

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 XI.

WICLIFFE AND TRANSUBSTANTIATION.

Wicliffe Old—Continues the War—Attacks Transubstantiation—History of the Dogma—Wicliffe's Doctrine on the Eucharist—Condemned by the University Court—Wicliffe Appeals to the King and Parliament, and Retires to Lutterworth—The Insurrection of Wat Tyler—The Primate Sudbury Beheaded—Courtenay elected Primate—He cites Wicliffe before him—The Synod at Blackfriars—An Earthquake—The Primate reassures the Terrified Bishops—Wicliffe's Doctrine on the Eucharist Condemned—The Primate gains over the King—The First Persecuting Edict—Wicliffe's Friends fall away.

DID the Reformer now rest? He was old and sickly, and needed repose. His day had been a stormy one; sweet it were at its even-tide to taste a little quiet. But no. He panted, if it were possible and if God were willing, to see his country's emancipation completed, and England a reformed land, before closing his eyes and descending into his grave. It was, he felt, a day of visitation. That day had come first of all to England. Oh that she were wise, and that in this her day she knew the things that belonged to her peace! If not, she might have to buy with many tears and much blood, through years, and it might be centuries, of conflict, what seemed now so nearly within her reach. Wicliffe resolved, therefore, that there should be no pause in the war. He had just ended one battle, he now girded himself for another. He turned to attack the doctrinal system of the Church of Rome.

He had come ere this to be of opinion that the system of Rome's doctrines, and the ceremonies of her worship, were anti-Christian—a "new religion, founded of sinful men," and opposed to "the rule of Jesus Christ given by Him to His apostles;" but in beginning this new battle he selected one particular dogma as the object of attack. That dogma was Transubstantiation. It is here that the superstition of Rome culminates: it is in this more than in any other dogma that we find the sources of her prodigious authority, and the springs of her vast influence. In making his blow to fall here, Wicliffe knew that the stroke would have ten-fold more effect than if directed against a less vital part of the system. If he could abolish the sacrifice of the priest, he would bring back the sacrifice of Christ, which alone is the Gospel, because through it is the "remission of sins," and the "life everlasting."

Transubstantiation, as we have already shown, was invented by the monk Paschasius Radbertus in the ninth century; it came into England in the train of William the Conqueror and his Anglo-Norman priests; it was zealously preached by Lanfranc, a Benedictine monk and Abbot of St. Stephen of Caen in Normandy,¹ who was raised to the See of Canterbury under William; and from the time of Lanfranc to the days of Wicliffe this tenet was received by

¹ Gabriel d'Emillianne, Preface.

the Anglo-Norman clergy of England.² It was hardly to be expected that they would very narrowly or critically examine the foundations of a doctrine which contributed so greatly to their power; and as regards the laity of those days, it was enough for them if they had the word of the Church that this doctrine was true.

In the spring of 1381, Wicliffe posted up at Oxford twelve propositions denying the dogma of transubstantiation, and challenging all of the contrary opinion to debate the matter with him.³ The first of these propositions was as follows:—"The consecrated Host, which we see upon the altar, is neither Christ nor any part of Him, but an efficacious sign of Him." He admitted that the words of consecration invest the elements with a mysterious and venerable character, but that they do in nowise change their substance. The bread and wine are as really bread and wine after as before their consecration. Christ, he goes on to reason, called the elements "bread" and "My body;" they were "bread" and they were Christ's "body," as He Himself is very man and very God, without any commingling of the two natures; so the elements are "bread" and "Christ's body"—"bread" really, and "Christ's body" figuratively and spiritually. Such, in brief, is what Wicliffe avowed as his opinion on the Eucharist at the commencement of the controversy, and on this ground he continued to stand all throughout it.⁴

Great was the commotion at Oxford. There were astonished looks, there was a buzz of talk, heads were laid close together in earnest and subdued conversation; but no one accepted the challenge of Wicliffe. All shouted heresy; on that point there was a clear unanimity of opinion, but no one ventured to prove it to the only man in Oxford who needed to have it proved to him. The chancellor of the university, William de Barton, summoned a council of twelve—four secular doctors and eight monks. The council unanimously condemned Wicliffe's opinion as heretical, and threatened divers heavy penalties

