

## Here We Stand: Imitating Luther's Faith

The writer to the Hebrews, in the closing chapter of his book, offered his readers this encouragement: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7 NIV). Most likely, he wanted his readers to call to mind those who had served as their spiritual leaders, what we might refer to as pastors. The writer desired that they consider carefully not only what their pastors had taught them, but also how those leaders had conducted themselves as children of God. Though they faced persecution for their Christian testimony, perhaps even martyrdom, they refused to abandon the Christian faith in fear. With their hearts fixed on the sure and certain promises of God, they remained faithful to the end. It was as if the writer to the Hebrews was saying, “You witnessed their faithfulness in trials. The Lord who enabled them to be faithful is your Lord, too. So imitate their trust in the promises of God, because you know how their story ended—God was glorified, God’s people were encouraged, and they were blessed.”

Though the writer to the Hebrews almost certainly was pointing his readers to spiritual leaders alongside whom they lived, it isn’t wrong to think of the “leaders who spoke the word of God to you” in broader terms. None of us had the privilege of sitting at Martin Luther’s feet as he lectured on the Psalms or preached at the city church in Wittenberg. Yet he has spoken the Word of God to us through his many writings that have remained to this day.<sup>1</sup> None of us witnessed personally how the Reformer conducted his life, unless watching Luther movies counts. (*And I don’t think it does.*) At the same time, we do know quite a bit about how Luther carried out the ministry entrusted to him. While Luther was a sinner in desperate need of the grace of God in Christ, a fact he readily confessed, he still serves as a helpful model for us five hundred years later. We want to imitate his God-given confidence in the Lord’s promises, with the prayer that the Lord would enable us to stand firm in Christian faith, confess the Savior’s gospel with humble confidence, and trust him to work through us for the benefit of others and the glory of his name.

There is much for Christians to learn from the way Dr. Luther conducted himself throughout his years of ministry. This essay means to focus especially on what the Lord accomplished in and through the Reformer at the Diet of Worms, the quincentennial of which we celebrated earlier this year. There Luther stood before some of the world’s most powerful leaders, with his life on the line. There he took a stand against the teachings of the Roman

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1. This was not Luther’s wish. In his Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings, Luther wrote, “I would have been quite content to see my books, one and all, remain in obscurity and go by the board.” His desire was that his writings would lead people to search the Scriptures and make his writings superfluous. It is a good reminder for us as we read Luther today—his writings function best when they drive us to the Scriptures. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Volume 34 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 283. Hereafter *Luther’s Works* will be noted by *LW*, followed by the volume and then the page number.

church that obscured the merits of Christ, deprived the Lord of the glory he deserved as the one who chooses to love undeserving sinners, and robbed consciences of the comfort God desired them to have. By reviewing the events of the Diet of Worms and the way the Reformer conducted himself, this essay aims to identify ways in which we can imitate Luther's faith today.

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE DIET OF WORMS

### The Papal Bulls

Pope Leo X issued a formal decree, dated June 15, 1520, condemning the errors of Martin Luther and his followers. Popularly known as *Exsurge Domine* (Arise, Lord), from the Latin words with which it began, the papal bull specifically listed forty-one errors to be found in the writings of Luther and his followers. Pope Leo characterized Luther as a "wild boar in the forest" whose teachings were "destructive, pernicious, scandalous, and seductive to pious minds." He wanted everyone to regard those teachings as "utterly condemned, reprobated, and rejected" by the church. In addition, every one of Luther's books and pamphlets were to be "burned publicly and solemnly in the presence of the clerics and the people," as a testimony that Luther was "a true heretic." To ensure that the burned pamphlets were not replaced by other writings, Pope Leo forbade Luther to write, preach, or teach. By this decree the pope intended both to "cut off the advance of this plague and cancerous disease" and to call Luther to repentance. If Luther agreed to offer a formal recantation of what he had written, within sixty days of receipt of the papal bull, he would find mercy with the pope. Failing to do so would result in his being excommunicated.<sup>2</sup>

Though Luther became aware of the general contents of the papal decree by the beginning of October, he first received a copy on October 10. That marked the beginning of the sixty days in which he could either travel to Rome to renounce what he had written (and promise to cease with that teaching) or to submit the same in writing. After reading the papal decree, Luther wrote to his friend George Spalatin, who served as the assistant to Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, expressing his disappointment. Since the bull condemned his teachings, all of which were aimed at pointing sinners to Christ alone for righteousness and life, Luther lamented: "Christ himself is condemned in it."<sup>3</sup> Luther considered the bull unbecoming of the pope, who should have been doing everything in his power to preserve the preaching of the gospel of Christ, not silence it.<sup>4</sup> The leaders of the Roman church, Luther believed, had

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2. "Exsurge Domine: Condemning the Errors of Martin Luther, Pope Leo X-1520," <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo10/l10exdom.htm>.

3. Martin Luther, *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, Volume 1, translated and edited by Preserved Smith (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), 365.

4. Timothy F. Lull and Derek R. Nelson, *Resilient Reformer: The Life and Thought of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 116-17. Lull and Nelson write, "For Luther, the bull was really the last straw, the

become “monsters,”<sup>5</sup> whose rule would seem to spell the demise of faith and the Church. Had Luther allowed his eyes to tell him what to think about the situation, he could only have despaired. Instead, empowered by the Holy Spirit, he tuned his ears to the Lord’s promises. The Reformer rejoiced in the Lord’s promise to preserve his people from the devil’s lies, even when spoken by the visible church. He also rejoiced that he had been considered worthy of suffering for so noble a cause.<sup>6</sup>

During the sixty days allotted for his recantation, Luther (unsurprisingly!) did what he had been forbidden to do. He wrote against the pope’s decree. He asked those who found fault with his teachings to demonstrate his errors from the writings of the prophets and apostles, not the councils of the church. In his *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist*,<sup>7</sup> Luther laments, “This bull condemns me from its own word without any proof from Scripture, whereas I back up all my assertions from the Bible.” His plea was simply this: “Let them show where I am a heretic, or dry up their spittle.”<sup>8</sup> On December 10, 1520, Philip Melancthon, Luther’s colleague on the university faculty, invited those in Wittenberg who supported the evangelical cause to gather for a book burning. Only it wouldn’t be Luther’s books, as the papal bull had commanded, but the books of canon law that had granted the pope authority over the Scriptures.

While the books were burning, Luther decided to throw into the fire the papal bull that threatened to excommunicate him. From a letter Spalatin wrote to Elector Frederick on December 3, Luther had at least a week earlier “decided to burn the bull publicly in the pulpit unless they mend their abuses.”<sup>9</sup> He burned the bull, not as a rebel against the authorities or as a great hero who had no fear, but “with trembling and praying.”<sup>10</sup> Never had he set out to position himself against the church; his desire was a reformation of the church from within. He only wanted to ensure that the gospel of Christ would be preached in the church, not human

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confirmation that the pope was the antichrist. The one person who should have praised Luther for championing the gospel instead condemned him and was about to cast him out of the church.”

5. *Luther’s Correspondence*, 366.

6. *Luther’s Correspondence*, 366. “Yet I rejoice with my whole heart that for this best of causes I suffer evil, who am not worthy of being so tried.”

7. Already in his letter to Spalatin on October 11, 1520, the day after he received the papal bull, Luther indicated that he believed the pope to be the Antichrist: “I am certain at length that the Pope is Antichrist and that the seat of Satan has been openly found.” *Luther’s Correspondence*, 366.

8. As quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon–Cokesbury, 1950), 162.

9. *Luther’s Correspondence*, 405.

10. *LW* 48:192. A month after the burning of the bull, in a letter addressed to John von Staupitz, Luther’s confessor as an Augustinian monk, Luther wrote: “I have burned the books of the pope and the bull, at first with trembling and praying; but now I am more pleased with this than with any other action of my life, for [these books] are worse than I had thought.”

tradition focused on the contributions human beings must make.<sup>11</sup> The bull seemed to indicate, however, that the Roman church had no interest in discussing the Scriptures' teaching. While the burning of a papal bull seems rather dramatic, an action that probably ought to have been accompanied by stirring music, it may not have been all that remarkable at the time. It's possible that only a few people recognized what Luther had done.<sup>12</sup> Luther biographer Heinz Schilling suggests that "only subsequently, reworked by the public and through memorialization, did Luther's action become a revolutionary repudiation of his threatened excommunication."<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, Luther's action was at best only symbolic. After all, burning a decree wouldn't put an end to the false teachings that had become prevalent in the church. Burning the bull wasn't going to give comfort to burdened consciences. It was, however, a statement. Eric Metaxas, in a recent popular biography of Luther, argues that "Luther's fiery statement was that he was turning the tables" by "symbolically excommunicating the false church that had thought to excommunicate him."<sup>14</sup> If the Roman church refused to listen to the Scriptures, to the voice of Jesus himself speaking there, then Luther knew it could not and would not speak for Jesus. Specifically, the Roman church would not proclaim the unconditional gospel: that the righteousness that counts before God comes through faith in Christ alone. And that was Luther's primary concern.

When Luther failed to meet the demands of *Exsurge Domine*, and even defied the decree by continuing to speak and write against the church's gospel-denying teachings, Pope Leo X acted. He issued another papal bull, this one called *Decet Romanum Pontificum* (It Befits the Roman Pontiff), on January 3, 1521. In that decree, Leo X dealt decisively with the Augustinian monk whom he accused of tearing apart "the seamless robe of our Redeemer and the unity of the orthodox faith." He declared Martin a heretic. What's more, the pope passed the same sentence on all "who have cared nought of their own salvation but publicly and in all men's eyes become followers of Martin's pernicious and heretical sect." By giving them the title "Lutheran," the Roman pontiff intended to do two things. First, he wanted to shame them, since they had foolishly chosen to follow a solitary man instead of the church. And second, he

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11. In a letter written to Emperor Charles V on August 30, 1520, a month before he became aware of the details of the pope's decree, Luther emphasized his concern for the gospel of Christ: "I strove for nothing other than spreading the truth of the gospel against superstitious opinions stemming from human tradition." After three years of trying to engage in a discussion of how the church was obscuring the gospel with its teachings, Luther could sense what was going to happen: "There is only one thing prepared for me: to be annihilated, together with the whole gospel." *LW* 48:178.

12. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521*, translated by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 424.

13. Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval*, translated by Rona Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 165.

14. Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2017), 198.

wanted to make it clear that they “shall likewise share his punishments.” The punishments prescribed were significant. “The men in question are everywhere to be denounced publicly as excommunicated, accursed, condemned, interdicted, deprived of possessions and incapable of owning them. They are to be strictly shunned by all faithful Christians.”<sup>15</sup> The pope and the Roman Curia were not going to engage a heretic in a doctrinal discussion. If Luther wished to retract his writings, they would listen. They had no interest in anything beyond that. The pope’s decree carried significant weight even beyond the church. The authorities of the Holy Roman Empire typically followed the lead of the ecclesiastical authorities, which would have meant exile from the empire for Luther as well.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Emperor’s Dilemma: Should Luther Be Given a Hearing?**

The leaders of the Holy Roman Empire would be meeting in Germany a few short weeks after Pope Leo X had excommunicated Luther. Emperor Charles V, the twenty-year-old who had just begun his reign in Germany in October 1520, arrived in Worms in early January 1521. Elector Frederick of Saxony, whose territory included Wittenberg, met with the emperor privately to request that Luther be given a hearing. Along with many other German electors, Frederick the Wise considered it inappropriate for Luther to be condemned without a hearing from impartial scholars. In fact, even before Leo had published the bull excommunicating Luther, Frederick had written to the emperor on December 20, 1520, asking him to “do nothing against Luther before he is heard, so that the truth whether he has erred in his writings might be established.”<sup>17</sup> Frederick was not, with his request, stating his personal agreement with Luther’s doctrinal position. Rather, he was insisting, as Schilling says, that this “was a matter of procedure and the procedure to be followed should be as determined by the law and constitution of the Holy Roman Empire and the privileges of the German estates, not by Roman ecclesiastical law.”<sup>18</sup> From Frederick’s perspective, peace and unity in Germany could only be preserved by following the established process, not by submitting to a unilateral mandate from Rome.

The German electors rejected a proposal to fall in line with the papal bull and ban Luther’s writings. They suggested, probably not inaccurately, that the common people might revolt if Luther, their hero,<sup>19</sup> didn’t receive a hearing at the diet. The electors’ plea for a hearing should

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15. “*Decet Romanum Pontificem*: Papal Bull of Excommunication of Martin Luther and his Followers, Pope Leo X–1521,” <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo10/l10decet.htm>.

16. Herman Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 151.

17. *Luther’s Correspondence*, 429–30.

18. Schilling, 169.

19. A woodcut from the time by Hans Holbein the Younger depicted Luther as the “German Hercules.” Luther’s countrymen considered him a hero because, as Larry Mansch explains, “he alone had the courage to take

not be understood, however, as an expression of agreement with, and support for, the Wittenberg professor's theological positions.<sup>20</sup> What the electors had in common with Luther was this: they were concerned about papal authority and desirous of reform. It wasn't, however, because they were convinced that the pope's teachings contradicted the Scriptures and deprived God's people of comfort. Instead, the electors had political and financial concerns. They believed the Roman Curia had abused its authority and taken advantage of the German churches. During the early weeks of the diet, which began in late January and concluded in early May, a committee outlined for the emperor 102 abuses that the church in Rome had perpetrated on the German church.<sup>21</sup> Those grievances needed to come before the diet, and one way to ensure that they did was to agitate for Luther to appear at Worms.<sup>22</sup> Though there were many important items on the agenda for Charles V's first imperial diet, the German electors believed that Luther must receive a hearing.

The Roman church, predictably, held an entirely different opinion. The pope had already spoken on the Luther matter, and decisively, when he excommunicated Luther. Jerome Aleander, the papal ambassador, gave a three-hour speech in which he painted Luther as one intent on destroying the peace and unity of the church. If the emperor were to give Luther a hearing, Aleander argued, he would be giving credence to teachings that the pope himself had declared heretical. Most importantly, the secular authorities should "stay in their lane" and leave doctrinal matters to those who had the calling of doctrinal oversight. The Roman church was convinced, as Timothy Lull and Derek Nelson point out, that "only mischief could come from this kind of group—many of them laity, for that matter—dabbling in theological matters where they had neither jurisdiction nor competence."<sup>23</sup> The emperor would provide a great service both to empire and church by supporting the church's declaration and refusing to re-examine the rationale for the excommunication.<sup>24</sup>

Emperor Charles V, inexperienced both as a man and as a ruler, faced a difficult decision. He was, and desired to be, a faithful Roman Catholic, supportive of the church. Declaring Luther an outlaw without any hearing would have suited him fine. That was apparent, for instance, by

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on the Roman Catholic Church on behalf of the German people." Larry D. Mansch and Curtis H. Peters, *Martin Luther: The Life and Lessons* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2016), 107.

20. Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 101. "Delegates to the Diet who wanted to hear Luther out sympathized with his criticism of Rome more than with his theology."

21. De Lamar Jensen, *Confrontation at Worms: Martin Luther and the Diet of Worms* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1973), 40.

22. Augustus Graebner goes so far as to say, "What was foremost in the minds of the many were not the articles of faith, but the grievances of the nation, and if it had not been for these, Luther would never have been summoned to appear before the Diet." Augustus L. Graebner, "Luther's Conduct at Worms," *Theological Quarterly* 4:1 (January 1900), 32.

23. Lull and Nelson, 120.

24. Bainton, 169.

his approach in those lands in which he had clear and obvious authority, where he ordered that Luther's books be burned.<sup>25</sup> In November 1520, in a letter to Elector Frederick, Charles V acknowledged that he would like to have Luther's books "burned here and everywhere in the Holy Empire,"<sup>26</sup> for the sake of preserving unity. At the same time, the emperor needed the support of the German aristocrats, including Elector Frederick, so that he could strengthen his position as the Holy Roman Emperor. Without German support, he would have difficulty supporting his military campaigns against the Turks. In the end, as Scott Hendrix aptly observes, "the political risk of condemning Luther without a hearing was too great"<sup>27</sup> for Charles. On March 6, he extended an official invitation to Luther. In deference to Elector Frederick, who had expressed concern in December 1520 about having the professor travel to Worms because of what might happen to him,<sup>28</sup> the emperor included with that invitation a letter of safe conduct. He threatened to use the empire's power to punish any who might injure Luther either on the way to Worms or back to Wittenberg.<sup>29</sup>

In the invitation, which reached the professor in the final days of March 1521, Charles V asked "our dear and pious Dr. Martin Luther" to come to Worms because "the Estates of the Holy Empire, here assembled, have undertaken and decreed to obtain information about certain doctrines and certain books which formerly originated with you."<sup>30</sup> The invitation must have sounded promising to Luther. At the very least, it sounded different than the "invitation" Pope Leo X issued in June 1520. The pope offered no opportunity for discussion, insisting only that Luther recant perpetually what he had been teaching. The emperor, however, made no mention of recantation. By all appearances, Charles was following through on his initial proposal to Elector Frederick in November 1520, when the emperor mentioned inviting Luther to Worms where he could be "sufficiently examined by learned and wise persons."<sup>31</sup> Since the emperor and the estates summoned him "to obtain information" about his teaching, Luther must have surmised that he would have the chance to demonstrate that he drew his teachings solely from the Scriptures.

### **The Question Facing Luther: Should He Travel to Worms?**

It's important to note that the emperor had extended an *invitation*. He had not issued a *command* under threat of punishment. In other words, Luther did not have to appear before

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25. Schilling, 167–68.

26. *Luther's Correspondence*, 398.

27. Hendrix, 101.

28. *Luther's Correspondence*, 430.

29. *Luther's Correspondence*, 483–84.

30. *Luther's Correspondence*, 482.

31. *Luther's Correspondence*, 399.

the gathering of the Holy Roman Empire. In fact, a good argument could have been made that Luther should decline the invitation. Those who felt Luther should stay in Wittenberg pointed to what had happened to Bohemian reformer Jan Huss. A century earlier Emperor Sigismund had invited Huss to the Council of Constance, with the promise that he would be protected in his travels both to and from the Council. While in Constance, however, Huss was imprisoned. Some seven months later he was burned at the stake because he had been declared a heretic. Emperor Charles' promise of safe conduct, then, could not be considered a guarantee of safety, particularly when Pope Leo X had already declared Luther a heretic. Traveling to Worms seemed unwise at best and foolish at worst, since there was so much work to be done in reforming the church and Luther's leadership, humanly speaking, played a critical role.

In the months leading up to the Diet of Worms, Luther had been thinking about what he would do if he were called to appear. On behalf of Elector Frederick, Spalatin asked Luther that specific question in December 1520. Luther answered that he would undertake the long journey to Worms and offered several reasons for doing so. First, he recognized the authority of the emperor as God's representative. If the emperor summoned him, he would hear the Lord's voice behind it. Second, he trusted that though his enemies may plot evil and even seek to kill him, the Lord could protect him, just as he had done for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Third, he did not want to give the enemies of the gospel an opportunity to say, if he refused to travel to Worms, "He's afraid to stand up for what he says he believes. If he's not willing to suffer for it, he must not believe it." Knowing that he did not, on his own, have the strength to confess in the face of danger, Luther prayed, "May the merciful Christ prevent such cowardice on our part and such boasting on their part. Amen."<sup>32</sup> In the end, Luther recognized that people in Germany might be tempted to abandon the faith if he wavered in doubt concerning the teaching of the Scriptures: "You may expect everything of me except flight and recanting," he told Spalatin. "I do not want to escape, much less recant; may the Lord Jesus strengthen me in this. I could do neither without endangering piety and the salvation of many."<sup>33</sup> In the final analysis, it was his love for Christ's gospel and his concern for all who hear the gospel that moved him to accept the invitation to appear before the diet.<sup>34</sup>

On March 19, 1521, about a week before he received the invitation from the emperor, Luther sent a letter to Spalatin in which he expressed his willingness to attend the diet, if Charles summoned. Only one thing would stop him from coming. It wasn't concern for his life. In fact, if Charles called him to the diet to kill him, Luther was more than ready to make the trip. With Christ's help, he would not flee the battle. The only reason he would decline to attend is if he were going to be called only for the sake of recanting what he had written. Making the trek

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32. *Luther's Correspondence*, 189.

