

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lessons 53 & 54

Martin Luther – Parts Two & Three

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record an interchange between Jesus and those who compared Jesus' religious practices to the more rigorous practices of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. John's disciples and the Pharisees often fasted, while Jesus' disciples did not. Jesus explained that while the bridegroom was present, people behaved differently than when the bridegroom was absent. Jesus then told them a short story to make his point:

No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, "The old is better." (Luke 5:36-39)

Jesus makes the point that the times were different; God had come to earth to dwell with men. If the religious thought it was business as normal, they would be sorely surprised, for the revelation and incarnation of God in Jesus was a fresh and new wine. It would never fit into the old wineskins nor the religious system of the Pharisees or even of John the Baptist. It would burst forth from such old confinements.

History shows the parable finding expression in Christian communities¹ over and over. Just when faith and practice seems to get encrusted with forms and structures that restrict and constrain faith, the gospel finds a new and fresh expression that breaks the old molds and shines forth in strong and pungent ways pointing to the Lord and his marvelous salvation. Church history has shown this development through many of our classes, whether Augustine or St. Francis. There have been many who brought back the core gospel issues to a needed time and place.

From a protestant perspective, that was the role of Martin Luther. He grasped some core gospel truths about the righteousness before God that man receives through faith, and he brought that freshness out in ways that burst the wineskins of the church wide open. Having said that, Protestants should readily acknowledge

¹ We should carefully see the analogy as applying to Christian communities or expressions as opposed to applying to the church itself. The Church is Christ' body; it will not shed itself for another movement of God.

that dividing the body of Christ is never the optimal solution to a problem. Reform of the church should not be divisive, but rather inclusive. Still, we are not writing the history of 500 years ago; we are merely studying it!²

REVIEW

Last week, we took an initial historical look at Luther and his place in history. In biographical terms, we studied him up to his posting of 95 theses for debate on the Wittenburg door. Those were 95 debating points that challenged the church's teachings on penance, indulgences, and the pope's authority to free people from Purgatory.

Luther posted the theses on the door of the church (which was used as a bulletin board in the community) on October 31, 1517, the night before "All Saints Day." All Saints Day was November 1, and it was a special day when the various relics were displayed for the faithful to come and pay homage, with the net result of decreasing the time required for the faithful to spend in purgatory. In effect, Luther was publicly challenging the practice on the eve of its most prolific (and money making) day.

We do not know whether Luther made any efforts to spread the theses beyond the immediate confines of Wittenburg or the Archbishop over the area. The wonders of the printing press along with the general German discontent with the church, took the theses much further. The theses were translated into German and distributed en masse throughout Germany. Within weeks, Luther's assault on the church was well distributed and debated in most German towns.

THE PLOT

The church did not dismiss Luther's challenge. The archbishop (Albrecht) forwarded the theses to Rome, where the pope has been quoted as saying, "Luther is a drunken German. He will feel different when he is sober."³ Luther was not a

² We do, however, write our history of today. The effect Luther had on the Reformation movement is also an effect he had on the Catholic Church. We will see in the weeks ahead that the Church followed many of the concerns Luther raised, but not before there was the great schism we term the Reformation movement. As we consider the history we write today, all Christians should be mindful of the need to move all aspects of the church toward greater unity in Christ and his gospel.

³ A second quote attributed to the pope at this time was, "Friar Martin is a brilliant chap. The whole row is due to the envy of the monks." Most scholars reckon that the pope said neither statement; however, the statements do convey the reactions of many to Luther's pronouncements.

drunken German, but he was certainly an angry one! The way the church handled his grievances, did nothing to abate his anger.

The church set the matters up for a scholastic debate between Luther, his followers, and certain Catholic academicians. Luther walked to one such encounter (in Heidelberg) incognito for fear of his life. Among the younger generation, Luther was seen as a bright star and hero. Many of the older generation thought him dangerous and a renegade.

