

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 XV.

### WICLIFFE'S THEOLOGICAL AND CHURCH SYSTEM.

His Theology drawn from the Bible solely—His Teaching embraced the Following Doctrines:  
The Fall—Man's Inability—Did not formulate his Views into a System—His "Postils"—  
His Views on Church Order and Government—Apostolic Arrangements his Model—His  
Personal Piety—Lechler's Estimate of him as a Reformer.

STANDING before the Bible, Wicliffe forgot all the teaching of man. For centuries before his day the human mind had been busy in the field of theology. Systems had been invented and built up; the glosses of doctors, the edicts of Councils, and the bulls of Popes had been piled one above the other till the structure looked imposing indeed. Wicliffe dug down through it all till he came to the first foundations, to those even which the hands of prophets and apostles had laid. Hence the apostolic simplicity and purity of his doctrine.<sup>1</sup> With all the early Fathers he gave prominence to the free grace of God in the matter of man's salvation; in fact, he ascribed it entirely to grace. He taught that man was fallen through Adam's transgression; that he was utterly unable to do the will of God, or to merit Divine favour or forgiveness, by his own power. He taught the eternal Godhead of Christ—very God and very man; His substitution in the room of the guilty; His work of obedience; His sacrifice upon the cross, and the free justification of the sinner through faith in that sacrifice. "Here we must know," says he, "the story of the old law. . . . As a right looking on that adder of brass saved the people from the venom of serpents, so a right looking by full belief on Christ saveth His people. Christ died not for His own sins as thieves do for theirs, but as our Brother, who Himself might not sin, He died for the sins that others had done."<sup>2</sup>

What Wicliffe did in the field of theology was not to compile a system, but to give a plain exposition of Scripture; to restore to the eyes of men, from whom they had long been hidden, those truths which are for the healing of their souls. He left it for those who should come after him to formulate the doctrines which he deduced from the inspired page. Traversing the field of revelation, he plucked its flowers all fresh as they grew, regaling himself and his flock therewith, but bestowing no pains on their classification.

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<sup>1</sup> Above all, Wicliffe holds up to view that the preaching of the Word of God is that instrumentality which very specially serves to the edification of the Church, because God's Word is seed (Luke viii. 11). "Oh, astonishing power of the Divine seed," exclaims Wicliffe, "which conquers the strong-armed man, softens hard hearts, and renews and changes into godly men those who have become brutalised by sin, and wandered to an infinite distance from God! Evidently no priest's word could work such a great wonder, if the Spirit of Life and the Eternal Word did not co-operate." (Lechler, vol. i., p. 395.)

<sup>2</sup> Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., p. 356.

Of the sermons, or “postils,” of Wicliffe, some 300 remain. The most of these have now been given to the world through the press, and they enable us to estimate with accuracy the depth and comprehensiveness of the Reformer’s views. The men of the sixteenth century had not the materials for judging which we possess; and their estimate of Wicliffe as a theologian, we humbly think, did him no little injustice. Melanchthon, for instance, in a letter to Myconius, declared him to be ignorant of the “righteousness of faith.” This judgment is excusable in the circumstances in which it was formed; but it is not the less untrue, for the passages adduced above make it unquestionable that Wicliffe both knew and taught the doctrine of God’s grace, and of man’s free justification through faith in the righteousness of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The early models of Church government and order Wicliffe also dug up from underneath the rubbish of thirteen centuries. He maintained that the Church was made up of the whole body of the faithful; he discarded the idea that the clergy alone are the Church; the laity, he held, are equally an essential part of it; nor ought there to be, he held, among its ministers, gradation of rank or official pre-eminence. The indolence, pride, and dissensions which reigned among the clergy of his day, he viewed as arising from violation of the law of the Gospel, which declares “it were better for the clerks to be all of one estate.” “From the faith of the Scriptures,” says he in his *Triialogus*, “it seems to me to be sufficient that there should be presbyters and deacons holding that state and office which Christ has imposed on them, since it appears certain that these degrees and orders have their origin in the pride of Cæsar.” And again he observes, “I boldly assert one thing, namely, that in the primitive Church, or in the time of Paul, two orders of the clergy were sufficient—that is, a priest and a deacon. In like manner I affirm that in the time of Paul, the presbyter and bishop were names of the same office. This appears from the third chapter of the first Epistle to Timothy, and in the first chapter of the Epistle to Titus.”<sup>4</sup>

As regards the claims of the clergy alone to form the Church, and to wield ecclesiastical power, Wicliffe thus expresses himself: “When men speak of Holy Church, anon, they understand prelates and priests, with monks, and canons, and friars, and all men who have tonsures, though they live accursedly, and never so contrary to the law of God. But they call not the seculars men of Holy Church, though they live never so truly, according to God’s law, and die in perfect charity. . . Christian men, taught in God’s law, call Holy Church the congregation of just men, for whom Jesus Christ shed His blood, and not mere stones and timber and earthly dross, which the clerks of Antichrist mag-

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<sup>3</sup> The same excuse cannot be made for Dorner. His brief estimate of the great English Reformer is not made with his usual discrimination, scarce with his usual fairness. He says: “The deeper religious spirit is wanting in his ideas of reform.” “He does not yet know the nature of justification, and does not yet know the free grace of God.” (*History of Protestant Theology*, vol. i., p. 66; Edin., 1871.)