33. *Luther's Correspondence*, 190.

34. Here I might differ with Scott Hendrix, who suggests that, "One simple argument seems to have carried the day. If Luther did not go to Worms, his enemies might call him a coward." Hendrix, 101. Hendrix gives the impression that Luther's concern was primarily for how he might be viewed, rather than the gospel.

to Worms would in that case be a colossal waste of time, because, he said, he could recant just as easily from Wittenberg.<sup>35</sup>

### **Luther Travels under the Lord's Protecting Hand**

That Luther decided to go to Worms gives some indication of how he read the invitation from Emperor Charles. He did not think he was being called solely to recant what he had written, but to provide “information about certain doctrines” and discuss what he taught from the Scriptures. On April 2, he left Wittenberg for the 320-mile, two-week journey to Worms. Crowds of people received him enthusiastically at many places along the way, a testimony to the fact that his writings had been circulated widely. Many thronged to meet Luther, “in some ways the first celebrity of modern culture,”<sup>36</sup> in Metaxas’ words, to see with their own eyes “the miracle-man who was so brave as to oppose the Pope and all the world, who held the Pope to be a God against Christ,”<sup>37</sup> as Friedrich Myconius, a colleague of Luther, described it. During the trip Luther preached to large gatherings in Erfurt, Gotha, and Eisenach. Luther himself spoke of the journey to Worms as a triumphal procession, like Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, Luther faced several challenges during his journey to Worms. In Weimar, he learned that the emperor had issued a mandate that all of Luther’s books were to be sequestered. Anyone who dared to sell or share his books would be subject to punishment. More troubling to Luther than the sequestration of his writings was that the emperor’s decree indicated that “the condemnation of Luther’s cause was already a fact.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, Spalatin sent word to Luther regarding the discussion occurring among at least some at Worms, that the safe conduct would only have to be honored if Luther recanted. Concerned that condemnation and death awaited Luther at the diet, Spalatin advised the professor not to enter Worms.<sup>40</sup> Though Luther must have wondered how impartial a hearing he would receive and how open his inquisitors would be to the information he would provide, he nevertheless chose to

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35. Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as He Lived and Breathed: Recollections of the Reformer* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 93. Kolb offers a translation of sorts of Luther’s letter to Spalatin found in *Weimar Ausgabe (WA) Briefe 2:289, Nr. 389*.

36. Metaxas, 204.

37. As quoted in Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017), 166.

38. Bainton, 179. After the positive reception in Erfurt, Luther said: “I have had my Palm Sunday. I wonder whether this pomp is merely a temptation or whether it is also a sign of my impending passion.” Bainton does not provide a reference for the statement. Brecht speaks of Luther being “moved by the possibility of an impending martyrdom.” Brecht, 449.

39. Brecht, 446.

40. Roper, 450, note 27.

continue the journey. He did so trembling.<sup>41</sup> At Eisenach, Luther had such a high fever that some of his colleagues feared he might die. Perhaps, as Lyndal Roper suggests, “Anxiety over the looming trial took its toll”<sup>42</sup> and showed itself in the various sicknesses he experienced during the journey.

Heiko Oberman, in his book *Martin Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, dismisses the picture of a conquering hero traveling to Worms with “unshakable resolve,” with no fear of anyone or anything. Luther was rather “a sorely tested man,”<sup>43</sup> who recognized that the devil was hounding him with sickness and harassing him with fear to turn him away from a clear confession of the truth.<sup>44</sup> Luther knew his struggle was “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12 NIV). In a letter to Spalatin written just a few days before he was to arrive in Worms, Luther wrote, “Satan has done everything to hinder me with more than one disease. All the way from Eisenach to here I have been sick; I am still sick in a way which previously has been unknown to me.”<sup>45</sup>

The devil’s repeated attacks, however, did not stop him. Luther entered the city of Worms, despite his own weakness and fear, under the Lord’s protecting hand. “But Christ lives,” he wrote to Spalatin, “and we shall enter Worms in spite of all the gates of hell and the powers in the air.”<sup>46</sup> His confidence rested not in the promise of the safe conduct granted by the emperor or the protection of Elector Frederick, but the Risen Savior’s promise to be with him and to rule over everything for the benefit of his people. On April 16, around 10:00 a.m., Luther and his traveling companions finally reached Worms. A trumpet from the church tower announced their arrival and some two thousand people greeted him loudly in the streets, much to the chagrin of Aleander, who thought Luther ought to be burned at the stake, not cheered.

## LUTHER APPEARS BEFORE THE DIET OF WORMS

### The Initial Appearance

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41. Selderhuis, 153, referring to something Luther said at table in 1533 as he recounted the situation. *WA Tischreden* 3:3357a.

42. Roper, 166.

43. Heiko Oberman, *Martin Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwartzbart (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 199.

44. Schilling supports Oberman’s view: “As Luther understood his travelling to Worms as a mission in the cause of salvation, he saw the devil behind every and all misfortunes that occurred along the way.” 175.

45. *LW* 48:198.

46. *LW* 48:198.

The next morning Luther received word that he was to appear at 4:00 p.m. for a special hearing at the bishop's residence, where the emperor was staying.<sup>47</sup> Though not an official meeting, it remained a setting with which the monk from Wittenberg was not at all familiar. No one could have blamed him for being nervous about facing a gathering of the politically powerful, particularly when he had to have sensed "that both his life and his cause were at stake."<sup>48</sup> Yet, out of place as he might have felt, he stood ready to provide the "information" the emperor said the estates would be seeking.

To Luther's great disappointment, no one asked him to present what he taught from the Scriptures. Instead, Johann von der Ecken, who was presiding over the meeting on behalf of the archbishop of Trier, set some ground rules. He explained that the emperor had summoned Luther for two reasons: first, to see if Luther would acknowledge that he had written the books published under his name and second, to see if Luther wished to retract them. Luther was to answer questions with a simple yes or no; there were to be no speeches. Von der Ecken then pointed to a table that had a pile of Luther's books stacked on it and asked, "Are these your writings?" After the titles were read, Luther acknowledged them as his books and confessed that he had also written others. When von der Ecken asked Luther point blank if he wished to recant what he had written, Luther did not provide an immediate answer. He had indicated repeatedly in letters sent to Spalatin and others, some just days before, that he would not recant unless proved wrong from Scripture. One might have expected Luther to say, in a loud voice for all to hear, "No. I cannot and will not recant." Instead, speaking with a subdued, soft voice that made it difficult for observers to understand him<sup>49</sup> and disappointed even his supporters,<sup>50</sup> Luther suggested that the question was more simply posed than answered. The question required a careful and thoughtful response, he said, because it dealt with the most important matters: the salvation of souls and the Word of God. For that reason, Luther respectfully asked his imperial majesty "for time to think, in order to satisfactorily answer the question without violence to the divine Word and danger to my own soul."<sup>51</sup>

After consulting with the emperor and princes about Luther's request, von der Ecken returned with a response. First, he warned Luther that by propagating his personal opinions he

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47. Hendrix, 104.

48. E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 502.

49. Brecht, 453. Robert Kolb observes, "Fearless criticism of men of higher station that later typified his public utterances had not yet germinated in his disposition." Kolb, *Martin Luther as He Lived and Breathed*, 84.

50. Schilling, 182. "Even the Saxon elector, who had consistently refused to meet the rebellious monk in person and now in Worms saw him for the first time close up, was visibly disappointed." Selderhuis mentions that Luther "heard from supporters that his performance had not been impressive. It had been difficult to hear him, and he had not shown a strong defense." Selderhuis, 157. Jerome Aleander reported, in a letter written that evening, that while many considered Luther "a pious man, full of the Holy Ghost," it appeared to him that Luther had "lost considerable reputation in the regard of all." *Luther's Correspondence*, 527.

51. LW 32:107.

was disrupting the unity of the church and leading many faithful people astray. Then he scolded Luther for not being prepared to answer the question posed to him—a trained theologian should always be ready to confess. In addition, the secretary argued, Luther knew very well that he had been summoned to answer the recantation question above all. Though Luther did not deserve additional time to consider the question, von der Ecken said, the emperor would show him mercy and give him a day. The one stipulation was that Luther was to present his answer orally, not in writing. The leaders of the empire knew how well Luther had utilized the technology of the day—the printing press—to get his message out, and they wanted to ensure that he did not “repair to his room to summon from his pen yet another mesmerizing manifesto that would doubtless be printed over and over and read far and wide.”<sup>52</sup> They remained uninterested in hearing Luther explain his teachings.

Luther’s conduct on April 17 seemed strange, both to those who attended the diet and to those who reflect on it five hundred years later. Why didn’t Luther give an immediate answer to the question about his willingness to recant his writings? After all, Luther had to have expected the question was coming. At the very least, he should have inferred that from the emperor’s recent order that Luther’s writings be sequestered. In addition, Luther knew that the papal legate was in the emperor’s ear, insisting that it would be inappropriate to give a heretic opportunity to present his case. Finally, Luther had to realize that young Charles V wanted to show himself faithful to the church at Rome. The emperor could hardly defend Luther when the church had already passed its sentence on him.

Could it be that Luther was orchestrating the situation so that he could address the diet in plenary session? Was he concerned that he could be sent to the stake already that very night if he refused to recant, and he wanted to be certain that he was ready to die confessing what he had written? Did he want to craft “an answer that would also be an argument”<sup>53</sup>? Maybe the answer is as simple as this: Luther did not give an immediate answer because he was not prepared to face the question of recantation as the first order of business. The emperor’s invitation had given Luther reason to think that there would be a discussion of the teachings of Scripture, because they were seeking “information” about his writings. Luther anticipated that the emperor would assemble a dream team of scholars to destroy him in debate and demonstrate conclusively that Luther’s teachings conflicted with what the church has taught always and everywhere.<sup>54</sup> Had such scholars proved from Scripture that he was misleading people, he would have been ready to recant those teachings. In addition, what Luther said in

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52. Metaxas, 212.