The pope tried to get the Augustinian order to rein Luther in. When that was unsuccessful, the church worked through political channels, trying to get Frederick the Wise to turn Luther over to the church for prosecution. Frederick refused to do so, in spite of Rome's repeated urgings. The most Frederick would allow was an interrogation on German soil. The hearing was set for Augsburg. Luther's most recent writings had upset not only the pope, but also the emperor and a certain Cardinal Cajetan who would be present to prosecute Luther at Augsburg.⁴

The pope specially selected Cardinal Cajetan for this mission. He was bright, well spoken, and authoritative. Cajetan was sent with three main purposes: to rally the German support for a crusade against the Turks who were threatening in the East (in this he failed), to get an agreed tax levied upon the Germans to pay for the crusade (failed here too), and to have Martin Luther either recant or sent back to Rome to face a heresy trial. The pope even sent a letter to Frederick the Wise requesting that Luther be placed into Cajetan's hands.

Luther had three interviews with Cajetan on October 12, 13, and 14, 1518. Luther fell prostrate to the ground on day one, in accordance with proper humility before a Cardinal. The Cardinal, probably sensing victory already, raised Luther up and told him to recant. Luther responded that he had not traveled all that way merely to do something he could have done from home! Luther said he wanted to be instructed in his errors. The chief error Cajetan pointed to was Luther's denial that the pope had at his disposal a treasury of merit that could be dispensed and reduce time in purgatory.⁵ Luther debated the point in a somewhat rude and irreverent manner.

⁴ Notwithstanding the position of the new Emperor, a number of the nobility (Dukes, Princes, etc.) were actually quietly supportively of Luther and others who challenged the Roman Church. These political figures were not fans of local tax money crossing the alps and going to the church at Rome. Those taxes were preferred staying in the local ruler's fiefdom.

⁵ The teaching at issue was the Catholic doctrine that the life of Christ, his mother Mary, and the saints had accumulated excess good deeds into a treasury of sorts that the pope had authority to use on the less deserving as a means of limiting time in purgatory. This view of purgatory, though current at the time, was somewhat shallow compared to most other periods of history.

Over the three days, Luther tried to justify his teachings on the basis of Scripture. The Cardinal asserted that the church was the interpreter of Scripture, not Luther. Luther then offered to submit his views to the scholastic communities at several universities. Cajetan saw this as a denial of his jurisdiction and told Luther that Luther had one word he could say, and one word only. Until Luther was ready to say “*Revoco*” (which means, “I recant”), Luther had no right to engage Cajetan in any more conversation.

Cajetan tried going to Luther’s superior and church father figure, Staupitz (*see Lesson #50*), but to no avail. Rather than bring the Augustinian condemnation upon Luther, Staupitz chose to release Luther from his vows as a monk. Luther left Augsburg under cover of darkness to preclude being arrested by Cajetan.

Cajetan sought out Frederick the Wise and demanded that Luther either be turned over to Rome or banished from the German territories. Luther wrote Frederick and offered to leave his lands, but Staupitz wrote Luther a response saying Frederick would not give him up. Frederick wrote Cajetan and said he would be glad to follow his demands and give Luther up or banish him *once he was convicted of heresy*. In essence, Frederick bought Luther time.

Luther did not go into exile. He continued to study, write, and teach. Luther was engaged by some of the best minds of Germany in debates on the issues. The Church sent the University of Ingolstadt professor John Eck into the arena to debate Luther and show Luther’s teaching heresy.

Eck was an old friend of Luther’s. He was smart, great with words, had a wonderful resume, an incredible memory, and, unlike Cajetan, was a German. Eck’s German heritage removed Luther’s ability to play the “We’re Germans and the church abuses us” card.

Luther and Eck met in debate in Leipzig in July 1519. Melancthon came as Luther’s assistant. The first issue was whether to have stenographers for the debate. Eck argued, “No!” asserting it would chill the heat of debate. Melancthon noted that the “truth might fare better at a lower temperature!” Round one went to Luther/Melancthon (hence, we have a good record of the entire proceeding!). Round two was whether to have judges. Luther did not want them. Round two – Luther lost. Leadership from the Universities of Paris and Erfurt were appointed as judges.