² "It had been for near a thousand years after Christ the Catholic doctrine," says Lewis, "and particularly of this Church of England, that, as one of our Saxon homilies expresses it, 'Much is betwixt the body of Christ suffered in, and the body hallowed to *housell* [the Sacrament]; this latter being only His ghostly body gathered of many cornes, without blood and bone, without limb, without soule, and therefore nothing is to be understood therein bodily, but all is to be ghostly understood.'" (Homily published by Archbishop Parker, with attestation of Archbishop of York and thirteen bishops, and imprinted at London by John Bay, Aldersgate beneath St. Martin's, 1567.)

³ Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, chap. 6.

⁴ *Conclusiones J. Wiclefi de Sacramento Altaris*—MS. Hyp. Bodl. 163. The first proposition is—"Hostia consecrata quam videmus in Altari nec est Christus nec aliqua sui pars, sed efficax ejus signum." See also *Confessio Magistri Johannis Wycliff*—Lewis, Appendix, 323. In this confession he says: "For we believe that there is a three-fold mode of the subsistence of the body of Christ in the consecrated Host, namely, a virtual, a spiritual, and a sacramental one" (*virtualis, spiritualis, et sacramentalis*).

against any one who should teach it in the university, or listen to the teaching of it.⁵

The council, summoned in haste, met, it would seem, in comparative secrecy, for Wicliffe knew nothing of what was going on. He was in his classroom, expounding to his students the true nature of the Eucharist, when the door opened, and a delegate from the council made his appearance in the hall. He held in his hand the sentence of the doctors, which he proceeded to read. It enjoined silence on Wicliffe as regarded his opinions on transubstantiation, under pain of imprisonment, suspension from all scholastic functions, and the greater excommunication. This was tantamount to his expulsion from the university. “But,” interposed Wicliffe, “you ought first to have shown me that I am in error.” The only response was to be reminded of the sentence of the court, to which, he was told, he must submit himself, or take the penalty. “Then,” said Wicliffe, “I appeal to the king and the Parliament.”⁶

But some time was to elapse before Parliament should meet; and meanwhile the Reformer, watched and fettered in his chair, thought best to withdraw to Lutterworth. The jurisdiction of the chancellor of the university could not follow him to his parish. He passed a few quiet months ministering the “true bread” to his loving flock; being all the more anxious, since he could no longer make his voice heard at Oxford, to diffuse through his pulpit and by his pen those blessed truths which he had drawn from the fountains of Revelation. He needed, moreover, this heavenly bread for his own support. “Come aside with Me and rest awhile,” was the language of this Providence. In communion with his Master he would efface the pain of past conflicts, and arm himself for new ones. His way hitherto had been far from smooth, but what remained of it was likely to be even rougher. This, however, should be as God willed; one thing he knew, and oh, how transporting the thought!—that he should find a quiet home at the end of it.

New and unexpected clouds now gathered in the sky. Before Wicliffe could prosecute his appeal in Parliament, an insurrection broke out in England. The causes and the issues of that insurrection do not here concern us, farther than as they bore on the fate of the Reformer. Wat Tyler, and a priest of the name of John Ball, traversed England, rousing the passions of the populace with fiery harangues preached from the text they had written upon their ban-

⁵ *Definitio facta per Cancellarium et Doctores Universitatis Oxonii, de Sacramento Altaris contra Opiniones Wycliffanas*—MS. Hyp. Bodl. 163. Vaughan says: “Sir R. Twisden refers to the above censures in support of this doctrine as ‘the first plenary determination of the Church of England’ respecting it, and accordingly concludes that ‘the opinion of the Church of transubstantiation, that brought so many to the stake, had not more than a hundred and forty years’ prescription before Martin Luther.’” (Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., p. 82, footnote.)

⁶ Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, chap. 6, pp. 95, 96.

ners:—

“When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?”

