliffe's enlightenment are just the stages of the Reformation. We now stand beside the cradle of Protestantism in England, and we behold the nation, roused from its deep sleep by the Reformer's voice, making its first essay to find the road of liberty. If a little noise accompanies these efforts, if crowds assemble, and raise fanatical cries, and scare prelates on the judgment-seat, this rudeness must be laid at the door of those who had withheld that instruction which would have taught the people to reform religion without violating the laws, and to utter their condemnation of falsehoods without indulging their passions against persons. Would it have been better that England should have lain still in her chains, than that she should disturb the repose of dignified ecclesiastics by her efforts to break them? There may be some who would have preferred the torpor of slavery. But, after all, how harmless the tumults which accompanied the awakening of the English people in the fourteenth century, compared with the tragedies, the revolutions, the massacres, and the wars, amid which we have seen nations since—which slept on while England awoke—inaugurate their liberties!²

The paper handed in by Wicliffe to his judges, stripped of its scholastic form—for after the manner of the schools it begins with a few axioms, runs out in numerous divisions, and reaches its conclusions through a long series of nice disquisitions and distinctions—is in substance as follows:—That the Popes have no political dominion, and that their kingdom is one of a spiritual sort only; that their spiritual authority is not absolute, so as that they may be judged of none but God; on the contrary, the Pope may fall into sin like other men, and when he does so he ought to be reprov'd, and brought back to the path of duty by his cardinals; and if they are remiss in calling him to account, the inferior clergy and even the laity “may medicinally reprove him and implead him, and reduce him to lead a better life;” that the Pope has no supremacy over the temporal possessions of the clergy and the religious houses, in which some priests have vested him, the better to evade the taxes and burdens which their sovereign for the necessities of the State imposes upon their tem-

² “His [Wicliffe's] exertions,” says Mr. Sharon Turner, “were of a value that has been always highly rated, but which the late events of European history considerably enhance, by showing how much the chances are against such a character arising. Many can demolish the superstructure, but where is the skill and the desire to rebuild a nobler fabric? When such men as Wicliffe, Huss, or Luther appear, they preserve society from darkness and depravity; and happy would it be for the peace of European society, if either France, Spain, or Italy could produce them now.” (Turner, *Hist. Eng.*, vl. v., pp. 176, 177.)

poralities; that no priest is at liberty to enforce temporal demands by spiritual censures; that the power of the priest in absolving or condemning is purely ministerial; that absolution will profit no one unless along with it there comes the pardon of God, nor will excommunication hurt anyone unless by sin he has exposed himself to the anger of the great Judge.³

This last is a point on which Wicliffe often insists; it goes very deep, striking as it does at one of the main pillars on which the Pope's kingdom stands, and plucking from his grasp that terrible trident which enables him to govern the world—the power of anathema. On this important point, “the power of the keys,” as it has been technically designated, the sum of what Wicliffe taught is expressed in his fourteenth article. “We ought,” says he, “to believe that then only does a Christian priest bind or loose, when he simply obeys the law of Christ; because it is not lawful for him to bind or loose but in virtue of that law, and by consequence not unless it be in conformity to it.”⁴

Could Wicliffe have dispelled the belief in the Pope's binding and loosing power, he would have completely rent the fetters which enchained the conscience of his nation. Knowing that the better half of his country's slavery lay in the thralldom of its conscience, Wicliffe, in setting free its soul, would virtually, by a single stroke, have achieved the emancipation of England.

³ Walsingham, *Hist. Angliæ*, pp. 206–208. Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, chap. 4.