An eyewitness to the proceedings has left us with a good description of the two focal men:

Martin is of middle height, emaciated from care and study, so that you can almost count his bones through his skin, He is in the vigor of manhood and has a clear, penetrating voice. He is learned and has the Scripture at his fingers' ends. He knows Greek and Hebrew sufficiently to judge of the interpretations...He is affable and friendly, in no sense dour or arrogant. He is equal to anything. In company he is vivacious, jocose, always cheerful and gay no matter how hard his adversaries press him. Everyone chides him for the fault of being a little too insolent in his reproaches and more caustic than is prudent for an innovator in religion or becoming to a theologian... Eck is a heavy, square-set fellow with a full German voice supported by a hefty chest. He would make a tragedian [actor] or town crier, but his voice is rather rough than clear. His eyes and mouth and his whole face remind one more of a butcher than a theologian.⁶

Luther's theological debate with Eck first centered on the papacy, whether it was a man made institution or a divine one. Eck argued that the papacy was central to Christianity's unity. Luther responded that Christianity could stay united with numerous heads in much the same way that different nations dwell in peace together. (Luther was right... in the wrong way! Mankind has proven over and over its divisive nature both in politics and the church). Eck pointed out the warring among the nations and lack of peace in many quarters, adding that for him there was "one faith, one Lord Jesus Christ, and...the Roman pontiff as Christ's vicar." Eck then pointed to letters claimed to be of first century origin referencing the papacy as coming from the very commands of Christ and the apostles. Luther argued that the letters were not genuine (as history and both Catholic and non-Catholic scholars have come to agree).

Eck then charged Luther with the "errors of Wyclif" and the "errors of Hus." The Hus charge was especially charged because the debate was taking place in Leipzig where there was a great hatred and mistrust of the Bohemians and Hus. Luther replied that his teachings were Biblical whether Wyclif and Hus agreed with them or not!

The debate turned to the issue of Purgatory. Eck argued from II Maccabees 12:45 for Purgatory, which says; "*And because he considered that they who had fallen asleep with godliness, had great grace laid up for them.*" Luther argued that that the passage came from the Apocrypha was not equal with Scripture.

⁶ Quoted from, *Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther* by Roland Bainton (Meridian Books 1995) p. 87. This is one of the most readable and thorough biographies of Luther in English.

After 18 days, the Duke stopped the debate and the parties returned to their homes. No immediate winner was proclaimed. Many followers of Hus would later write Luther appreciating what Luther had said. Luther would respond, “We are all Hussites without knowing it.”

Luther’s effect was international. Zwingli (the Swiss reformer we studied last week – see Lesson #52) was fighting for Luther’s reforms in the church. He would order hundreds of copies of Luther’s sermons and writings. The times were such that Luther’s thoughts struck a resonance they might not have at an earlier time. The printing press made for rapid and relatively cheap distribution of Luther’s thoughts. The renaissance was in full swing as was its attitude that mankind should learn and expand dominion over all areas of knowledge and life. Scriptures were more readily available than they had ever been before. In addition, German nationalism was on the rise as other nations sought to establish their own supremacy in Europe. The New World had been discovered and the Spanish, French, Portuguese, and British were seafaring nations staking claim to the Americas. Germany had no real naval presence, and it had to find its national identity through other means. These factors led to a movement around Luther in Germany of the intellectual as well as the common citizenry.

Over the next 18 months, the Church moved forward to deal with its “Luther problem.” The ultimate goal was to try and get Luther to Rome where his death could more readily be assured. But, Frederick the Wise continued his support of Luther and always found ways to protect Luther in Germany.

Luther used this time to write some of his most controversial and compelling works. From March to November 1520, Luther wrote 5 strong tracts that are still considered core to his life’s work. These tracts would ultimately test even Frederick’s ability to protect Luther

TRACT ONE: THE SERMON ON GOOD WORKS

The first of these five tracts was entitled, *The Sermon on Good Works*, dedicated on March 29, 1520 to John, the brother of Frederick the Wise.⁷ This book was an effort to show the place of good works in the life of a Christian. Many critics of Luther charged him with preaching a justification by faith that minimized good works and even provided many with excuses for sin. This was not only a concern for the church, but also for the secular rulers who needed a Christian citizenry that

⁷ No doubt by dedicating this book to the royal family and the successor to Frederick the Wise, Luther was showing great appreciation for the family that was protecting his life.

would follow society's rules. Luther responded with this tract to show the importance of good works to a Christian.