53. Mansch and Peters, 117, quoting from Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 276.

54. Luther indicated as much in a letter he sent to Lucas Cranach on April 28, 1521, eleven days after his first appearance: “I thought His Imperial Majesty would have assembled one or fifty scholars and overcome this monk in a straightforward manner. But nothing else was done there than this: Are these your books? Yes. Do you want to renounce them or not? No. Then go away!” LW 48:201–2.

response to von der Ecken's question indicates that he was concerned about speaking rashly, in a way that might damage souls or rob God of the glory he deserves. He wanted to be in command of his thoughts, so that he would say neither too much nor too little. So great was his love for the Word of God, in which he learned of the righteousness God gives through faith in Christ, that he wanted to express himself carefully. If he refused to recant, it wouldn't be because he was a stubborn German who enjoyed being contrary, but because of his love for the gospel of Christ, which addressed his fundamental need as a sinner.

That evening brothers in Christ encouraged Luther not to fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. They pointed him to the Lord's promise to give his witnesses the words to say when they are called before kings.<sup>55</sup> Luther spent time in prayer, pleading with the Lord for strength to carry out his calling as a confessor of the truth. Recognizing that he was a mere instrument in the Lord's hand, he prayed,

Thou who art my God, support me in this struggle against the reason and wisdom of all the world. Do it! Thou must do it, Thou alone. This affair is not mine, but Thine. I have no personal business here with these great lords of the world. Indeed, I, too, would spend my days in undisturbed comfort and peace. But, O Lord, this affair is Thine, and it is righteous and of eternal importance. Stand by me, Thou faithful and eternal God!<sup>56</sup>

In a letter he wrote that evening, he revealed what he intended to say the next day, as the Lord stood by him: "With Christ's help, however, I shall not in all eternity recant the least particle."<sup>57</sup>

### **The Second Appearance**

Luther was to appear at 4:00 p.m. on April 18, again at the bishop's residence, but it ended up beginning at 6:00 p.m. and in a larger hall, before even more dignitaries. Luther's "tremor" at his first appearance provided this unique opportunity: He got to address the diet in plenary session.<sup>58</sup> By all appearances, Luther was a changed man on that second day. No longer awed by the setting, he spoke with more boldness. He began with an apology for his appearance the previous day, explaining that monks who live in seclusion have no experience addressing dignitaries in court. He then addressed the recantation question, explaining that it could not be simply answered, because he had written different kinds of books. Three kinds, to be exact. The first addressed matters of Christian piety and morals. Even those who opposed some of his teachings recognized that those books were helpful. To retract those books would be to deny

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55. *LW* 32:108.

56. Ewald M. Plass, *This is Luther: A Character Study* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1948), 189. This is Plass's translation of Luther's prayer as it is found in the St. Louis edition of *Luther's Works*, Volume 10, 1422.

57. *Luther's Correspondence*, 200.

58. Bainton, 183.

the truths of Scripture and the universal teaching of the Christian church, and Luther could not do that. In the second kind of book, he wrote against the papacy, whose false teachings contradicted the gospel and “tortured” the consciences of God’s people. In addition, the papacy had unfairly taken property and wealth from the German nation, without consideration of their needs. To retract the books of this second kind would be to express support for their wickedness and to encourage its continuance. In the third type he had written against individuals who supported the Roman church’s teaching and practice. He admitted that he had occasionally spoken more strongly than he should have, considering his calling as a teacher in the church. At the same time, he wrote the way he did because of his concern for the gospel of Christ, to which conditions were being added. To recant this third type would be to encourage the oppression of God’s people to continue. If, however, he could be shown from the Scriptures where he had taught falsely, he would recant and would be the first to throw the books into the fire.<sup>59</sup>

Luther then addressed the warning he had received, that he was disrupting the unity of the church by his teaching. He viewed the dissension differently than they, considering it natural and necessary wherever the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed. In fact, he said, to “see dissension arise because of the Word of God is to me clearly the most joyful aspect of all in these matters,”<sup>60</sup> because Jesus himself said that he had not come to bring peace, but a sword. The peace and unity that please God come from believing and confessing what the Lord says in his Word, not by teaching contrary to it. Allowing some false teaching for the sake of outward peace invariably leads to other evils.

Though he had been told that there would be no debate, Luther tried to draw the emperor’s representative into a discussion by the distinction he made between his books. Mission unaccomplished! Von der Ecken refused to discuss it. He rather went on the attack, accusing Luther of not making a clear enough distinction about his second kind of book, in which he had addressed papal tyranny. The books Luther had written in response to *Exsurge Domine* were “far more abominable and execrable than those written earlier, and deserve to be condemned.”<sup>61</sup> If Luther wanted his writings to be preserved, then he should remove the false teachings included in them. Otherwise, even that which he believed to be sound teaching would be burned up and all memory of him blotted out. Von der Ecken then sought to put Luther in his place: “Do not, I entreat you, Martin, do not claim for yourself that you, I say, that you are the one and only man who has knowledge of the Bible, who has the true understanding of holy Scripture. . . . Do not regard yourself as wiser than all others.”<sup>62</sup>

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59. This is a summary of what can be found in *LW* 32:109–13, which provides a transcript of Luther’s statement.

60. *LW* 32:111.

61. *LW* 32:127.

62. *LW* 32:129.

### Luther Takes His Stand because of the Gospel

At that point, von der Ecken, in the name of the emperor, demanded that Martin provide an unambiguous (without horns or teeth) response to the question of recanting what he had written. In response Luther spoke the famous words:

Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.<sup>63</sup>

He could have just said, “No.” But he was a teacher and a preacher, so a one-word answer would not suffice. What particularly shines through is the tenacious hold the Scriptures had on Luther. He said that he was bound (captured/seized/conquered) by the Scriptures he had cited in his writings. While granting that Luther was speaking figuratively, his description of the Scriptures’ hold on him is revealing.

The living and active Word of God had conquered his heart. For so long Luther had an inadequate conception of God and the way to life, thinking it was incumbent on him to produce a righteousness by which he could stand before the righteous God. Until, that is, the Holy Spirit enlightened him by the gospel of Christ. Years later, as he reflected on the Lord’s grace in leading him to the truth, the Reformer pointed to his wrestling with Romans 1:17: “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” He confessed that he had hated the expression “the righteousness of God,” because he could think only of the righteous God demanding a righteousness from sinners that they could not achieve, no matter how fervently they struggled. In his mercy, the Lord helped Luther to see that “the righteousness of God” revealed in the gospel is the righteousness God gives. That, Luther said, changed everything for him. “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.”<sup>64</sup> As he enabled Luther to believe that he was righteous before God through faith in Christ, the Lord filled his heart with a newfound zeal for the Scriptures. Because the Scriptures revealed the glorious message of forgiveness in Christ and freed him from the foolish idea that he must earn righteousness by his obedience, they would hold central place not only in his heart but also in

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63. LW 32:112–13.

64. LW 34:33.

his preaching, teaching, and writing. He could not escape the Scriptures. And, because of the Spirit's work, he had no desire to do so.

Luther's insistence on the Scriptures alone<sup>65</sup> being able to establish and judge doctrine, then, resulted from the gospel capturing Luther's heart. Martin Brecht, author of a three-volume biography of Luther, offers this observation: "The absolute commitment to the Scriptures, however, was not merely an empty formal allegiance to a principle. Rather it was precisely the Word of God which had freed him from guilt and then also from false human impositions. He could not repudiate the Word which promised him salvation."<sup>66</sup> The faith the gospel worked in his heart placed him willingly under the Scriptures. What Luther had heard from popes and councils had too often contradicted the gospel of righteousness through faith in Christ, thereby robbing God of the glory he deserved as the Savior of unworthy sinners and depriving consciences of the comfort the Lord desired them to have.

Luther refused to recant because he believed it was neither safe nor right to go against conscience. If we think of conscience the way many understand it today, we will miss the point. Luther was not a twenty-first century citizen of the United States demanding the freedom to believe whatever he felt was right. He was not insisting that no one had the right to question his personal perspective on things or compel him to act contrary to his private views. When Luther spoke of conscience, he had in mind, as Robert Kolb says, "his entire disposition or orientation toward God and life"<sup>67</sup> based on what he had heard about the righteousness of Christ in the Scriptures. From his study of the Bible, Luther knew what the Savior-God wanted to be taught and preached, for the glory of his name and the salvation of sinners. As Luther confessed, his "conscience was *captive* to the Word<sup>68</sup> of God."

Again, the language grabs our attention. The Scriptures through which the Spirit had granted him the righteousness that avails on the Last Day had taken his conscience captive. James Nestingen builds on Kolb's definition of conscience when he writes, "Luther was a sinner who had been so grasped by grace that his whole sense of himself in relation to God and others was captive by the word of God."<sup>69</sup> He could not escape what God taught, whether he found

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65. When Luther said that he would have to be "convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason," he was not saying that the Scriptures and reason were two separate items that could move him to recant. Robert Rosin helpfully explains that the clear reason Luther had in mind was "a reasoning ability that had been shaped by the word.... At bottom, since clear reason is that which is aligned with the word, the actual bottom line, the foundation, is simply Scripture—*sola Scriptura*." Robert Rosin, "Luther at Worms and the Wartburg: Still Confessing," *Concordia Journal* (Spring 2019), 64.

66. Brecht, 461.

67. Kolb, *Martin Luther as He Lived and Breathed*, 85.

68. Theodor Dieter catches the plural Luther used to speak of the Scriptures when he writes, "He refused to recant because his conscience was 'caught' in the words (plural!) of God." Theodor Dieter, "Another Quincentennial: The Diet and Edict of Worms (1521)," *Lutheran Quarterly* 35 (2021), 4.

