

**WYCLIFFE; CRANMER; THE
HOLLY COMMUNION OF
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND**

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Wycliffe; Cranmer; The Holly communion of the church of England by Dyson Hague

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DYSON HAGUE

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WYCLIFFE

An Historical Study

by the

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CAREER like Wycliffe's should never be forgotten by men who speak the English tongue, and love the thing called British liberty. He was such a splendid Englishman, such a splendid scholar, and, above all, such a splendid Christian. It does one good in these modern days to freshen up one's knowledge of the man and his work. Though dead and gone over 500 years, one cannot read of his day and doings without getting a clearer vision of the needs and questions of this twentieth century, and the present-day problems of the Church. Like the wave pulses that go on and on and on, the influences of his epoch-making life are still spreading with most persistent force. John Wycliffe being dead, yet speaketh.

I have endeavored to verify with the utmost care every quotation, reference, and historic fact.

My chief authorities have been: Green's *History of the English People*; Fisher, D'Aubigné, Blunt, Beckett, Geikie, Massingberd, on the Reformation; Wylie's *History of Protestantism*; the well-known works on Wycliffe, such as *The Religious Tract Society's*, Burrows, Varley, Pennington, Poole, S. G. Green, Le Bas, Sergeant, Carrick; and, above all, the great works of the German writers, Professor Lechler, of the University of Leipsic, and Professor Loserth, of the University of Czernowitz. For the quotations and references I have also used the writings of Wycliffe by the Religious Tract Society, the English works of Wycliffe, by F. D. Matthew, and, above all, the invaluable editions of his Latin works by the Wyclif Society, especially the *de Eucharistia, de Ecclesia, de Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, and the *Opus Evangelicum*.

D. H.

John Wycliffe.

John Wycliffe was a Yorkshireman. He belonged to a family which had been lords of the manor from the days of the Conquest. He was born probably about 1320, or perhaps 1324. It is impossible to fix the date with exactitude. He died on the last day of the last week of 1384.

If not the greatest man of his age, John Wycliffe was the greatest Englishman. He was its foremost scholar. He became its most influential teacher. He was the most outspoken nationalist of his day. He was, as Lechler, the German biographer, puts it in a word, the centre of the whole pre-reformation history. In insight, vivid; in living, holy; in preaching, fervent; in organization and labors, unwearying; he came to be, to slightly alter Lowell's words:

"The kindly, earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient,
New birth of our new soul, the first great Englishman."

The life and work of John Wycliffe may be regarded as a proof of the providential disposals of the great Head of the Church. He seems to have been purposely raised up to do a work that only could have been performed in the age in which he lived by a man of his varied attainments and official character.

The Age in which Wycliffe lived.

The age in which Wycliffe lived was one of the epoch-marking eras of England's history; the

fourteenth century. It was the golden age of reform before the Reformation. It was the age of Edward III., the royal upholder of England's national rights. It was the birth age of England's national consciousness. It was the age of the emergence of that little island kingdom upon the sphere of history as the realm of a strong and liberty-loving people. The distant island kingdom of the northern seas had long ceased to be the haunt of warring and barbarian tribes. For England then was becoming a nation, and its name, even then, was identified with the ideas of valor, of independence, of justice, and of law. The masterful blood of the Norman had mingled with that of the stalwart and patriotic Saxon, and the blend had produced the Englishman, the English language, the English constitution, and the English nation.

The restless Dane, the hardy Celt, the sturdy Saxon,
The Norman, dauntless, dominant,
These are the bloods that intermingling form
The modern Briton ;
These are the strands that interwoven blend
To make the race that conquering rules,
And finding takes, and taking holds,
For liberty, and law, and righteousness, and God.

It was during the fourteenth century that these elements of national greatness, which have since lifted England to the highest rank, came into operation. It was during the fourteenth century that the inflated increase of the Papal pride synchronized with the emerging dignity of

English nationalism. It was during the fourteenth century that the English language emerged from the chaos of centuries, and became fixed as the language of the nation. In 1356 Sir John Mandeville wrote the first book ever produced in English, and in 1362 English became the authorized language of the law courts.

In 1327, when Wycliffe was a mere child at his mother's side, Edward III. ascended the throne of England. The imperial and independent characteristics of William the Norman, of Stephen Langton, and of Robert Grosseteste, blended in his royal character. He was a typical Englishman. Edward III. believed in English supremacy, and had an Englishman's impatience of foreign interference. He had a constitutional contempt for foreigners. Thus it was, that at a time when England's realm and England's church were simply overrun with foreigners; when Italians and Frenchmen were sent by Papal authority to occupy the most valuable positions in England; when the nobles were wearying of clerical misrule, and the rulers and lawgivers were awakening to the intolerableness of Rome's demands; it was at this time that God raised up John Wycliffe and brought into the political and ecclesiastical arena of the great fourteenth century an English Churchman who was not only the outstanding Englishman of the century, but was destined to be the first, if not the greatest, of the reformers the world has known.

The Distinctive Work of Wycliffe.

The distinctive peculiarity of the work of Wycliffe was neither its national devotedness nor its antipapal zeal. It was neither the vigor of his exposure of abuses nor the amazing valor of his defiance of the popes. It was something different from this. It was something deeper and more real. It was, rather, the fact that he was the first great Catholic Churchmen to discern the falsity of Rome's doctrinal position, and to boldly announce and rehabilitate the truth as the truth is in the Bible and the teaching of Christ.

Others, doubtless, had seen and known these things. To the Cathari and the Waldenses, to Claude of Turin, and Peter Waldo, it was given to understand through the Scriptures not only the glory of the Gospel, but the corruptions and apostasy of the Church of Rome. But of Wycliffe it may be distinguishingly asserted, that he was the first really great and enlightened advocate of the supremacy of the Scriptures, and the first great practical expositor of the falsity of the keystone doctrines of the Roman Church. Others had done, and were doing, the political part of Protestant reform. Grosseteste had done it. Edward III. had done it. Parliament had done it, and would do it again. But the work of John Wycliffe was higher and deeper. Wycliffe's work was the complement of this. It was the indispensable other half, without which all the mere anti-papal legislation and anti-vice preaching in the

world would never have freed the Church from Popery. It was the shaking not merely of Papal pretensions, but of Papal falsities. It was the impeachment not merely of vices, but of errors. It was the propagation not merely of negative protests, but of evangelical principles.

One of the commonest fallacies of history is the fallacy of speaking of Wycliffe's reformatory work as if it were a mere reform of morals in the Church, and a mere correction of national abuses.

This is a great mistake.

It is the mistake that makes men completely misapprehend the English Reformation. The English Reformation was not merely a reform *in* the Church. It was a doctrinal reform *of* the Church. This was in essence also the work of Wycliffe two centuries or so before. While its negative aspect dealt largely with the exposure of Papal abuses and clerical vices, it derived its chief strength from its positive features; the exposure of doctrinal errors widely received as Scriptural truths, of Papal falsities long believed as Catholic verities, and the dauntless declaration of the teachings of the Apostles of Christ. Other men had whispered; he cried aloud. Others had spoken in the secrecy of closets; he proclaimed on the housetops. Others had denounced the vices of popes; he denounced the very foundation principles of the Papal Church system. It is this that constituted Wycliffe not merely the morning star, but the rising sun, of the Reformation.