

THE CHRISTIAN SENTINEL.

I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved.—HAB. ii. 1.

Rev. A. H. BURWELL, Editor.]

THREE-RIVERS, FRIDAY, 28th JANUARY 1831.

[Vol. I.—No. 22.]

SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF JOHN WICKLIFF THE ENGLISH REFORMER.

Concluded from last week.

It is very possible that the injustice Wickliff had experienced at the hands of the Court of Rome and the higher clergy of his own Church, awakened an hostility to their exorbitant pretensions which he would not otherwise have felt; but, whatever may have been its cause, he seems henceforward to have applied himself with increased earnestness to the detection and exposure of the Romish corruptions. He began now to view their whole religion as a system of errors; and proceeded with fearlessness, but with caution, to point out their deviations from the word of God—to expose the scandalous lives of their ministers—and to represent the decay of vital religion in the prevailing devotion to a monstrous incumbrance of unedifying forms and superstitious ceremonies.

Through the influence of the Duke of Lancaster, who ever proved a zealous coadjutor of Wickliff in opposing the Papal encroachments, an inquiry was instituted regarding the liberties of the Anglican Church, and deputies were sent from England, to confer with Ambassadors from the Pope. These on the part of England, which were the Bishop of Bangor and Wickliff, met at Bruges; and although the result of the negotiation was not perfectly satisfactory, the right of presentation to benefices in England was resigned by the Pope. But this embassy, if it was less fruitful than it might have been, served, at least, to confirm Wickliff in his opinion of the Romish corruptions more strongly than ever:—he now inveighed with aggravated severity, against all their unlawful tenets, and attacked, with unusual acrimony, the impious pretensions of the Pope and the wicked lives of the clergy. But this violent hostility was, by no means, viewed with equanimity by his enemies; and on a charge of heresy, Wickliff was summoned to appear before the Bishop of London at St. Paul's. From the vindictive judgment of this formidable tribunal he was, however, relieved by the interference of the Duke of Lancaster, who, with Lord Percy the Earl Marshal, attended him to the trial—insulted the prelates—and caused a tumultuous breaking up of the Meeting.†

The bold champion of reform was not, however, suffered thus to rest. After the death of Edward III. the Bishops taking advantage of the declining popularity of the Duke of Lancaster, recommenced the persecution against Wickliff, and so heartily engaged the Pope in their interests, that he sent no less than five Bulls into England on this subject—three directed to the prelates, a fourth to the University, and the fifth to the King. By the University the mandate of the Pope was wholly disregarded; and the Regency, to manifest their contempt for the Pontiff, formally demanded the opinion of the very man they were commanded to punish on the legality of appropriating to the service of the nation—now that a war with France was threatened—the money collected in England for the use of the Pope. It remained, therefore, for the Bishops to fulfil the commands of his holiness; and they—the Bishops of London especially—were not backward in yielding their dutiful obedience. After some delay, which the authority and threats of the Duke effected, Wickliff was cited to Lambeth to answer to certain articles brought against him. Here his answers and explanations, although conducted with much art and perhaps with a culpable evasion, were far from satisfactory to his judges: but the clamors of the populace without forbade every offer of violence to the ac-

cused, and the synod was at length broken up by the authoritative interference of Sir Lewis Clifford an officer of the Court.*

The celebrated schism in the Papacy, which occurred after the death of Gregory XI. in 1378, when Urban VI. and Clement VII. contested their rights to the chair of St. Peter with any thing but Christian temper, gave Wickliff another opportunity of attacking their impious pretensions to infallibility. But more effectually to support his arguments against this and other corrupt tenets of that Church, and to afford to the people a criterion by which to judge of the lawfulness of his positions, he set about a translation of the holy Scriptures in the vulgar tongue—a work, however, which it appears he had not been the first to undertake.† This was, of course a proceeding which served but to increase the alarm and resentment of his enemies, and great efforts were made for the suppression of his translation of the Scriptures: yet so much had the spirit of religious freedom gained ground, that the Parliament could not be persuaded to assent to its condemnation. All this added to the boldness of the reformer: he went to greater lengths of opposition and even ventured at last, to attack the favourite doctrine of Transubstantiation which he had discovered to be an invention of later ages. Here, however, he failed of his usual support. The prejudices of the people were against him; the University deserted him, and even his constant friend the Duke of Lancaster advised him, on so mysterious a subject, to yield to the authority of the Church. His difficulties, too, were much increased by the elevation of his inveterate enemy Courtney, Bishop of London, to the See of Canterbury, who speedily cited him to answer to the charge of heresy on the subject of the Sacrament. His explanations, on this occasion, have been accused as uncaudid and evasive; yet it appears that he spoke his real sentiments in avowing his belief of the real presence, but denying his ability to explain the manner of it—implying his conviction of Christ's presence in the Sacrament, but after that spiritual manner in which it is maintained by most of the reformed Churches of the present day.‡

Soon after this, Wickliff retired from the increasing storm of Prosecution and resided in his living at Lutterworth. There however, he still protested against the antichristian principles of the Roman Pontiff and inveighed against the unholy practices of the Church of which he was head; and there, too, he was followed by the Popish resentment. He was even summoned to Rome by the imperious Pontiff; but he died of a palsy before the adherents of that Court could take further steps for his degradation or punishment. Thus died Wickliff—but his memory did not perish nor were his tenets forgotten. The root, as an interesting writer expresses it, was drawn, but the seeds were scattered.|| A spirit was propagated in England which proved the destruction of the Popish dominion there; and to Wickliff, as we have already observed, Bohemia and Germany owed their first resistance to the authority of Rome. His memory will therefore be cherished by the members of every reformed Church, as that of a common champion; and although his enemies have blackened his name with every opprobrium—dug up, dishonored and burned his mouldered remains—collected his writings and burned them with every mark of contempt and abhorrence—yet history bears unquestionable testimony to his sincere love and undaunted vindication of truth, to his learning, his eloquence and his piety. X.

* Gilpin, life of Wickliff, p. 30.

† Southey, Book of the Church, vol. i. p. 353, 3d Edition.

‡ Hume, Hist. of England, ch. xvii.

§ Southey's Book of the Church, vol. i. p. 355.

|| Gilpin.

* Not the whole—only a part.—Ed.

† See Collier's Eccles. History of Great Britain, vol. i. p. 565.