

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 XIV.

### WICLIFFE'S LAST DAYS.

Anticipation of a Violent Death—Wonderfully Shielded by Events—Struck with Palsy—Dies December 31st, 1384— Estimate of his Position and Work—Completeness of his Scheme of Reform—The Father of the Reformation—The Founder of England's Liberties.

WHEN Wicliffe had indicted and dispatched this letter, he had "finished his testimony." It now remained only that he should rest a little while on earth, and then go up to his everlasting rest. He himself expected that his death would be by violence—that the chariot which should carry him to the skies would be a "chariot of fire." The primate, the king, the Pope, all were working to compass his destruction; he saw the iron circle contracting day by day around him; a few months, or a few years, and it would close and crush him. That a man who defied the whole hierarchy, and who never gave way by so much as a foot-breadth, but was always pressing on in the battle, should die at last, not in a dungeon or at a stake, but in his own bed, was truly a marvel. He stood alone; he did not consult for his safety. But his very courage, in the hand of God, was his shield; for while meaner men were apprehended and compelled to recant, Wicliffe, who would burn but not recant, was left at liberty. "He that loveth his life shall lose it." The political troubles of England, the rivalry of the two Popes, one event after another came to protect the life and prolong the labours of the Reformer, till his work attained at last a unity, a completeness, and a grandeur, which the more we contemplate it appears the more admirable. That it was the fixed purpose of his enemies to destroy him cannot be doubted; they thought they saw the opportune moment coming. But while they waited for it, and thought that now it was near, Wicliffe had departed, and was gone whither they could not follow.

On the last Sunday of the year 1384, he was to have dispensed the Eucharist to his beloved flock in the parish church of Lutterworth; and as he was in the act of consecrating the bread and wine, he was struck with palsy, and fell on the pavement. This was the third attack of the malady. He was affectionately borne to the rectory, laid on his bed, and died on the 31st of December, his life and the year closing together. How fitting a conclusion to his noble life! None of its years, scarcely any of its days, were passed unprofitably on the bed of sickness. The moment his great work was finished, that moment the Voice spake to him which said, "Come up hither." As he stood before the earthly symbols of his Lord's passion, a cloud suddenly descended upon him; and when its darkness had passed, and the light had returned, serener and more bright than ever was dawn or noon of earthly day, it was no memorial or symbol that he saw; it was his Lord Himself, in the august splendour of His glorified humanity. Blessed transition! The earthly sanctuary, whose gates he had

that morning entered, became to him the vestibule of the Eternal Temple; and the Sabbath, whose services he had just commenced, became the dawn of a better Sabbath, to be closed by no evening with its shadows, and followed by no week-day with its toils.

If we can speak of one centre where the light which is spreading over the earth, and which is destined one day to illuminate it all, originally arose, that centre is England. And if to one man the honour of beginning that movement which is renewing the world can be ascribed beyond controversy, that man is John Wicliffe. He came out of the darkness of the Middle Ages—a sort of Melchisedek. He had no predecessor from whom he borrowed his plan of Church reform, and he had no successor in his office when he died; for it was not till more than 100 years that any other stood up in England to resume the work broken off by his death. Wicliffe stands apart, distinctly marked off from all the men in Christendom. Bursting suddenly upon a dark age, he stands before it in a light not borrowed from the schools, nor from the doctors of the Church, but from the Bible. He came preaching a scheme of re-institution and reformation so comprehensive, that no Reformer since has been able to add to it any one essential principle. On these solid grounds he is entitled to be regarded as the Father of the Reformation. With his rise the night of Christendom came to an end, and the day broke which has ever since continued to brighten.

Wicliffe possessed that combination of opposite qualities which marks the great man. As subtle as any schoolman of them all, he was yet as practical as any Englishman of the nineteenth century. With intuitive insight he penetrated to the root of all the evils that afflicted England, and with rare practical sagacity he devised and set agoing the true remedies. The evil he saw was ignorance, the remedy with which he sought to cure it was light. He translated the Bible, and he organised a body of preachers—simple, pious, earnest men—who knew the Gospel, and were willing to preach it at crossroads and in market-places, in city and village and rural lane—everywhere, in short. Before he died he saw that his labours had been successful to a degree he had not dared to hope. “His doctrine spread,” said Knighton, his bitter enemy, “like suckers from the root of a tree.” Wicliffe himself reckoned that a third of the priests of England were of his sentiment on the question of the Eucharist; and among the common people his disciples were innumerable. “You could not meet two men on the highway,” said his enemies, “but one of them is a Wicliffite.”<sup>1</sup>

