

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 XIII.

WICLIFFE BEFORE CONVOCATION IN PERSON, AND BEFORE THE ROMAN CURIA BY LETTER.

Convocation at Oxford—Wicliffe cited—Arraigned on the Question of Transubstantiation—Wicliffe Maintains and Reiterates the Teaching of his whole Life—He Arraigns his Judges—They are Dismayed—Wicliffe Retires Unmolested—Returns to Lutterworth—Cited by Urban VI. to Rome—Unable to go—Sends a Letter—A. Faithful Admonition—Scene in the Vatican—Christ's and Antichrist's Portraits.

BAFFLED before the Parliament, the primate turned to Convocation. Here he could more easily reckon on a subservient court. Courtenay had taken care to assemble a goodly number of clergy to give éclat to the trial, and to be the spectators, as he fondly hoped, of the victory that awaited him. There were, besides the primate, six bishops, many doctors in divinity, and a host of inferior clergy. The concourse was swelled by the dignitaries and youth of Oxford. The scene where the trial took place must have recalled many memories to Wicliffe which could not but deeply stir him. It was now forty years since he had entered Oxford as a scholar; these halls had witnessed the toils of his youth and the labours of his manhood. Here had the most brilliant of his achievements been performed; here had his name been mentioned with honour, and his renown as a man of erudition and genius formed not the least constituent in the glory of his university. But this day Oxford opened her venerable gates to receive him in a new character. He came to be tried, perchance to be condemned; and, if his judges were able, to be delivered over to the civil power and punished as a heretic. The issue of the affair might be that that same Oxford which had borrowed a lustre from his name would be lit up with the flames of his martyrdom.

The indictment turned specially upon transubstantiation. Did he affirm or deny that cardinal doctrine of the Church? The Reformer raised his venerable head in presence of the vast assembly; his eyes sought out Courtenay, the archbishop, on whom he fixed a steady and searching gaze, and proceeded. In this, his last address before any court, he retracts nothing; he modifies nothing; he reiterates and confirms the whole teaching of his life on the question of the Eucharist. His address abounded in distinctions after the manner of that scholastic age, but it extorted praise for its unrivalled acuteness even from those who dissented from it. Throughout it Wicliffe unmistakably condemns the tenet of transubstantiation, affirming that the bread still continues bread, that there is no fleshly presence of Christ in the Sacrament, nor other presence save a *sacramental* and *spiritual* one.¹

¹ Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., chap. 4. Wicliffe gave in two defences or confessions to Convocation: one in Latin, suited to the taste of the learned, and characterised

Wicliffe had defended himself with a rare acuteness, and with a courage yet more rare. But acquittal he will neither crave nor accept from such a court. In one of those transformations which it is given to only majestic moral natures to effect, he mounts the judgment-seat and places his judges at the bar. Smitten in their consciences, they sat chained to their seats, deprived of the power to rise and go away, although the words of the bold Reformer must have gone like burning arrows to their heart. "They were the heretics," he said, "who affirmed that the Sacrament was an accident without a subject. Why did they propagate such errors? Why, because, like the priests of Baal, they wanted to vend their masses. With whom, think you," he asked in closing, "are ye contending? with an old man on the brink of the grave? No! with Truth—Truth which is stronger than you, and will overcome you."² With these words he turned to leave the court. His enemies had not power to stop him. "Like his Divine Master at Nazareth," says D'Aubigne, "he passed through the midst of them."³ Leaving Oxford, he retired to his cure at Lutterworth.

Wicliffe must bear testimony at Rome also. It was Pope Urban, not knowing what he did, who arranged that the voice of this great witness, before becoming finally silent, should be heard speaking from the Seven Hills. One day about this time, as he was toiling with his pen in his quiet rectory—for his activity increased as his infirmities multiplied, and the night drew on in which he could not work—he received a summons from the Pontiff to repair to Rome, and answer for his heresy before the Papal See. Had he gone thither he certainly would never have returned. But that was not the consideration that weighed with Wicliffe. The hand of God had laid an arrest upon him. He had had a shock of palsy, and, had he attempted a journey so toilsome, would have died on the way long before he could have reached the gates of the Pontifical city. But though he could not go to Rome in person, he could go by letter, and thus the ends of Providence, if not the ends of Urban, would be equally served. The Pontiff and his conclave and, in short, all Christendom were to have another warning—another call to repentance—addressed to them before the Reformer should descend into the tomb.

John Wicliffe sat down in his rectory to speak, across intervening

by the nice distinctions and subtle logic of the schools; the other in English, and adapted to the understandings of the common people. In both Wicliffe unmistakably repudiates transubstantiation. Those who have said that Wicliffe before the Convocation modified or retracted opinions he had formerly avowed, have misrepresented him, or, more probably, have misunderstood his statements and reasonings. He defends himself with the subtlety of a schoolman, but he retracts nothing; on the contrary, he re-asserts the precise doctrine for which William de Barton's court had condemned him, and in the very terms in which he had formerly stated that doctrine. (See Appendix in Vaughan, Nos. 1,2.)

² *Confessio Magistri Johannis Wycliff*—Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., Appendix, No. 6.

³ D'Aubigne, *Hist. of Reform.*, vol. v., p. 132; Edin., 1853.

mountains and seas, to Urban of Rome. Than the epistle of the Rector of Lutterworth to the Pontiff of Christendom nothing can be imagined keener in its satire, yet nothing could have been more Christian and faithful in its spirit. Assuming Urban to be what Urban held himself to be, Wicliffe went on to say that there was no one before whom he could so joyfully appear as before Christ's Vicar, for by no one could he expect Christ's law to be more revered, or Christ's Gospel more loved. At no tribunal could he expect greater equity than that before which he now stood, and therefore if he had strayed from the Gospel, he was sure here to have his error proved to him, and the path of truth pointed out. The Vicar of Christ, he quietly assumes, does not affect the greatness of this world; oh, no; he leaves its pomps and vanities to worldly men, and contenting himself with the lowly estate of Him who while on earth had not where to lay His head, he seeks no glory save the glory of resembling his Master. The "worldly lordship" he is compelled to bear is, he is sure, an unwelcome burden, of which he is fain to be rid. The Holy Father ceases not, doubtless, to exhort all his priests throughout Christendom to follow herein his own example, and to feed with the Bread of Life the flocks committed to their care. The Reformer closes by reiterating his willingness, if in aught he had erred, "to be meekly amended, if needs be, by death."⁴

We can easily imagine the scowling faces amid which this letter was opened and read in the Vatican. Had Wicliffe indulged in vituperative terms, those to whom this epistle was addressed would have felt only assailed; as it was, they were arraigned, they felt themselves standing at the bar of the Reformer. With severe and truthful hand Wicliffe draws the portrait of Him whose servants Urban and his cardinals professed to be, and holding it up full in their sight, he asks, "Is this your likeness? Is this the poverty in which you live? Is this the humility you cultivate?" With the monuments of their pride on every hand—their palaces, their estates, their gay robes, their magnificent equipages, their luxurious tables—their tyranny the scourge and their lives the scandal of Christendom—they dared not say, "This is our likeness." Thus were they condemned: but it was Christ who had condemned them. This was all that Urban had gained by summoning Wicliffe before him. He had but erected a pulpit on the Seven Hills, from the lofty elevation of which the English Reformer was able to proclaim, in the hearing of all the nations of Europe, that Rome was the Antichrist.

⁴ *Dr. Wicliffe's Letter of Excuse to Urban VI.*—Bibl. Bodl. MS.—Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, Appendix, No. 23. Fox, *Acts and Mon*, vol. i., p. 507; edit. 1684.