69. James A. Nestingen, *Martin Luther: A Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003), 46.

the Scriptures' doctrine convenient and pleasing or not. In other words, Luther was not saying that his conscience was the final authority. The Word of God held that position, because the Word informed his conscience. Metaxas rightly observes that Luther was not "asserting the freedom of the individual to do as he pleased. He was asserting the freedom of the individual to do as God pleased."<sup>70</sup> To act contrary to the Lord's commands or believe something that the Scriptures condemns is not freedom, but slavery.<sup>71</sup> The conscience is only free, as Oberman says, "once God has freed and 'captured' it"<sup>72</sup> through the Scriptures. The Reformer could not recant what he had written without going against the Scriptures and therefore, also, against his conscience, unless he could be shown from the Scriptures where he had erred.

After declaring that he could not and would not recant without being shown his errors from Scripture, he spoke the words from which this convention got its theme: "I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen." There is significant debate among scholars about which of those words Luther spoke. The individuals who prepared the official transcript of the meeting did not include "I cannot do otherwise, here I stand." The Weimar edition of *Luther's Works* has Luther's address entirely in Latin, save for the words, "I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, God help me. Amen," which are written in German, indicating that they may have been a later addition.<sup>73</sup> Only one account of the meeting, the one published in Wittenberg, includes the words. Schilling intimates that publishers in Wittenberg may have "ingeniously sharpened and extended" the record of Luther's speech, so that "this defiant version became indelibly associated with Luther"<sup>74</sup> as it was read throughout Germany. At the same time, the Wittenberg edition was prepared by Spalatin, likely with the assistance of Luther, which would argue for seeing the account as accurate. It could be that Luther said the words, but only a few heard them because of the uproar following his refusal to recant. Lull and Nelson contend that Luther probably spoke the words, but that early editors chose "to omit so brazen a comment made by a mere friar."<sup>75</sup> In the end, it does not really matter if he spoke those words. He decidedly took a stand on the Scriptures.<sup>76</sup> Doing otherwise was not an option because the Word of God had seized his heart and captured his conscience.

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70. Metaxas, 221.

71. As Jesus says in John 8:34 (NIV), "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

72. Oberman, 204.

73. At the same time, nearly all scholars and biographers of Luther agree that he did say the words, "God help me. Amen."

74. Schilling, 184.

75. Lull and Nelson, 130, note 35.

76. Kolb, 85: "Accounts of the time, including Luther's own, do not mention the words 'here I stand, I cannot do anything else,' although that phrase captures what the Wittenberg professor was actually doing." Metaxas, 215: "Even if Luther did not speak them, they nonetheless perfectly encapsulate his position, which is surely why they have stuck." Roper, 172: "If he did not say these words, this was the phrase that soon became famous. It certainly encapsulated the spirit of his appearance."

## THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

That scene is a filmmaker's dream. A monk from the little town of Wittenberg stands up to the powerful leaders of the Holy Roman Empire and drops the mic. Stirring music follows and the scene fades to black. The End. (*He did say, "Amen," after all!*) While his confession ranks as a critical point of the story, it was not the end. When Luther finished speaking, von der Ecken shouted another word of rebuke as the participants prepared to depart from a crowded and stuffy meeting area: "Lay aside your conscience, Martin; you must lay it aside because it is in error; and it will be safe and proper for you to recant."<sup>77</sup> As Luther left the meeting hall, the Spanish soldiers Charles V had brought with him to Worms called for him to be burned at the stake. But Luther returned safely to his quarters, where he would wait to see if the emperor would honor the promise of safe conduct back to Wittenberg or if his confession might cost him his life.<sup>78</sup>

### The Emperor's View of Luther

Charles V was not impressed. Finding Luther's stubbornness and arrogance appalling, Charles took a stand against him, and swiftly. That very evening he wrote a response in French, in his own hand, which was translated into German and read to the assembled estates the next day. In it he expressed his loyalty to the Roman church and his commitment to support the church's condemnation of all heretics, including the Augustinian from Wittenberg. The emperor refused to believe that Luther alone could be right: "For it is certain that a lone friar errs in his opinion which is against all of Christendom, both in times past—for a thousand years and more—and in the present, according to which opinion all of said Christendom would be, and always would have been, in error."<sup>79</sup> The emperor called on all present to join him in defending the Catholic faith against heresy. Though he promised to honor the order of safe conduct, he insisted that he would thereafter proceed against Luther, "a notorious heretic,"<sup>80</sup> whom he never wished to hear again. Charles spoke strongly both because of his personal conviction as a faithful member

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77. LW 32:130.

78. Here I might differ with the view proposed by Hartmut Lehmann, who, while acknowledging Luther's subjective fears, argues that "there was probably no real danger to Luther in Worms," and that Luther's appearance at Worms ought not be considered "heroic." Hartmut Lehmann, "Demythologizing the Luther Myths 1883–1983," *Lutheran Quarterly* 30 (2016): 417–19.

79. Jensen, 57.

80. Jensen, 57.

of the Roman church<sup>81</sup> and because he considered doctrinal unity critical to his goals as the leader of the Holy Roman Empire.

After the emperor's declaration had been read, the electoral council voted to declare Luther an outlaw. Luther's supporters, however, objected, because they did not believe he had received a proper hearing. They advocated for commissioning a group of princes and professors to meet with Luther and address his errors from the Scriptures. Charles consented to their request, perhaps concerned about a possible peasants' revolt, but he allowed them only three days to conduct these private meetings. In a letter written to Count Albert of Mansfeld on May 3, the Reformer provided a list of the men with whom he met in the days following his confession. Many pleaded with Luther to recant for the sake of peace and unity. They asked him to "submit [his] books and the whole affair to his Imperial Majesty and the Estates."<sup>82</sup> The Reformer responded privately as he had publicly. He would gladly submit his writings to everyone, "provided only that nothing should be recognized or decided contrary to the holy gospel."<sup>83</sup> He explained that he had not spoken against popes or councils because of their scandalous acts, but because of their false doctrine. Sinful actions he could overlook in love, but false teaching he could not overlook, because that would be "harmful to the gospel and the faith."<sup>84</sup> Love for the gospel compelled him to stand firm.

On April 25 the emperor, through his messengers, informed Luther that, because he had stubbornly persisted in his position, action would be taken against him. The emperor promised to honor the safe conduct, which gave Luther twenty-one days to return to Wittenberg. He added this stipulation: Luther was not to preach or write along the way. To that Luther said, "I will do all that pleases his Majesty, but I will leave God's Word free, as St. Paul says: 'The Word of God is not bound.'"<sup>85</sup> Luther had to obey God rather than the emperor. Elector Frederick, to preserve Luther's life, arranged for Luther to be abducted in the Thuringian Forest and taken to the Wartburg castle for safekeeping.

After informing the estates that he, as the protector and defender of the church, intended to proceed against Luther, the emperor directed Aleander to prepare a draft of an edict against Luther. On May 8 Aleander's draft was ready to go to print. The emperor, however, requested some changes to that original document and asked that it first be presented to the estates, who

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81. Schilling makes an interesting distinction between Luther and Charles by the headings he uses in the chapter in which he addresses the events of the Diet of Worms. One heading refers to Luther: "A Conscience Held Captive by the Word of God," 180. The next speaks of Charles V: "A Sovereign Held Captive by His Noble Ancestry," 185. Charles was mindful of his ancestors who were, as he described them in his initial formal reaction to Luther's appearance, "all to the death true sons of the Roman church, defenders of the Catholic faith and of its customs, decrees, rituals and ordinances." Jensen, 57.

82. *Luther's Correspondence*, 557.

83. *Luther's Correspondence*, 557.

84. *Luther's Correspondence*, 557.

85. *Luther's Correspondence*, 559.

would have to implement its orders. On May 21 the diet was officially recessed, and most participants began to return home without ever seeing the final wording of the document. The minority that remained in Worms approved the edict a few days later, with the emperor signing it on May 26. The edict was officially dated May 8, giving the impression that the whole diet approved. One ought not make too much of that, however, since the imperial estates had agreed to the edict and the emperor could have issued it on his own.<sup>86</sup>

### The Edict of Worms

The Edict of Worms pulled no punches in its description of Luther. He was “a demon in the appearance of a man, clothed in religious habit to be better able to deceive mankind”<sup>87</sup> and “possessed by some evil spirit.”<sup>88</sup> By his teaching, the edict contended, Luther “institutes a way of life by which people do whatever they please, like beasts,”<sup>89</sup> and “labors to trouble and demolish all religious peace and charity.”<sup>90</sup> He was “an obstinate, schismatic heretic,”<sup>91</sup> who “would not revoke one thing of what he had written until he was convinced otherwise by the Holy Scriptures or by divine authority.”<sup>92</sup> Faithful citizens of the empire were to apprehend Luther and bring him before the emperor to be punished. (The edict did not authorize individuals to kill Luther.) Those who assisted in his capture, the edict promised, would be “rewarded generously for their good work.”<sup>93</sup> Luther’s books were not to be printed, sold, read, or owned, but rather burned publicly, so that the Catholic faith might be preserved. Any who defied the emperor’s decree and supported Luther were also to be punished, with their goods confiscated.

In anticipation of such an edict, Elector Frederick arranged for Luther to be seized as he was returning to Wittenberg. In the Wartburg castle Luther could be protected from those eager to earn a generous reward from the emperor. While the edict did make Luther an outlaw, it was never published in Wittenberg or anywhere in Electoral Saxony and therefore never enforced there. It seems likely that Charles and Elector Frederick arrived at a secret agreement

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86. Brecht, 473.

87. Jensen, 89.

88. Jensen, 99.

89. Jensen, 87. This remains the charge against the teaching of righteousness through faith in Christ alone, without the works of the law. While some people will indeed consider the message of full and free forgiveness a license to sin, that does not mean we must therefore attach conditions to the gospel to preserve upright living.

90. Jensen, 89.

91. Jensen, 101.

92. Jensen, 95.

93. Jensen, 103.

to ensure that the edict would not go into legal effect in Electoral Saxony.<sup>94</sup> In the end, Charles could show himself faithful to the Roman church in supporting the papal bull excommunicating Luther, thereby securing the approval of the papacy, and a friend to Elector Frederick, whose political support he needed. Behind the scenes the Lord of the Church was actively guiding it all, protecting the Reformer's life and causing the gospel to sound forth.