The political measures which Parliament adopted at Wicliffe’s advice, to guard the country against the usurpations of the Popes, show how deeply he saw into the constitution of the Papacy, as a political and worldly confederacy, wearing a spiritual guise only the better to conceal its true character and to

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<sup>1</sup> Knighton, *De Eventibus Anglice*, col. 2663, 2665.

gain its real object, which was to prey on the substance and devour the liberty of nations. Matters were rapidly tending to a sacerdotal autocracy. Christendom was growing into a kingdom of shorn and anointed men, with laymen as hewers of wood and drawers of water. Wicliffe said, "This shall not be;" and the best proof of his statesmanship is the fact that since his day all the other States of Europe, one after the other, have adopted the same measures of defence to which England had recourse in the fourteenth century. All of them, following in our wake, have passed laws to guard their throne, to regulate the appointment of bishops, to prevent the accumulation of property by religious houses, to restrict the introduction of bulls and briefs. They have done, in short, what we did, though to less advantage, because they did it later in the day. England foresaw the evil and took precautions in time; other countries suffered it to come, and began to protect themselves only after it had all but effected their undoing.

It was under Wicliffe that English liberty had its beginnings. It is not the political constitution which has come out of the Magna Charta of King John and the barons, but the moral constitution which came out of that Divine Magna Charta, that Wicliffe gave her in the fourteenth century, which has been the sheet-anchor of England. The English Bible wrote, not merely upon the page of the Statute Book, but upon the hearts of the people of England, the two great commandments: Fear God; honour the king. These two sum up the whole duty of nations, and on these two hangs the prosperity of States. There is no mysterious or latent virtue in our political constitution which, as some seem to think, like a good genius protects us, and with invisible hand guides past our shores the tempests that cover other countries with the memorials of their devastating fury. The real secret of England's greatness is her permeation, at the very dawn of her history, with the principles of order and liberty by means of the English Bible, and the capacity for freedom thereby created. This has permitted the development, by equal stages, of our love for freedom and our submission to law; of our political constitution and our national genius; of our power and our self-control—the two sets of qualities fitting into one another, and growing into a well-compacted fabric of political and moral power unexampled on earth. If nowhere else is seen a similar structure, so stable and so lofty, it is because nowhere else has a similar basis been found for it. It was Wicliffe who laid that basis.

But above all his other qualities—above his scholastic genius, his intuitive insight into the working of institutions, his statesmanship—was his fearless submission to the Bible. It was in this that the strength of Wicliffe's wisdom lay. It was this that made him a Reformer, and that placed him in the first rank of Reformers. He held the Bible to contain a perfect revelation of the will of God, a full, plain, and infallible rule of both what man is to believe and what he is to do; and turning away from all other teachers, from the precedents of

the thousand years which had gone before, from all the doctors and Councils of the Church, he placed himself before the Word of God, and bowed to God's voice speaking in that Word, with the docility of a child.

And the authority to which he himself so implicitly bowed, he called on all men to submit to. His aim was to bring men back to the Bible. The Reformer restored to the Church, first of all, the principle of authority. There must be a Divine and infallible authority in the Church. That authority cannot be the Church herself, for the guide and those whom he guides cannot be the same. The Divine infallible authority which Wicliffe restored for the guidance of men was the Bible—God speaking in His Word. And by setting up this Divine authority he displaced that human and fallible authority which the corruption of the ages had imposed upon the Church. He turned the eyes of men from Popes and Councils to the inspired oracles of God.<sup>2</sup>

Wicliffe, by restoring *authority* to the Church, restored to her *liberty* also. While he taught that the Bible was a sufficient and all-perfect rule, he taught also that every man had a right to interpret the Word of God for his own guidance, in a dependence upon the promised aid of the Holy Spirit. Thus he taught men to cast off that blind submission to the teaching of mere human authority, which is bondage, and to submit their understandings and consciences to God speaking in His Word, which alone is liberty.

These are the two first necessities of the Church of God—*authority* and *liberty*; an infallible Guide, and freedom to follow Him. These two must ever go together, the one cannot exist without the other. Without authority there can be no liberty, for liberty without order becomes anarchy; and without freedom there can be no Divine authority, for if the Church is not at liberty to obey the will of her Master, authority is overthrown. In the room of the rule of God is put the usurpation of man. Authority and freedom, like the twins of classic story, must together flourish or together die.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Bible is the foundation deed of the Church, its charter: Wicliffe likes, with allusion to the Magna Charta, the fundamental deed of the civic liberty of his nation, to designate the Bible as the letter of freedom of the Church, as the deed of grace and promise given by God.” (Lechler, *De Ecclesia*.)