

Martin Luther: From Struggle with Rome until Death (1517-1546)

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Reformation Men and Theology, Lesson 4 of 11

I. HIS STRUGGLE OVER INDULGENCES

A. Around 1517, there was a terrible Roman Church teaching of indulgences which was being pushed with fervor. Indulgences provided a way of buying up time one might have to spend in purgatory by the paying of money to the Roman Church. Pope Leo X (1513-1521) needed great sums of money to continue the building of St. Peter's Church in Rome, and to gratify his own extravagant tastes. Indulgences were conceived in the minds of worldly clergymen as a good way to raise money. A famous seller of indulgences, a Dominican monk named Tetzel, shamefully offered the people these Indulgences or cards of forgiveness. He would tell the people, "No sooner will the money clink in the box, than the soul of the departed will be free" (speaking of purgatory). He went way beyond that to say, "Even if a man had committed a foul sexual assault upon the Virgin Mary that he could get an indulgence if he paid the appropriate fee." This stirred Martin Luther's spirit in opposition to the teaching of indulgences. In his first official sermon against indulgences he said,

"And if some persons cry out that I am a heretic (for the truth I preach is very injurious to their cash-box), I am not much disturbed by their yellings. They are men of

diseased and clouded brains — men who have never felt the Bible, never read the Christian doctrine, never understood their own doctors, and who rot beneath the rags of their idle opinions . . . God grant them and us a true sense! Amen.”

It was not the Roman Church or the pope Luther was attacking, but these impudent monks who were abusing the practice of indulgences. Luther felt the Pope was on his side in this matter, and never dreamed that this would bring a reformation in the Church that would overthrow the pope in Germany.

Luther probably did not oppose the idea of indulgences, but he was opposed to the abuses in this sinful practice. What bothered Luther was that men were not changing their lives after paying for indulgences. Luther, when hearing confessions, would not grant absolution if the people would not forsake their sins. The people would take out their notes of indulgences and boast of the fact that they had already been forgiven. Luther would become infuriated with these people and say, “Except ye repent, ye shall perish.”

- B. Luther, seeking for truth, set out to have a discussion about indulgences at Erfurt University. It was primarily designed to be a faculty discussion. The thesis began, “Out of love and zeal for truth, and the desire to bring it to light, the following theses will be publically discussed at Wittenberg.” On All Saints Day, October 31, 1517, he nailed his Ninety-five Theses (in Latin) to the church door at Wittenberg where vast crowds congregated. This document in essence stated: (1) that an indulgence can never remit guilt — God has kept that in his own hand; (2) it cannot remit divine punishment for sin as that

also is in God's hand alone; (3) it has no efficacy for souls in purgatory; and (4) the truly repentant Christian has already received pardon from God, and needs no indulgence.

- C. Copies were made in German of the Latin Theses and printed off by the tens of thousands for circulation all over Germany. One historian of that day commented,

“In fifteen days they were spread over the whole of Germany, and in four weeks they had overrun almost all Christendom, as if the angels themselves had been their messengers, and had borne them to the eyes of men. No one would believe the noise they made.”

Luther was thirty-four years old when this event happened, proving that God can use the young to spark reformation.

Luther never set out to break with the Roman Church; he simply wanted it to reform. He had often said, “No crime or abuse can justify a schism.” Luther was raised a Catholic and knew nothing else. He never intended to bring about a new church outside of the Roman Church. In fact, when Luther realized that the whole Church was against him, he had second thoughts about his actions:

“I began this affair in great fear and trembling. What was I, a poor, miserable, contemptible friar, more like a corpse than a man — who was I, to set myself up against the majesty of the Pope, before whom trembled not only the kings of the earth, and the whole world, but also, if I may so say, heaven and hell, constrained to obey the look of his eye? No one can know what my heart suffered in

those first two years, and into what dejection I have often been plunged . . . However, after having gained the victory, by the Scriptures, over all contrary arguments, I at last surmounted, by the grace of Christ, with much anguish and labour, and with great difficulty, the only argument, which still stopped me, namely — “It is necessary to hear the Church,” for I honoured the Pope’s Church from the bottom of my heart.

When Luther posted his Theses, he unconsciously took the first step that led eventually to the Protestant Reformation, and to the formation of a new church, the Protestant Church. Luther himself a few years later declared,

“The Church has need of a Reformation. And this cannot be the work of a single man, such as the Pope, or of many men, such as the cardinals and the Fathers of the Councils, but it must be that of the whole world; or rather, it is a work which pertains to God alone. . . The dyke is broken, and it is no longer in our power to restrain the rushing and rolling floods.”

- D. Monks in Germany began immediately to attack Luther and his teachings. They made great accusations and cried for his death as a heretic. He was called “venomous,” “Bohemian,” “heretic,” “seditious,” “insolent,” “audacious,” “proud,” etc. One monk said, “It is high treason against the Church to let such a horrible heretic live another hour. Up with the scaffold at once!” Luther would answer his opponents, “Are you athirst for murder? I assure you, you will not frighten me either by your rhodomontades or by the threatening din of your words.