While Luther did not have to live as a fugitive when he finally returned to Wittenberg the following March, the edict did have an impact on Luther. He could not travel as freely as he might have previously, even within Germany, because there were many areas in which the Edict of Worms had been published and would be enforced.<sup>95</sup> Lull and Nelson argue that the edict not only limited his travel, but also placed an extraordinary strain on him for the next twenty-five years of his life, physically and emotionally, as he regularly had to wonder about his survival.<sup>96</sup> While Luther expressed great confidence in the Lord's protecting hand, which allowed him to rest secure, he also recognized that following Christ meant carrying a cross. He was not shocked by the suffering he faced, since no servant is above his master. If they persecuted Christ, then they would persecute him, too (John 15:20). Christ's disciples, Luther recognized, must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him (Mark 8:34). As the Spirit enabled, Luther embraced the cross because he knew what the Lord does through the suffering of his children: he forms theologians. He trains them to focus on the promises of God no matter what they see or feel.

#### IMITATING LUTHER'S FAITH

A Christian can hardly hear the account of Luther at the Diet of Worms without thinking and praying, "Lord, work in me what you worked in your servant Martin Luther. Enable me to think as he thought, to believe as he believed, to confess as he confessed, and to serve as he served." If we're going to pray, we might as well pray big. The Lord loves it when his people so trust his love and power that they boldly ask for great blessings.<sup>97</sup>

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94. Schilling, 192. Brecht mentions that Frederick requested "that he be exempted from serving Luther with the mandate against him." Brecht, 474. Hendrix offers this rationale for the emperor's action: "Charles had calculated that it was better to let Luther live in exile than to make him a heroic martyr whose death might convulse the nation." Hendrix, 108.

95. As a result of the Edict of Worms, for example, Luther could not be in Augsburg for the presentation of the Augsburg Confession to Charles V in 1530.

96. Lull and Nelson, 135–36.

97. In the Large Catechism, as he explains the Second Petition, Luther teaches Christians to *pray big* in regard to spiritual blessings, because they know the power and love of the one to whom they pray: "Imagine if the richest and most powerful emperor commanded a poor beggar to ask for whatever he might desire and was prepared to give lavish, royal gifts, and the fool asked only for a dish of beggar's broth. He would rightly be considered a rogue and scoundrel, who had made a mockery of the imperial majesty's command and was unworthy to come into his presence. Just so, it is a great reproach and dishonor to God if we, to whom he offers and pledges so many

### A Heart Captured by the Gospel

Here is a petition that suggests itself: “Lord, capture my heart with your word of full and free forgiveness in Christ.” Luther’s courageous stand at the Diet of Worms ultimately traces back to the Lord’s merciful work in Luther’s heart. In his days in the monastery, Luther lived in continual concern about his standing before God. Believing what he had been taught, that the righteous God demands righteousness from all who desire to live with him, Luther labored to manufacture a righteousness that would please God. His conscience plagued him because his sinfulness was always before him. Day after day he witnessed the sins that issued from his sinful nature. Even his best works, he realized, needed forgiveness.<sup>98</sup> He might be able to reduce the sins he would commit outwardly by exerting every ounce of his willpower to obey God’s commandments, but he couldn’t stop sinning against God. Despair settled upon Luther when he recognized that the righteousness he needed to stand before God was beyond his ability to produce.

But then the Lord broke through.<sup>99</sup> With the light of his unconditional gospel, the Lord dispelled the haze that had made it impossible for Luther to see the Lord as he truly is: as the one who loves the unworthy and welcomes the penitent with open arms. Through the gospel, he opened Luther’s heart to believe that the righteousness that counts before God is the righteousness God gives through faith in Christ. By a miracle of God’s grace, worked by the Spirit’s power, Luther trusted that the righteousness of Christ was his righteousness, that the Father delighted in him the way he delighted in his Son. The Lord captured Luther’s heart by his powerful, life-giving gospel. Freed from the foolish idea that he had to do something to get God’s attention or receive his favor, Luther experienced peace like never before. The burden had been lifted. He felt that “he had entered paradise itself through open gates.”<sup>100</sup> The Lord

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inexpressible blessings, despise them or lack confidence that we shall receive them and scarcely venture to ask for a morsel of bread.” LC III:57 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, editors, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 447.

98. Here’s one of the forty-one statements from Luther condemned in *Exsurge Domine*: “In every good work the just man sins.” Luther supported that teaching with Isaiah 64:6 (NIV), “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags,” and Ecclesiastes 7:20 (NIV84), “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.” The law teaches that a believer’s works are sins on their own because they are done by a sinner. The gospel teaches that a believer’s works are good and pleasing to God, a delight to him, because they are done by his child whom he has declared righteous through faith.

99. Nearly every Luther biography wrestles with the question, “When did Luther have his evangelical breakthrough? When did he finally grasp the gospel?” It’s an interesting question. At the same time, one wonders if the question might be turned around, to put the Lord and his mercy at the center of the story: “When did the Lord break through?” The Lord graciously opened Luther’s heart, by the gospel, to believe the gospel. He then graciously worked in and through Luther to cause the gospel of righteousness through faith in Christ to sound forth from his lips.

100. LW 34:33.

taught Luther to live by the promise of righteousness through faith instead of fixating on his obedience. Luther's greatest desire, as one who had been freed by the gospel, was to be the Lord's instrument in causing the promise to be proclaimed clearly. At the heart of his service, then, was the heart the Lord had captured by his gospel.

How do we ensure that the Lord captures our hearts by his gospel to the same extent he captured Luther's heart? Few of us have experienced exactly what Luther did, with consciences so burdened with guilt and doubt that we despaired of being saved. We didn't think of Jesus consistently as an angry judge ready to unleash his wrath on us because of our unrighteousness. Many of us have known God's unconditional love in Christ from infancy. The one who made light shine out of darkness made his light shine in our hearts. He led us to what we could never have arrived at on our own: a confidence that the righteousness of Christ is our entire righteousness before God, not based on our worthiness, but on his grace, through faith in Jesus. The Lord worked that miracle through his gospel.

The Lord desires—for our benefit, not his—to expand his reign in our hearts. He continues to come to us through the gospel in the Scriptures, in the sacraments, and in the word of forgiveness we hear from called servants of the gospel and from our brothers and sisters in Christ. To all who aspire to take their stand against teachings that obscure the gospel, the Lord makes this promise: his living and active Word will not return to him empty. (Too often we think of that only as a promise about our proclamation of his Word. It's his promise about our listening, too.) The Spirit will work through the gospel to grant peace, increase faith, and empower service. That's why the apostle Paul invites us, "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16 NIV). The apostle's choice of "richly" is instructive. The Lord desires that his people have abundant contact with the message of the Savior who lived and died for all. We are free to rest, at our Savior's invitation. We are free to spend time each day reading and reflecting on the Scriptures. As we do, we will see more clearly our sinfulness and our desperate need for a Savior. Better, the Lord will enable us to view Jesus with bigger eyes, even more astounded at his love for undeserving sinners. Hearts that are amazed by what God has done for them, and in which God lives by his Spirit, will be ready to stand on the Scriptures. They cannot do otherwise.

### **A Heart Concerned for the Gospel**

Luther's insistence on the *sola Scriptura* principle, that every teaching be established by the Scriptures alone, not by the councils of the church or the Roman pontiff, arose from a heart captured by the gospel. He loved the Scriptures and turned to them because they pointed

consistently to Christ as the sinner's righteousness and life.<sup>101</sup> The Roman church, by its teachings, had pointed people away from Christ to their own righteousness. Luther's concern was not to preserve pure doctrine for pure doctrine's sake, but for the sake of preserving the gospel by which the Lord effects faith and gives life. Please do not misunderstand that. The Reformer was not a fundamentalist, focused only on a short list of teachings that he deemed critical to the Christian faith. The Reformer's commitment to pure teaching in every area shines through clearly in his writings. What drove that commitment, however, was his love for the gospel that sets people free from everlasting death. If people believed that the pope had the authority to teach something contrary to Scripture, then they would no longer concern themselves with what the Bible teaches about the righteousness of God received by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*). In other words, Luther insisted on *sola Scriptura* primarily because the Lord had broken through and convinced him of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. This is a place where we desire to imitate Luther's faith.

We desire to take our stand on the Scriptures. We desire to teach the Word of God in its truth and purity. And rightly so. We do well, though, to consider whether we are insisting on pure doctrine for pure doctrine's sake or for the sake of the gospel. For instance, when the unbelieving world around us contends that the Bible is filled with errors, we feel compelled to speak. We confess with intrepid hearts what the Bible says about itself: that it is God's own Word, given by inspiration, without any errors. His Word could hardly be anything but truth, we maintain, since God himself is truth. In the end, the argument simplified becomes this: "To deny that the Bible is inspired and inerrant is to break the First Commandment. You are defying what God has said." That is certainly true, but insisting on pure doctrine for pure doctrine's sake is ultimately a law-oriented approach. It's arguing about who's right and who's wrong. At that point we're not far from pride being the driver of our insistence on purity of doctrine.

With Luther, our ultimate concern is for the gospel. As evangelical Lutherans, we want the good news of righteousness through faith in Christ presented clearly and widely, for the glory of God as the one who loves sinners and for the benefit of human beings. When it comes to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, for example, it is good to keep in mind how we came to believe that the Bible is the very Word of God. The Spirit of God introduced Christ to us as the gift of the Father's love for sinners. By the message of righteousness through faith in Christ, the Spirit formed saving faith in our hearts. And now we believe what the Bible says about itself. Notice the order. Faith in Christ comes first, then the conviction that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. In short, we believe that the Bible is God's Word, without error, because the Scriptures bring Christ to us. Therefore, rather than trying to convince an unbeliever, as the first order of business, that the Bible is God's inerrant Word, we want to proclaim Christ to her.

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101. Robert Rosin, picking up on an illustration that Luther himself used, describes it this way: "Because he found Christ in the Scriptures rather than in the decrees of popes and councils, Luther held fast to those biblical texts. The Scriptures were the swaddling clothes that held Christ." Rosin, 64.