In this tract, Luther sets out his basis for Christian works. He begins teaching that "The first, highest, and most precious of all good works is faith in Christ."⁸ Luther uses the passage from John 6:28-29 where Jesus is asked, "What must we do to be doing the good work of God?" Jesus responds, "This is the work of God, that you believe in whom he has sent."

Luther then goes on to teach that any good work is a good work that proceeds out of faith. The goodness of the deed is never found in the deed itself. The goodness comes from the deed being one of faith and trust in God. Luther explains that the best human deeds, if done apart from faith, have absolutely no merit before God and "amount to nothing."⁹

After establishing faith as the platform for any work to be "good," Luther then discusses the common misperception that some works are mundane as opposed to others that are holy. Luther says that many in his day would consider working, walking, eating, drinking, sleeping, *etc.*, as common mundane necessities of life, but not something where one is particularly pleasing God. These same people would consider works that have a more "spiritual" nature to be more pleasing to God, like praying, fasting, and tithing. Luther explains that this thinking is wrong. Anything done in faith is holy and right before God, even if it seems mundane. For his Scriptural support, Luther used John 8:29 where Jesus said, "I always do the things that please him [God]." Luther asks how Jesus could do things always pleasing to God if Jesus was eating and sleeping. For Luther, this was indicative of the fact that when these actions were done in faith, were, they were as holy as those acts typically deemed spiritual.

Luther says a life with good deeds that proceed from faith is a life built on the rock of Jesus. A life that is full of good deeds out of arrogance and self-righteousness is a house built on sand. In the end, the house built on faith is the only one standing.

Luther then goes through the Ten Commandments in great detail. He explains not merely the letter of the law contained in each, but the spirit of the law as well. When one is done with this part of his tract, most anyone must readily accept the

⁸ Our translations of Luther are from the series of Luther's Works put out by Concordia Publishing House and edited by James Atkinson and Helmut Lehman (1966). Here the quote is from Vol. 44, p. 23 (*Treatise on Good Works*, 2).

⁹ *Treatise on Good Works*, at 2.

inability to follow even the easiest of the ten. For example, the first commandment is to have no other gods before God. For Luther this meant, “Since I alone am God, thou shalt place all thy confidence, trust, and faith in Me alone and in no one else.”¹⁰ Clearly, no one will ever follow this commandment fully.

This treatise was one which radically challenged the current views on holiness, on the sacred and the secular, and on the understanding of Christian ethics. It placed common Christians on equal footing before God with the spiritual elite. It was current when written in 1520. It is no less current today!

TRACT TWO: THE PAPACY AT ROME

Luther’s second work during this period was *The Papacy at Rome*. This work was prompted by a publishing by an Augustine monk in Leipzig who took it upon himself to disprove Luther’s view on the papacy espoused the year before in the debate with Eck. The monk’s name was Alveld and he set out some fairly weak arguments for the papacy in two separate works. Luther ignored the first, but wrote against the second. The core of this writing was Luther’s repeated explanations on why the papacy should be seen as an institution of man rather than of Scripture.¹¹

...THE PLOT THICKENS

In the next few months, the Pope met with a number of cardinals, theologians, and leaders from the three great monastic orders (Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians) along with John Eck from Germany and several others. The issues hashed out over four sessions were: what to do with Luther, what to do with his ideas, and what to do with his books.

At the meetings, some pushed for outright condemnation, others for a trial, and still others for a bull.¹² Ultimately, the decision was reached to issue a bull giving Luther 60 days to appear in Rome (from the date of posting in his district). Additionally, 41 of Luther’s writings were officially condemned. The bull was dated June 15, 1520. Accompanying the bull, the Pope wrote Frederick the Wise and asked him to capture Luther in the event Luther refused to honor the bull.

¹⁰ *Treatise on Good Works*, at 9.

¹¹ We should carefully distinguish here between the trappings of the papacy and the office itself. There is no question that the role of a Bishop for the church at Rome was a Scriptural position. Whether that Bishop had or has authority over other congregations of Christians is another issue. Also whether that Bishop has rulership authority and special access to God are different issues.

