

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 XII.

### WICLIFFE'S APPEAL TO PARLIAMENT.

Parliament meets—Wicliffe appears, and demands a Sweeping Reform—His Propositions touching the Monastic Orders—The Church's Temporalities—Transubstantiation—His growing Boldness—His Views find an echo in Parliament—The Persecuting Edict Repealed.

THE Parliament met on the 19th November, 1382.<sup>1</sup> Wicliffe could now prosecute his appeal to the king against the sentence of the university court, condemning his twelve propositions. But the prelates had been beforehand with him. They had inveigled the sovereign into lending them the sword of the State to wield at will against Wicliffe, and against all who should doubt the tremendous mystery of transubstantiation. Well, they might burn him tomorrow, but he lived today, and the doors of Parliament stood open. Wicliffe made haste to enter with his appeal and complaint. The hierarchy had secretly accused him to the king, he openly arraigns them before the Estates of the Realm.

The complaint presented by Wicliffe touched on four heads, and on each it demanded a very sweeping measure of reform. The first grievance to be abated or abolished was the monastic orders. The Reformer demanded that they should be released from the unnatural and immoral vow which made them the scandal of the Church, and the pests of society. "Since Jesus Christ shed His blood to free His Church," said Wicliffe, "I demand its freedom. I demand that every one may leave these gloomy walls [the convents] within which a tyrannical law prevails, and embrace a simple and peaceful life under the open vault of heaven."

The second part of the complaint had reference to the temporalities of the Church. The corruption and inefficiency of the clergy, Wicliffe traced largely to their enormous wealth. That the clergy themselves would surrender these overgrown revenues he did not expect; he called, therefore, for the interference of the State, holding, despite the opposite doctrine promulgated by the priests, that both the property and persons of the priesthood were under the jurisdiction of the king. "Magistracy," he affirms, is "God's ordinance;" and he remarks that the Apostle Paul, "who putteth all men in subjection to kings, taketh out never a one." And analogous to this was the third part of the paper, which related to tithes and offerings. Let these, said Wicliffe, be remodelled. Let tithes and offerings be on a scale which shall be amply sufficient for the support of the recipients, in the discharge of their sacred duties, but not such as to minister to their luxury and pride; and if a priest shall be found to be indolent or vicious, let neither tithe nor offering be given him.

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 580.

“I demand,” he said, “that the poor inhabitants of our towns and villages be not constrained to furnish a worldly priest, often a vicious man and a heretic, with the means of satisfying his ostentation, his gluttony and his licentiousness—of buying a showy horse, costly saddles, bridles with tinkling bells, rich garments and soft furs, while they see the wives and children of their neighbours dying of hunger.”<sup>2</sup>

The last part of the paper went deeper. It touched on doctrine, and on that doctrine which occupies a central place in the Romish system—transubstantiation. His own views on the dogma he did not particularly define in this appeal to Parliament, though he did so a little while after before the Convocation; he contented himself with craving liberty to have the true doctrine of the Eucharist, as given by Christ and His apostles, taught throughout England. In his *Triologus*, which was composed about this time, he takes a luminous view of the dogma of transubstantiation. Its effects, he believed, were peculiarly mischievous and far-extending. Not only was it an error, it was an error which enfeebled the understanding of the man who embraced it, and shook his confidence in the testimony of his senses, and so prepared the way for any absurdity or error, however much in opposition to reason or even to sense. The doctrine of the “real presence,” understood in a corporeal sense, he declares to be the offspring of Satan, whom he pictures as reasoning thus while inventing it:

“Should I once so far beguile the faithful of the Church, by the aid of Antichrist my vicegerent, as to persuade them to deny that this Sacrament is bread, and to induce them to regard it as merely an accident, there will be nothing then which I will not bring them to receive, since there can be nothing more opposite to the Scriptures, or to common discernment. Let the life of a prelate be then what it may, let him be guilty of luxury, simony, or murder, the people may be led to believe that he is really no such man—nay, they may then be persuaded to admit that the Pope is infallible, at least with respect to matters of Christian faith; and that, inasmuch as he is known by the name Most Holy Father, he is of course free from sin.”<sup>3</sup>

“It thus appears,” says Dr. Vaughan, commenting on the above, “that the object of Wicliffe was to restore the mind of man to the legitimate guidance of

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<sup>2</sup> Vaughan, vol. ii., p. 125. *A Complaint of John Wicliffe: Tracts and Treatises* edited by the Wicliffe Society, p. 208.

<sup>3</sup> *Triologus*, lib. iv., cap. 7. Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., p. 131. “Hoc sacramentum venerabile,” says Wicliffe, “est in natura sua verus panis et sacramentaliter corpus Christi” (*Triologus*, p. 192)—*naturally* it is bread, sacramentally it is the body of Christ. “By this distinction,” says Sharon Turner, “he removed from the most venerated part of religious worship the great provocative to infidelity; and preserved the English mind from that absolute rejection of Christianity which the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation has, since the thirteenth century, been so fatally producing in every country where it predominates, even among many of its teachers.” (*Hist. of Eng.*, vol. v., pp. 182,183.)

reason and of the senses, in the study of Holy Writ, and in judging of every Christian institute; and that if the doctrine of transubstantiation proved peculiarly obnoxious to him, it was because that dogma was seen as in the most direct opposition to this generous design. To him it appeared that while the authority of the Church was so far submitted to as to involve the adoption of this monstrous tenet, no limit could possibly be assigned to the schemes of clerical imposture and oppression.”

The enemies of the Reformer’ must have been confounded by this bold attack. They had persuaded themselves that the hour was come when Wicliffe must yield. Hereford, Repingdon, Ashton—all his friends, one after the other, had reconciled themselves to the hierarchy. The priests waited to see Wicliffe come forward, last of all, and bow his majestic head, and then they would lead him about in chains as a trophy of their victory, and a proof of the complete suppression of the movement of Reform. He comes forward, but not to retract, not even to apologise, but with heart which grows only the stouter as his years increase and his enemies multiply, to reiterate his charges and again to proclaim in the face of the whole nation the corruption, tyranny, and errors of the hierarchy. His sentiments found an echo in the Commons, and Parliament repealed the persecuting edict which the priests and the king had surreptitiously passed. Thus the gain remained with Wicliffe.