When the Spirit forms faith in her heart through the message of Christ, he will have opportunity to change her view of the Scriptures, too.

There's a lesson there, too, when it comes to visible Christian churches that speak at odds with the Scriptures. Our concern is the gospel, not pure doctrine for pure doctrine's sake. The goal isn't to prove that we are right or that we teach what the Bible teaches, but to preserve a place for the preaching of the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. For instance, there are Christian churches who affirm homosexual marriage as a God-pleasing way in which people attracted to others of the same gender may live in a relationship of love and trust. The confusion over sexuality within the visible church calls us to action. The first action is to pray for those who have been deceived by the devil's cunning. As we pray that the Lord would open their eyes to what he says in the Scriptures, we would rightly express our thanksgiving that the Lord graciously broke through and taught us the truth. That we know the truth about marriage is not because we are smarter or better than others, but only because the Lord is merciful. If it weren't for the Lord's grace, we would think and act at odds with everything God says.

After praying, by which we are reminded that we are merely instruments in the hands of the one who guides all things, we rightly take a stand. We need to confess what the Scriptures say, that marriage is for one man and one woman and that God's initial design for human sexuality still stands. Our goal in doing so is not primarily to ensure that people do the right thing and live the right way.<sup>102</sup> It's not to prove that we, unlike other church bodies, are faithful to the Scriptures and that we teach God's Word in its truth and purity. Nor do we take a stand to demonstrate that, unlike "those" churches that teach "those things," we put a priority on pleasing God, not human beings. Instead, we confess God's design for human sexuality for the sake of the gospel. When natural law is obliterated, then the gospel seems unnecessary. If people do not recognize that they are accountable to God or realize how often they have transgressed God's commands and how their sins reveal their depravity, then they will feel no need for the righteousness that God gives through faith in Christ. Once people learn how to dismiss natural law in one area of life, they become increasingly adept in dismissing it in other areas, too. And then the gospel seems superfluous to them. As we follow in the footsteps of the

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102. While it is not our primary goal as the Church (either "gathered" as a body of believers or "scattered" in our individual situations and stations in life) to ensure that people submit to natural law and live upright lives, we can think of it as an ancillary task. Both individually and corporately (as congregations and a synod), we rightly work to help preserve order in our society, out of love for our neighbor and, additionally, so that we can continue to have the freedom to preach the gospel, again out of love for our neighbor. In 1 Timothy 2:1–4, as the apostle Paul encourages us to pray for those in authority, that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives, he makes a connection between a civil society and the preaching of the good news that is the mission of the church. When the government does its God-given job of providing peace and safety, Christians can freely speak of the God who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. God's people can be part of the Lord's answer to their prayers for the welfare of society as, for instance, they help promote obedience to natural law regarding sexuality, by their personal example, their engagement in the community, and their support of marriage as God designed it. It's only when the gathered people of God (e.g., a congregation or church body) think of that as the church's primary responsibility, rather than an ancillary task, that it becomes detrimental.

Reformer, we want to take a stand for the sake of the gospel. We want Christ to be magnified in people's hearts and that happens when the Spirit convicts people of sin and convinces them that the righteousness of Christ covers their sin. This is not to suggest that keeping the preaching of the gospel as our primary goal guarantees that people will never again accuse us of being unloving, narrow-minded, or homophobic. It may, however, help us from focusing on proving ourselves right.

### **Willing to Suffer for the Gospel**

When it comes to dealing with persecution, Luther offers much to imitate. He certainly experienced significant persecution. The pope, who by his calling ought to have defended Luther and promoted the gospel, did the opposite. He declared Luther a heretic and commanded that all of Luther's writings be burned. The emperor declared Luther an outlaw, threatening to pursue and punish Luther for the crime of treason because of his divisive teaching. That persecution, however, did not surprise Luther or shake him to the core of his being. For this reason, first: he believed what the Scriptures said about the devil. He knew that the Christian's struggle is "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12 NIV). This was not the stuff of science fiction for Luther, but his day-to-day reality. The devil and the evil angels are real and powerful. They desire to destroy God's new creation, his Church, and to silence the gospel by which the Lord builds his Church. Luther traced many of the challenges he faced to the devil, who was seeking to derail him from carrying out his calling as a gospel preacher.

The more the Scriptures govern our thinking, the more readily we see the devil at work persecuting the Church. Are we a bit hesitant to speak of persecution in those terms? Does it seem a bit "out there" to speak of evil beings that people cannot see? The Scriptures do not hesitate to speak of "spiritual forces of evil," and neither should we. When we are persecuted, we need to connect it to the spiritual battle in which we are engaged. This is serious business; life with God is at stake. However, while Luther was quick to recognize the devil's activity, the devil did not terrify him. He trusted the Lord's promise that Christ had defeated the devil, once and for all, in his rising from the dead.<sup>103</sup> Because Jesus lives, he reigns.<sup>104</sup> He rules over everything for the good of his Church, even over the devil's attempts to silence the preaching of the gospel through persecution. We imitate Luther's faith as we cling to the promise that our

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103. One cannot help but think of Luther's great hymn on Psalm 46: "Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us, We tremble not, we fear no ill; They shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done! One little word can fell him."

104. LW 48:198, as referenced earlier. "But Christ lives, and we shall enter Worms in spite of all the gates of hell and the powers in the air." In a letter to Spalatin in December 1520, Luther wrote, "For He who saved the three men in the furnace of the Babylonian king still *lives and rules.*" LW 48:189, *emphasis mine.*

Savior has authority over the spiritual forces of evil. Jesus has crushed the devil's head. The victory is his. And since we have been baptized into Christ, the victory is ours, too.

Here's a second reason Luther was not surprised by the persecution he experienced: he knew what Jesus had said about a student not being above his teacher. Jesus himself, the perfect Son of God, faced persecution and rejection. His disciples will necessarily face the same. Luther was not a masochist. He did not enjoy the persecution he experienced for proclaiming the gospel that sets people free. What allowed him to remain steadfast was his Spirit-worked confidence in the Lord's promise in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11,12 NIV). Luther considered it an honor to suffer for the Savior's gospel the way the prophets and apostles had.<sup>105</sup> We imitate the faith of Luther when we think more about the promised reward awaiting us than the suffering we may experience for a time as we proclaim God's Word to the world. The heavenly reward the Savior will graciously give us on the Last Day will make any suffering we experienced here seem rather small in comparison. As the apostle Paul says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18 NIV).<sup>106</sup>

Rather than complaining that people infringe on our "right" to proclaim God's Word by their insistence that we adhere to politically correct language, might we simply rejoice and carry on? The apostles did not complain about being flogged by the Sanhedrin for preaching the message of new life in Christ. Instead, they left "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" and "they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" (Acts 5:41,42 NIV). The Lord's promise had captured their hearts and was ringing in their ears. With Paul, we can see the persecution we experience as something other than a burden unfairly foisted upon us: "For it has been *granted*<sup>107</sup> to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29 NIV). The language St. Paul employs is arresting. He describes suffering the same way he describes faith, as a gracious gift from God. With Luther and all those who have gone before us, we live by faith and not by sight. We bear the cross that comes as a necessary consequence of our connection to Christ,<sup>108</sup> seeing the troubles we experience not as a sign that God has forgotten

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105. *Luther's Correspondence*, 366, as previously referenced. "Yet I rejoice with my whole heart that for this best of causes I suffer evil, who am not worthy of being so tried."

106. In a sermon on Romans 8:18–22 for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, Luther summarizes the apostle's encouragement to endure suffering: "So Paul makes all earthly suffering infinitely small—a drop, a tiny spark, so to speak; but of yonder hoped-for glory he makes a boundless ocean, an illimitable flame." Martin Luther, *Luther's Epistle Sermons*, Volume 3, translated by John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis: The Luther Press, 1909), 99.

107. The verb translated "granted" has "grace" at its root. We can properly consider our suffering for the sake of the gospel as a gift of God's undeserved love, just as we view faith.

108. Luther, in the previously-mentioned sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Trinity, wrote of the necessity of the cross for the Christian in these words: "Since Christ, our dear Lord and Savior, had to suffer before

us, but as indication that we are Christians. There is no Christianity without the cross, as Luther wrote in the Large Catechism: “For where God’s Word is preached, accepted, or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind.”<sup>109</sup> Like Luther, we cling to the Savior’s promises. The Lord promises that we are blessed when we suffer for the gospel. He promises that the glory we will experience in the new heavens and the new earth will make any temporal suffering we endure for confessing the faith seem trivial.<sup>110</sup> He promises that he will use the crosses we must carry to purify our faith (1 Peter 1:6,7).

### **The Joyful Obligation of Confessing the Gospel**

In Luther’s confessing of the faith we have an excellent example to follow. When von der Ecken asked Luther if he would affirm or retract what he written, the professor from Wittenberg requested time to think about his answer. He explained that he did not want to “assert less than the cause demands or more than accords with the truth.” In addition, he wanted to ensure that he would not “come under Christ’s judgment” by denying the Savior before the world.<sup>111</sup> Confessing the faith, Luther demonstrated, is important business that requires great care. The next day, after prayer and meditation, Luther did what a child of God does. He confessed. He believed, and therefore he spoke (2 Corinthians 4:13), for the glory of God and the benefit of others. The Word that had conquered his heart sounded forth from his lips. It’s true that he did not have opportunity at the Diet of Worms to explain what the Scriptures teach about the righteousness that matters before God, given the strictures placed on him. However, he did confess that he still believed what he had written about the way to life with God. The good news of righteousness through faith alone by grace alone was more important to him than his status in the church or the empire. Recanting the good news would have robbed God of his glory as the Savior of unworthy sinners and would have caused many to stumble.

Luther realized the gift he had been given by God, this understanding of righteousness received through faith in Christ. He felt an obligation to proclaim it to others. That obligation did not arise from the law, that is, from a demand God made of him if he wished to remain in

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he could be glorified, we must be martyrs with hm, with him be mocked by the world, despised, spit upon, crowned with thorns and put to death, before the inheritance will be ours. It cannot be otherwise.” *Luther’s Epistle Sermons*, 97.