¹² A “bull” was a papal declaration that had the effect of law or command in the church.

TRACT THREE: THE ADDRESS TO GERMAN NOBILITY

While the bull was debated and prepared, Luther was writing his most radical piece yet. This third work was *The Address to German Nobility*, published in August 1520. This tract was one of the most important and influential of the Reformation. In it, Luther challenges the core political, religious, and social structure of Europe. For the 1,000 years of the Middle Ages preceding Luther, the Church held sway over morality, education, and social thought. The Church did so through its clergy. The laity followed where the clergy led. The clergy had the education and the resultant literacy. The church's clergy had access to books and writings, including Scripture, which the laity did not. It was the church, actually the pope, who had the authority to translate Scripture. The Church had international reach and influence. It was the clergy who held the keys to Christian fellowship, to the Eucharist, and so it was taught, to salvation itself. There were very distinct lines drawn between the clergy of the church and the laity of the common masses. There were lines even within European government as the church enforced morality and virtue, even excommunicating those rulers who transgressed key church doctrine.

In his *Address to German Nobility*, Luther redrew all of those lines in one fell swoop. Luther set forward his work in three parts. The first part redrew the lines that supported the priesthood and the papacy. Luther argued that Biblically there was no real distinction between priest and laity. The priests had no benefits or abilities beyond that of any Christian. All Christians were priests under Luther's teaching of Scripture. This meant that the duty of enforcing morality and restraining evil was not that of the church. Luther taught that the state had that responsibility. Accordingly, Luther also argued that the pope had no absolute right to interpret Scripture. Since all believers were priests, all believers were called upon to interpret Scripture, although orthodoxy still required certain bounds of interpretation. The orthodoxy came not from a pope, however, but from the great councils of the church.

The second part of the *Address* centered on Luther's list of abuses in the church that needed to be checked. Luther compared Christ to the pope. Christ traveled on foot; the pope on a steed in a parade. Christ washed his disciples' feet; the pope had his feet kissed, etc. The third part of the *Address* centered on Luther's suggestions for reform. Here, Luther explains that the church should not have control over government, that there should be public provision for the poor, and that the church should tend to the disorders within itself. In essence, Luther was calling on the citizenry and ruling class of Germany to reform the Church! Luther believed if the church was stripped of its governing powers and wealth, it could better focus on its spiritual functions.

TRACT FOUR: THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

After writing these three tracts, Luther came out with a fourth tract that did to the church what the *Address* did to society and government. The fourth tract we focus on was entitled, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. In this book, Luther discusses the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, dismissing five of them as not truly sacraments.

Because many aspects of the Christian faith do not maintain any sacrament, it is worth pausing to clarify the definition Luther was using of “sacrament.” It was the Catholic Church’s belief (and Luther’s as well) that there were events or practices where God actually communicates grace to the participants. This is different from the non-sacramental Christian tradition that views the practices as symbolic rather than literal encounters with the divine.

Luther derived the title to this work from the Old Testament accounts of the Babylonians conquering Jerusalem and taking the Jews into captivity. Luther paralleled the Scriptural events with the situation in Europe where the Christians were carried away from the Scripture into captivity under the papacy. Luther believed the first sacrament captured by the church was the Eucharist. Luther used Scripture to argue that the church should not withhold the cup from the laity (at the time, the priests took the cup and the bread in communion, but the laity was given just the bread). The reasoning was the laity might accidentally spill the wine which was seen to have transformed into the actual blood of Christ. This meant that Christ’ blood would be spilled in such an accident. Luther not only argued against the exclusivity of withholding the cup, but argued against transubstantiation¹³ itself. Luther asserted that faith was the key to the sacrament, not a literal transfer of the essence of the bread and wine into the essence of Christ. Finally on the Eucharist, Luther wrote that God is not actually brought down upon the altar as if by some magical incantation of the priest. Instead, God reveals himself where he is and as he is in the Eucharist.