Though I be killed, Christ lives, Christ my Lord and the Lord of all, blessed forever more. Amen!”

II. HIS STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL (1518-1520)

- A. At first the pope thought this was merely a squabble among monks, but he soon realized his mistake and summoned Luther to Rome in July, 1518. To have gone would have meant certain death for Luther, so he refused. Luther was commanded to recant, but he answered the pope with a definite “no.”
- B. Luther found himself in an emotional struggle with Rome, for his mind told him the truth of Christ and the gospel, but his heart told him to be faithful to Rome. At one point he said, “I would rather die than retract what I feel bound to teach.” Luther wanted to know the truth and to be corrected if he were wrong. In his various debates with heads of the Church, he said such things as:

“I appear before you as a submissive and obedient son of the holy Christian Church; and I admit that it was I who published the propositions and theses in question. I am ready to hear, in all obedience, what I am accused of, and, if I am deceived, to suffer myself to be instructed according to the truth”;

“As for indulgences, if it is proved to me that I am wrong, I am ready to be set right; one may pass over that, without being a bad Christian. But, as to the article of faith, if I gave way in the least, I should be denying Jesus Christ.

On this head, therefore, I will not and cannot yield; by the grace of God, I never will”;

“I declare that I honour the holy Roman Church, and that I will continue to honour it. I have sought the truth in public disputes; and all that I have said, I regard, to this very hour, as just, true, and Christian. Yet I am a man, and I may be deceived. I am, therefore, ready to be instructed and corrected in those things in which I may have erred.”

- C. In 1519, a disputation was arranged at Leipzig between Carlstadt, an enthusiastic but not always wise supporter of Luther, and John Eck, the papal champion. Luther took part, and Eck and Luther faced each other. As to debating ability, both were about equal. Eck backed Luther into a corner, getting him to admit publically that the teachings of John Hus had been unjustly condemned. Eck made Luther take a stand on the side of a man officially condemned by the Church as a heretic. During this debate, Luther declared that the supremacy of the pope was unknown in the Scriptures, that it had grown up only in the previous 400 years, and that the General Councils had erred in giving their support of it. Luther had tremendously strengthened his position at Leipzig. He made his followers feel he was right. He also won many new followers, one of whom was Martin Bucer, who became an important leader of the Reformation, and who helped to shape the views of John Calvin.
- D. At Leipzig, Luther had cast his die. He was fully aware of his position, and his break with the Roman Church was now imminent. During 1520, he wrote four major works that shook

Europe to its roots: *On Good Works*, wherein he set forth that salvation is through faith alone; *To the Nobility of the German Nation*, which was a trumpet call to do away with the abuses fostered by Rome; *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, which exposed the false claims of the Roman Church that men could be saved only through the Roman system; and *Concerning Christian Liberty*, which dealt with grace and the Christian life.

- E. On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo ratified and signed the bull excommunicating Luther, and demanding all Luther's works be burned. Luther's first reaction to the bull was disappointment. He said,

“Hold my peace! I am willing to do so, if they will make others quid. If any one envies my post, let him take it. I am quite ready to rest, provided they do not require the Gospel to rest. There is nothing in the world that may not be obtained of me, provided they do not shut Christians out of the way of salvation. I am not frightened at any of their threats. I am not to be led away by their promises.”

Luther soon recovered his warrior-spirit, declaring,

“My resolution is taken. I despise Rome's fury, and I despise her favour. No more reconciliation, no more communication with her forever! Let her condemn and burn my writings. I, in my turn, will condemn and publicly burn the Pontifical Law, that nest of all heresies. The moderation I have shown, to this hour, has been useless; I renounce it!”

Luther, being a man of passion, wanted to show his contempt for the papacy and the bull of excommunication. Having arranged a bonfire outside Wittenberg, he went arrayed in the robes of his Order, amid a crowd of sympathizers from the University and the town, and publically flung the bull of excommunication into the fire, burning the pope's words. He then stated, "The pope's decretals are the devil's excretals!" When the bull was burning, they sang "We Praise Thee, O God." It then got a little out of hand when the youth began to sing funeral dirges in honor of the burnt papal decretals and bull. By these actions Luther announced to the world that there was only death between him and the pope.

III. HIS STRUGGLE AT WORMS

- A. The most powerful monarch on earth at this time was Spain's Charles V. His territories spread throughout Europe and the Americas. He was a fervent Roman Catholic, determined to create one worldwide united empire and one worldwide united Church from which no one could dissent. He hated the Protestants, and would have killed them all, but he needed all the help he could get to fight the Turks on one front and Francis I of France on another. Charles V called the Diet of Worms in 1521 to which he invited the most important secular rulers in Europe. His purpose for Worms was to put down Luther. He invited Luther to Worms and promised his safe conduct to and from the Diet. Luther's friends urged him not to go, reminding him of what had happened to John Hus. Luther replied, "Though there were as many devils in Worms as tiles on its roofs, I would go." The Diet was presided over by Charles V, who at this time was but twenty-one years of age.