These tumults were not confined to England, they extended to France and other Continental countries, and like the sudden yawning of a gulf, they show us the inner condition of society in the fourteenth century. How different from its surface!—the theatre of wars and pageants, which alone the historian thinks it worth his while to paint. There was nothing in the teaching of Wicliffe to minister stimulus to such ebullitions of popular wrath, yet it suited his enemies to lay them at his door, and to say, “See what comes of permitting these strange and demoralising doctrines to be taught.” It were a wholly superfluous task to vindicate Wicliffe or the Gospel on this score.

But in one way these events did connect themselves with the Reformer. The mob apprehended Sudbury the primate, and beheaded him.⁷ Courtenay, the bitter enemy of Wicliffe, was installed in the vacant see. And now we look for more decisive measures against him. Yet God, by what seemed an oversight at Rome, shielded the venerable Reformer. The bull appointing Courtenay to the primacy arrived, but the pall did not come with it. The pall, it is well known, is the most essential of all those badges and insignia by which the Pope conveys to bishops the authority to act under him. Courtenay was too obedient a son of the Pope knowingly to transgress one of the least of his father’s commandments. He burned with impatience to strike the head of heresy in England, but his scrupulous conscience would not permit him to proceed even against Wicliffe till the pall had given him full investiture with office.⁸ Hence the refreshing quiet and spiritual solace which the Reformer continued to enjoy at his country rectory. It was now that Wicliffe shot another bolt—the *Wicket*.

At last the pall arrived. The primate, in possession of the mysterious and potent symbol, could now exercise the full powers of his great office. He immediately convoked a synod to try the Rector of Lutterworth. The court met on the 17th of May, 1382, in a place of evil augury—when we take into account with whom Wicliffe’s life-battle had been waged—the Monastery of Blackfriars, London. The judges were assembled, including eight prelates, fourteen doctors of the canon and of the civil law, six bachelors of divinity, four monks, and fifteen Mendicant friars. They had taken their seats, and were proceeding to business, when an ominous sound filled the air, and the building in which they were assembled began to rock. The monastery and all the city of London were shaken by an earthquake.⁹

⁷ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 568.

⁸ Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 97. Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., p. 89.

⁹ “Here is not to be passed over the great miracle of God’s Divine admonition or warning, for when as the archbishops and suffragans, with the other doctors of divinity and lawyers,

Startled and terrified, the members of the court, turning to the president, demanded an adjournment. It did seem as if “the stars in their courses” were fighting against the primate. On the first occasion on which he summoned Wicliffe before him, the populace forced their way into the hall, and the court broke up in confusion. The same thing happened over again on the second occasion on which Wicliffe came to his bar; a popular tempest broke over the court, and the judges were driven from the judgment-seat. A third time Wicliffe is summoned, and the court meets in a place where it was easier to take precautions against interference from the populace, when lo! the ground is suddenly rocked by an earthquake. But Courtenay had now got his pall from Rome, and was above these weak fears. So turning to his brother judges, he delivered to them a short homily on the earthly uses and mystic meanings of earthquakes, and bade them be of good courage and go on. “This earthquake,” said he, “portends the purging of the kingdom from heresies. For as there are shut up in the bowels of the earth many noxious spirits, which are expelled in an earthquake, and so the earth is cleansed, but not without great violence: so there are many heresies shut up in the hearts of reprobate men, but by the condemnation of them the kingdom is to be cleansed, but not without irksomeness and great commotion.”¹⁰ The court accepting, on the archbishop’s authority, the earthquake as a good omen, went on with the trial of Wicliffe.

An officer of the court read out twenty-six propositions selected from the writings of the Reformer. The court sat three days in “good deliberation” over them.¹¹ It unanimously condemned ten of them as heretical, and the remainder as erroneous. Among those specially branded as heresies, were the propositions relating to transubstantiation, the temporal emoluments of the hierarchy, and the supremacy of the Pope, which last Wicliffe admitted might be deduced from the emperor, but certainly not from Christ. The sentence of the court was sent to the Bishop of London and all his brethren, the suffragans of the diocese of Canterbury, as also to the Bishop of Lincoln, Wicliffe’s diocesan, accompanied by the commands of Courtenay, as “Primate of all England,” that they should look to it that these pestiferous doctrines were not taught in their dioceses.¹²

Besides these two missives, a third was dispatched to the University of

with a great company of babling friars and religious persons, were gathered together to consult touching John Wicliffe’s books, and that whole sect; when, as I say, they were gathered together at the Grayfriars in London, to begin their business, upon St. Dunstan’s day after dinner, about two of the clock, the very hour and instant that they should go forward with their business, a wonderful and terrible earthquake fell throughout all England.” (Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 570.)