The second sacrament Luther writes on is that of baptism. Luther maintained that “It is therefore correct to say that baptism is a washing away of sins.”¹⁴ Luther saw baptism as a symbol of the death and resurrection, and for that reason prefers that baptisms be a full immersion rather than a pouring or sprinkling. Luther did hold to the idea of infant baptism citing the healed paralytic in Mark 2:8-12 as

¹³ The changing of the elements of the bread and wine, when they are consecrated in the Eucharist, into the actual body and blood of Christ, although their appearances remain the same.

¹⁴ *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36, p. 68.

Biblical authority that one can be healed by the faith of others. Luther believed that the faith of those who present an infant for baptism, as well as the faith of the church, was adequate for the baptism.

The third sacrament Luther addressed was penance. Luther believed that the Church had taken this sacrament captive by eliminating faith from its role in the process of forgiveness. “They have divided penance into three parts – contrition, confession, and satisfaction; but in such a way that they have removed whatever was good in each of them, and have established in each of them their caprice and tyranny.”¹⁵ For Luther, contrition was to be a result of faith, but he felt like the church had transformed it into a work. Luther warned his readers not to put their confidence in their contrition or, believe that their forgiveness comes from their own remorse. It is the believers’ faith that caused the remorse that finds God’s favor.

As for confession, Luther readily states, “confession of sin is necessary and commanded of God.”¹⁶ Luther even agrees with the practice of private confession, although he is quick to point out it “cannot be proved by Scripture.”¹⁷ Luther’s complaint about the confessional system was the church’s requirements that the confession be made to priests. Luther believed confession was proper before any Christian brother, not merely the clergy.

As for the third part of penance, satisfaction, Luther held that the church through its practices of indulgences had “grossly abused” the concept “to the ruin of Christians in body and soul.”¹⁸

The fourth sacrament was that of Confirmation, or the laying on of hands. For Luther, confirmation was a good churchly rite, but it was not a “sacrament of faith” because it does not have a divine promise connected with it, nor does it impart salvation.

The fifth sacrament was marriage. Luther pointed out that, like confirmation, there is no Scriptural basis for considering marriage a sacrament. In the marriage, no particular grace of God is imparted to man or woman. Unbelievers are married, with marriages no less sacred than believers, yet God is not meeting the unbeliever

¹⁵ *Id.* at 83-84.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 85-86.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 89.

in salvation. For Luther, marriage as a sacrament was merely another way the church had its hand in every aspect of the community's life from cradle to the grave. Luther does go into a great detail about the importance of marriage, the symbol of marriage as the relationship of Christ to his church, etc. But for Luther, the marriage as important and holy as it is, does not impart grace and should not be termed a sacrament.

In this discussion, Luther also spoke of divorce. Luther would not take a position on whether divorce was allowable, but he did state, "For my part, I so greatly detest divorce that I should prefer bigamy to it."¹⁹ Luther noted that Christ permitted divorce, but only on the grounds of unchastity. Luther urged people not to believe the pope had greater powers of granting a divorce than those Christ taught.

The sixth sacrament was ordination. Luther considered it an invention of the church, plain and simple. "There is not a single word said about it in the whole New Testament."²⁰

The final sacrament was extreme unction. This was the rite of anointing the sick upon their deathbed. It was also called the "last sacrament." The basis for the church's position was the passage in James 5:14-15 which says, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven."

Luther challenged this on several bases. First, he had serious doubts that James was written by the apostle James and deserved being regarded as authoritative. Second, Luther says even if it is authoritative, it is speaking of sick people, not dying people.

This tract doubtlessly sealed Luther's fate with the church. The scholar Erasmus, who had tried to find a way to merge a peace between Luther and the church, read the tract and then exclaimed, "The breach is irreparable."

...BACK TO THE PLOT

Meanwhile, the bull was sent via John Eck and Jerome Aleander (a language scholar and former Rector at the University of Paris). Eck went to Eastern Germany, Aleander to the west. Aleander's first stop was to the Emperor Charles.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 105.

²⁰ *Id.* at 107.

Along the way, notarized copies of the bull were posted in the main towns and cities. Many of the Germans were so aligned with Luther at this point that the bulls were often torn down and ripped up. There were places where the public burnings of Luther's works did not occur because the masses were too threatening to the papal delegates.