Luther was questioned about his books, and ordered to retract. The real question was whether or not he would recant. When the emperor demanded a plain answer, Luther asked for a day to think it over, explaining,

As to the second — this being a question which concerns the faith and the salvation of souls, involving the Word of God, the greatest and most precious treasure on earth and in heaven — I should act imprudently if I replied without reflection. I might affirm less than the matter demands, or more than truth requires, and so incur guilt, according to the declaration of Christ: ‘Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.’ I therefore, with all submission, beseech his Imperial Majesty to grant me time, that I may answer without prejudicing the Word of God.”

- B. Luther clearly saw that the whole cause of Christ and the Reformation depended upon his answer. Just before he went into the Diet to give his answer, he prayed,

“Almighty God! Eternal God! How terrible is the world! How it gapes to swallow me, and how little confidence I have in thee! . . . How weak is the flesh, and how strong is Satan! If it is in what the world thinks powerful that I most place my hope, I am undone! . . . The bell is cast; the judgment is pronounced! . . . O God! O God! . . . O thou my God, aid me against all the wisdom of the world! Do this — thou must do it . . . Thou only . . . for it is not my work but thine. I have nothing to do in this: I have nothing to strive about with these great ones of the world. I, too, would fain pass happy, tranquil days. But the cause

is thine; it is just and eternal! O Lord, be thou my aid! Faithful God! Unchanging God! I rely on no man. It is in vain. Everything human is tottering and reeling; all that proceeds from man fades away. O God! O God! . . . hearest thou not? . . . My God, art thou dead? . . . No, thou canst not die; thou only hidest thyself. Thou hast chosen me for this work. I know it. Act, then, O God! . . . Keep thee by my side, for the name of thy well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who is my defense, my buckler and my fortress. Lord, where art thou? O my God, where art thou? . . . Come, come! I am ready! . . . I am ready to give up my life for thy truth . . . patient as a lamb, for the cause is just, and it is thine. I will not withdraw from thee, now or in all eternity. . . and though the world should be filled with demons, though my body, which is the work of thy hands, must bite the dust, be stretched on the ground, cut in pieces . . . reduced to powder . . . my soul is thine! Yes, I have thy Word for warrant of this. My soul is thine; it will dwell for ever near thee . . . Amen! . . . O God, aid me! . . . Amen!

- C. Luther, fortified by the grace of God and filled with the Spirit of God, faced the Diet and said,

“If the emperor desires a plain answer, I will give it to him. It is impossible for me to recant unless I am proved to be wrong by the testimony of Scripture. My conscience is bound to the Word of God. It is neither safe nor honest to act against one’s conscience. Here I stand. God help me. I cannot do otherwise.”

Luther was placed under the ban of the empire and condemned, but he was guaranteed safe conduct back to Wittenberg. However, everyone knew that Luther would soon be killed. To save his life, the Elector of Saxony secretly carried Luther off to the castle of Wartburg, and his enemies thought that he had perished.

- D. Through his whole struggle at Worms, Luther had a few verses that kept coming to his mind: Matthew 10:18-20,28,33.

IV. HIS STRUGGLE AT WARTBURG

- A. Luther spent one year at Wartburg, and it was there he really began to struggle with his own philosophy of how to establish a biblical Protestant church. He had condemned the institution of the Roman Catholic Church; yet he had put nothing positive in its place. He had fought darkness, but had not yet lighted a candle.
- B. Luther probably had some real moments of discouragement, for he was fighting 1500 years of history. However, Luther again rose to the occasion. He began to translate the Bible into the German language. He knew the Reformation would never get off the ground unless the common people stood with it, and they could never support it unless they knew God's Word. Luther, with the help of Greek scholar Melancthon, translated the Bible into German. Luther never put his name on any Bible, which shows that he was a humble man.

This was just about the time that the printing press was invented, so that the Bible in German was printed *en masse*.

Oh, we worship a wonderful God! How perfect is his plan, how perfect is his timing!

V. HIS STRUGGLE AT WITTENBERG

- A. On his return to Wittenberg from Wartburg in March, 1522, Luther found the community in a frenzy of excitement because of: the attacks of Carlstadt upon the rites and ordinances of the Church; the preaching of Claus Storch, an Anabaptist; and other fanatics from Zwickaw. Carlstadt was a radical who wanted the Reformation to move much more quickly, despite the potentially damaging consequences. Luther restored order, thus keeping his movement in the paths of moderation.
- B. The revolt of the Nobles in 1523 and the Revolt of the Peasants in 1525 caused great distress to Luther and hampered his work. They were due to hard social and economic causes, but the Reformer was blamed. Luther foolishly urged the authorities to crush the Peasant's Revolt unmercifully, and many of his followers were so alienated that they became Anabaptists.

VI. HIS STRUGGLE AT AUGSBURG

- A. It became desirable for the Lutheran movement to declare officially its faith to the world. A doctrinal statement was drawn up, and handed to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530.
- B. This statement of the Lutheran faith has become known as the Augsburg Confession. It was the first confession or creed to be formulated since the ancient Church formulated the Christian

Faith in the creeds of the Ecumenical Councils. This confession was not perfect, but as the first new creed in many centuries, it was certainly a good start.