<sup>4</sup> Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. ii., pp. 309, 310.

nify more than the righteousness of God, and the souls of men.”<sup>5</sup> Before Wicliffe could form these opinions he had to forget the age in which he lived, and place himself in the midst of apostolic times; he had to emancipate himself from the prestige which a venerable antiquity gave to the institutions around him, and seek his model and principles in the Word of God. It was an act of stupendous obedience done in faith, but by that act he became the pioneer of the Reformation, and the father of all those, in any age or country, who confess that, in their efforts after Reformation, they seek a “City” which hath its “foundations” in the teachings of prophets and apostles, and whose “Builder and Maker” is the Spirit of God. “That whole circle of questions,” says Dr. Hanna, concerning the canon of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, and the right of private interpretation of Scripture, with which the later controversies of the Reformation have made us so familiar, received their first treatment in this country at Wicliffe’s hands. In conducting this fundamental controversy, Wicliffe had to lay all the foundations with his own unaided hand. And it is no small praise to render to his work to say that it was even as he laid them, line for line, and stone for stone, that they were relaid by the master builders of the Reformation.”<sup>6</sup>

Of his personal piety there can be no doubt. There remain, it is true, scarce any memorials, written or traditional, of his private life; but his public history is an enduring monument of his personal Christianity. Such a life nothing could have sustained save a deep conviction of the truth, a firm trust in God, a love to the Saviour, and an ardent desire for the salvation of men. His private character, we know, was singularly pure; none of the vices of the age had touched him; as a pastor he was loving and faithful, and as a patriot he was enlightened, incorruptible, and courageous. His friends fell away, but the Reformer never hesitated, never wavered. His views continued to grow, and his magnanimity and zeal grew with them. Had he sought fame, or wealth, or promotion, he could not but have seen that he had taken the wrong road: privation and continual sacrifice only could he expect in the path he had chosen. He acted on the maxim which he taught to others, that “if we look for an earthly reward our hope of eternal life perisheth.”

His sermons afford us a glimpse into his study at Lutterworth, and show us how his hours there were passed, even in meditation on God’s Word, and communion with its Author. These are remarkable productions, expressed in vigorous rudimentary English, with no mystic haze in their thinking, disencumbered from the phraseology of the schools, simple and clear as the opening day, and fragrant as the breath of morning. They burst suddenly upon us like a ray of pure light from the very heart of the darkness, telling us that

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<sup>5</sup> *Sentence of the Curse Expounded*, chap. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Hanna, *Wicliffe and the Huguenots*, p. 116.

God's Word in all ages is Light, and that the Holy Spirit has ever been present in the Church to discharge His office of leading "into all truth" those who are willing to submit their minds to His guidance.

"If we look from Wicliffe," says Lechler, "backwards, in order to compare him with the men before him, and arrive at a scale of measurement for his own power, the fact is brought before us that Wicliffe concentratedly represented that movement towards reform of the foregoing centuries, which the degeneracy of the Church, arising from its secular possessions and simonies, rendered necessary. That which, in Gregory VII.'s time, Arnold of Brescia, and the community of the Waldenses, Francis of Assisi, and the begging orders of the Minorites strove after, what the holy Bernard of Clairvaux longed-for, the return of the Church to apostolic order, that filled Wicliffe's soul specially at the beginning of his public career. . . . In the collective history of the Church of Christ Wicliffe makes an epoch, in so far as he is the first reforming personality. Before him arose, it is true, here and there many schemes and active endeavours, which led also to dissensions and collisions, and ultimately to the formation of separate communities; but Wicliffe is the first important personality who devoted himself to the work of Church reform with the whole bent of his mind, with all the thinking power of a superior intellect, and the full force of will and joyful self-devotion of a man in Christ Jesus.. He worked at this his lifelong, out of an earnest, conscientious impulse, and in the confident trust that the work is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. xv. 58). He did not conceal from himself that the endeavours of evangelical men would in the first place be combatted, persecuted, and repressed. Notwithstanding this, he consoled himself with the thought that it would yet come in the end to a renewing of the Church according to the apostolic pattern."

"How far Wicliffe's thoughts have been, first of all, rightly understood, faithfully preserved, and practically valued, till at last all that was true and well proved in them deepened and strengthened, and were finally established in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, must be proved by the history of the following generations."<sup>7</sup>

Wicliffe, had he lived two centuries later, would very probably have been to England what Luther was to Germany, and Knox to Scotland. His appearance in the fourteenth century enabled him to discharge an office that in some respects was higher, and to fill a position that is altogether unique in the religious history of Christendom. With Wicliffe the world changes from stagnancy to progress. Wicliffe introduces the era of moral revivals. He was the Forerunner of all the Reformers, and the Father of all the Reformations of Christendom.

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<sup>7</sup> Lechler, *Johann von Wiclif*, vol. ii., pp. 741, 742.