On October 10, 1520, the bull reached Luther. He decided to treat it as fake rather than a genuine issue from the Pope. He did write that if the bull was truly real (which in his heart he knew it was), then it was inane. Luther would not go to Rome as directed.

TRACT FIVE: THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN

Just a few weeks later, Luther wrote his fifth tract for our consideration: *The Freedom of a Christian* published in November. This was a booklet that Luther wrote to accompany a letter to Pope Leo X. The letter and the booklet are conciliatory in nature, but if the pope ever actually read them, it would have caused quite a shock. For in these writings, Luther treats the pope not as the Vicar of Christ and head of the church, but rather as basically equals. The core of the tract was Luther's teaching that the righteous Christian life was one lived by faith. Luther told the pope that his writings and concern were never meant personally. Luther just believed that the pope's Rome was the equivalent of Babylon or Sodom! Luther gave Leo the benefit of the doubt and wrote that Leo must be a lamb in the midst of wolves or a Daniel in the midst of lions. Luther then goes on to give the pope advice, almost like a father confessor.

MEANWHILE, THE PLOT THICKENS...

Instead of going to Rome, Luther and Melanchthon staged a book burning of their own. On December 10, the day Luther should have appeared in Rome, a group of people joined Luther and Melanchthon and burned the papal constitution, the canon law, works of certain catholic theologians, and Luther himself threw the bull into the fire.

Things then heated up significantly. The pope got nowhere with Frederick the Wise and so went over his head to the Emperor. The Emperor insisted that Luther come to the Diet (read that "mega meeting" of church and government to settle major issues) at Worms. Luther did so in April 1521.

At the meeting, when Luther's time came, it was standing room only. Luther's books were laid out and the scene was intense. Bainton describes the scene:

Here was Charles, heir of a long line of Catholic sovereigns – of Maximilian the romantic, of Ferdinand the Catholic, of Isabella the orthodox – scion of the house of Hapsburg, lord of Austria, Burgundy, the Low Countries, Spain, and Naples, Holy Roman Emperor, ruling over a vaster domain than any save Charlemagne, symbol of the medieval unities, incarnation of a glorious if vanishing heritage; and here before him a simple monk, a miner's son, with nothing to sustain him save his own faith in the Word of God. Here the past and the future were met. Some would see at this point the beginning of modern times.²¹

The Catholic interrogator asked Luther if the books were his. In a quiet voice, Luther said yes. Luther was then asked whether he defended the books. In response and to the surprise of many, Luther asked for a day to think about his response.

The emperor granted a day, and the crowd was even larger 6 p.m. the next day when the hearing recommenced.

Luther was re-asked the question and he answered with a speech rather than a yes or no. The whole speech resulted in a fuss with the interrogator who just wanted a simple answer. In reply, Luther said:

Since then Your majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer...Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. Amen.²²

The emperor declared Luther guilty of heresy and declared his intentions to deal with Luther accordingly. This decision would mean death to Luther, barring some intervention.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Where do you stand? For what do you value enough to put your life on the line?

²¹ Bainton, *Here I Stand, a Life of Martin Luther* (1995) p. 141.

²² Bainton, *Here I Stand, a Life of Martin Luther* (1995) p. 144.

2. Luther understood more than most during his time the truth of Paul's writings that, "The righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:17), and "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:8-10)
3. We should infuse all we do with faith. For the Christian, we must never see things as "spiritual," "sinful," or "every day/mundane." There are not three categories of actions for the faithful. There are two. Walking, eating, and sleeping, when done in faith, are as holy as praying. Indeed, God's word says that even "the very hairs on our head are numbered." Matthew 10:30
4. Luther's understanding of the role of each believer before God finds expression in Hebrews where Jesus is shown as the High Priest and believers draw near through him, rather than an earthly clergy. "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:19-23).
5. We have Bibles readily available to us, something for which most Christians never had access to. We must read, study, and apply the teachings of Scripture. We should never run or ignore such a priceless treasure. We should pray and support the good work of the Gideons, and other organizations that spread God's word to places where the Bible is not easily accessible.