109. LC III:65–66.

110. In a (second) sermon on Romans 8:18–22 for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, Luther wrote, “‘Doubtless in yonder life we shall reproach ourselves with the thought: ‘How foolish I was! I am unworthy to be called the child of God, for I esteemed myself all too highly on earth and placed too little value upon this surpassing glory and happiness. Were I still in the world and with the knowledge I have of the heavenly glory, I would, were it possible, suffer a thousand years of imprisonment, or endure illness, persecution or other misfortunes. Now I have proven true that all the sufferings of the world are nothing measured by the glory to be manifested in the children of God.’” *Luther’s Epistle Sermons*, 113.

111. LW 32:107.

God's good graces. It came from the gospel. The Holy Spirit, in convincing Luther that life with God came as a gift, changed Luther's view of those around him. Instead of using them as means to an end, as objects to be served primarily to gain something from God, he was free to spend his life in service to his neighbors, for their benefit, as God's instrument to bless them.<sup>112</sup> Luther had been freed to serve. For him that meant proclaiming the good news of righteousness through faith in Christ to those who had been taught to produce their own righteousness. Through the gospel, Luther believed, the Lord would accomplish great things. In a letter to Spalatin in January 1521, Luther expressed his confidence in the Lord's working through the Word: "I would not fight for the gospel with force and slaughter. The world is overcome by the Word, the Church is saved, and will even be reformed, by the Word, and Antichrist also will hereafter, as formerly, be restrained without violence by the Word."<sup>113</sup> Luther trusted the Lord's promises about his gospel, that it was "the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16 NIV).

We have been given a special treasure in the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone. By the grace of God, we believe, teach, and confess that we do not need to participate in the acquisition of righteousness by our obedience to God's commands. From beginning to end, God does everything. It does not depend in even the smallest way on us: on our asking Jesus into our heart or our putting aside sin or our leading a new life. We are beggars. We receive what the Lord freely gives through Spirit-worked faith. Most in our world do not know the unconditional gospel. We do, because of God's grace. It is our joyful obligation to confess the righteousness of faith in Jesus to those around us, for their benefit, that they may join us in praising the God who loves undeserving sinners and rescued them in Christ. Christ's love for us, and for all, compels us. We imitate Luther's faith when we trust the Lord's promise to work through his gospel. Whenever the gospel is proclaimed, the Lord sends his Holy Spirit, "who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel."<sup>114</sup>

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112. Heiko Oberman expresses it this way: "Only when the crippling fear of not being saved and the anxious egotism of achieving one's salvation have been overcome by faith does the welfare of the world come into view. The gift of justification releases man from his greed for rewards and enables the believer to be truly pious 'for nothing'—not from fear of punishment and Hell but to the greater glory of God and 'to the benefit of one's neighbor.'" Oberman, 206. Charles Arand and Joel Biermann point out that the medieval church's teaching of righteousness by works "both undermined salvation and failed the neighbor. It failed the neighbor because it required that I instrumentalize or objectify my neighbor by using him in order to obtain my salvation." Charles P. Arand and Joel Biermann, "Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?" *Concordia Journal* 33 (2007), 121.

113. *Luther's Correspondence*, 442. In a sermon delivered in March 1522, soon after he returned to Wittenberg from his time at the Wartburg, Luther spoke about his confidence in the gospel's power: "Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything." *LW* 51:77.

114. AC V, 3.

The Lord does not ask us for results; he asks only that we be faithful with the life-giving gospel he has planted in our hearts and placed in our mouths.

### **Confessing the Gospel with Boldness and Humility**

Luther confessed boldly, often with strong language. On occasion, he wrote and spoke too strongly. He granted as much when he was differentiating between the types of books he had written. As he considered what he had written against some so-called distinguished people who supported Rome's false teaching, he admitted, "Against these I confess that I have been more violent than my religion or profession demands."<sup>115</sup> While he would not retract the content of the books, because they spoke for the righteousness of faith and against the lies of the Roman church, he recognized that he should have written in a kinder, gentler way. As he stood before the diet on April 18, he spoke humbly and respectfully. He addressed those gathered with deference: "Most serene emperor, most illustrious princes, most clement lords."<sup>116</sup> Acknowledging that he was no expert in courtly customs, Luther asked them to pardon his breaches of etiquette. His goal was to let God's Word have center stage, not him and his manner of expression. His confidence was that the gospel had power to "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:5 NIV). There was no need for him to resort to human techniques to compel people to believe.

The apostle Peter encourages us, as we confess why we are certain that we will live with God in the home of righteousness, to do so "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15 NIV). It's entirely too easy to speak with contempt about (and to) those who believe and teach contrary to Scripture. After all, they are dishonoring God by their false teaching. They are depriving people of the comfort the Lord desires them to have and therefore do not deserve our respect. That, however, is to have a memory like a sieve. It's to forget how we came to know the gospel. That we know the truth isn't because we were nobler than others, more likely to listen humbly to what God says in his Word. We know the gospel only because God is gracious. We cannot look down on others for their ignorance because we would be right there with them, if not for the grace of God.

One wonders if the oft-used expression, "We teach the Word of God in its truth and purity," might be a bit boastful. If the expression is used, it ought to be to confess our amazement at the grace God has shown us, that he has enabled us to teach the Scriptures properly. Robert Rosin encourages Lutherans to be mindful of the way they confess the truths of Scripture: "We confess not to hear ourselves talk or to pat ourselves on the back for being guardians of the truth even as we drive people away with our self-congratulatory attitudes or

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115. LW 32:111.

116. LW 32:109.

with the way we go about trying to teach and witness to that truth.”<sup>117</sup> Our goal in proclaiming the truth is not to prove that we are right and worthy of honor as “defenders of orthodoxy,” but to be the Lord’s instruments in reaching people with the gospel. The cause is the Lord’s, as Luther prayed the night before his second appearance. We want people to see Jesus, not us. As he addressed the illustrious lordships gathered in Worms, Luther said that in everything he had taught and written, he “had in view only the glory of God and the sound instruction of Christ’s faithful.”<sup>118</sup> Because that is our goal, too, we strive to confess our faith humbly.

### Confessing the Truth that Divides

Unfortunately, many will reject the truths of Scripture. They will resist the Spirit’s work in their hearts and refuse to submit to what God says in his Word, no matter how gently we confess. That was the case as Luther confessed the truth. The leaders of the Roman church dismissed the gospel’s teaching of righteousness through faith alone. They accused Luther of following the path of the heretics, who, “inspired only by their own sense of ambition, and for the sake of popular acclaim . . . twist and adulterate the Scriptures.”<sup>119</sup> By his teaching, Pope Leo charged, Luther not only misled people but also introduced “the evil of schism into the Church of God.”<sup>120</sup> Since division resulted from Luther’s teaching, the argument went, his teaching was therefore false and must be condemned. That’s not at all the way Luther saw it from Scripture. Luther went so far as to rejoice in the dissension that had arisen because of the Word of God, seeing it as a fulfillment of what Jesus had said, that he had come not to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34). Preserving peace in the church at the expense of the truth of the gospel, Luther said, would lead to “an intolerable deluge of evils”<sup>121</sup> as a judgment from God.

In his High Priestly Prayer Jesus prayed for all who would believe in him through the apostles’ preaching: “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21 NIV). That is our prayer, too. We want all Christians to be united in a common confession. For that reason, we will continue to confess to others what God teaches in his Word, so that there might be unity. Sitting in the corner and refusing to engage others in conversation does not fit with the calling we have received. At the same time, we cannot, for the sake of the noble goal of outward unity in the church, set aside some of the teachings of the Scriptures that we may deem peripheral.<sup>122</sup> While we labor for unity in doctrine, we expect that

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117. Rosin, 73.

118. LW 32:109.

119. *Exsurge Domine*.

120. *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, preamble.

121. LW 32:111.

122. Lutheran theologians have distinguished between *fundamental* articles of faith, which everyone must know and believe to be saved, and *nonfundamental* articles of faith, which could be unknown or denied without harm to salvation. However, as Adolf Hoenecke aptly says, we are not free to dismiss even a nonfundamental

there will be division because “many false prophets will arise and lead many astray” (Matthew 24:11 NIV) and because people will “gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3 NIV).<sup>123</sup> We know the devil’s ability to deceive people. That our attempts to confess may not be met with success should neither dissuade us from the effort nor surprise us. Instead we believe the Lord’s promise and look forward to the Day of Jesus’ return, when there will be complete unity.

### HERE WE STAND

As we consider what’s happening in the visible church today, we recognize that there is significant work to be done to “conserve and extend the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.”<sup>124</sup> It seems that we need another Martin Luther, whose heart has been captured by the gospel and is willing to risk even life itself to preserve it. We need another Martin Luther, who will take his stand on the truth of God’s Word and confess the faith boldly. Who’s it going to be? You? The Lord does not want you to be Martin Luther. He wants you to be you, in your setting and context. His design is that you, trusting his promises, will use the gifts he chose for you and take advantage of the opportunities he provides to confess the truth of righteousness through faith in Christ. Imitate Luther’s faith, his lively confidence in the promises of God. Trust that the Lord will be the Lord. He will give you strength to confess his gospel, for his glory and the blessing of others.

Here, by the grace of God, we stand. We cannot do otherwise. God help us. Amen.

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 The 66th Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
 Luther Preparatory School  
 Watertown, Wisconsin  
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teaching as unimportant: “It is certain from Scripture that every doctrine which God presents in Scripture binds us to receive it in faith and that every part of Scripture is an article of faith.” Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Volume 1, translated by James Langebartels and Heinrich Vogel (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 513.

123. Typically, as we think about teachers who give their hearers what their itching ears want to hear, we think about those who subtract from Scripture, to make it easier for their hearers. There are also false teachers who add to the Bible, demanding from people what God has not demanded. Some itching ears, it turns out, want something more demanding than righteousness that comes as a gift through faith in Christ. They desire something that agrees with the sinful nature’s view that life with God needs to be earned by the performance of impressive works.

124. WELS Constitution, Article IV. Are there bonus points for quoting from the synod’s constitution at a synod convention?