¹⁰ Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, pp. 106, 107. Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 570.

¹¹ Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., p. 91.

¹² Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 569. Knighton, *De Event. Angliæ*, cols. 2650, 2651.

Oxford, which was, in the primate's eyes, nothing better than a hot-bed of heresy. The chancellor, William de Barton, who presided over the court that condemned Wicliffe the year before, was dead, and his office was now filled by Robert Rigge, who was friendly to the Reformer. Among the professors and students were many who had imbibed the sentiments of Wicliffe, and needed to be warned against the "venomous serpent," to whose seductions they had already begun to listen. When the primate saw that his counsel did not find the ready ear which he thought it entitled to from that learned body, but that, on the contrary, they continued to toy with the danger, he resolved to save them in spite of themselves. He carried his complaint to the young king, Richard II. "If we permit this heretic," said he, "to appeal continually to the passions of the people, our destruction is inevitable; we must silence these lol-lards."¹³ The king was gained over. He gave authority "to confine in the prisons of the State any who should maintain the condemned propositions."¹⁴

The Reformation was advancing, but it appeared at this moment as if the Reformer was on the eve of being crushed. He had many friends—every day was adding to their number—but they lacked courage, and remained in the background. His lectures at Oxford had planted the Gospel in the schools, the Bible which he had translated was planting it in the homes of England. But if the disciples of the Reformation multiplied, so too did the foes of the Reformer. The hierarchy had all along withstood and persecuted him, now the mailed hand of the king was raised to strike him.

When this was seen, all his friends fell away from him. John of Gaunt had deserted him at an earlier stage. This prince stood stoutly by Wicliffe so long as the Reformer occupied himself in simply repelling encroachments of the hierarchy upon the prerogatives of the crown and independence of the nation. That was a branch of the controversy the duke could understand. But when it passed into the doctrinal sphere, when the bold Reformer, not content with cropping off a few excrescences, began to lay the axe to the root—to deny the Sacrament and abolish the altar—the valiant prince was alarmed; he felt that he had stepped on ground which he did not know, and that he was in danger of being drawn into a bottomless pit of heresy. John of Gaunt, therefore, made all

¹³ Many derivations have been found for this word; the following is the most probable:—"Lollen, or lullen, signifies to sing with a low voice. It is yet used in the same sense among the English, who say *lull a-sleep*, which signifies to sing any one into a slumber. The word is also used in the same sense among the Flemings, Swedes, and other nations. Among the Germans both the sense and the pronunciation of it have undergone some alteration, for they say *lallen*, which signifies to pronounce indistinctly or stammer. *Lolhard* therefore is a singer, or one who frequently sings." (Mosheim, cent. 14, pt. ii., s. 36, foot-note.)

¹⁴ Lewis, *Life of Wicliffe*, p. 113. D'Aubigne, *Hist. of Reform.*, vol. v., p. 130; Edin., 1853. Cobbett, *Parl. Hist.*, vol. i., col. 177. Fox calls this the first law for burning the professors of religion. It was made by the clergy without the knowledge or consent of the Commons, in the fifth year of Richard II.

haste to draw off. But others too, of whom better things might have been expected, quailed before the gathering storm, and stood aloof from the Reformer. Dr. Nicholas Hereford, who had aided him in translating the Old Testament, and John Ashton, the most eloquent of those preachers whom Wicliffe had sent forth to traverse England, consulted their own safety rather than the defence of their leader, and the honour of the cause they had espoused.¹⁵ This conduct doubtless grieved, but did not dismay Wicliffe. Not an iota of heart or hope did he abate therefore. Nay, he chose this moment to make a forward movement, and to aim more terrible blows at the Papacy than any he had yet dealt it.

¹⁵ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 579. Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., pp. 109, 110.