

The History of the Reformation...



HOW CHRIST
RESTORED
THE GOSPEL
TO HIS
CHURCH

The Three Trials... Martin Luther

If you ask any good Protestant about the trial of Martin Luther, they will almost certainly proceed to tell you about his trial before the Diet of Worms. They will tell you that church officials demanded Luther recant of his theological views and his criticism and that he responded by saying something like **“I will only first show me in the Bible where I am wrong.”** Then, if that good Protestant knew their history well enough, they would go on to tell you that those same church officials refused to do that but instead persisted in their demand that he recant his errors as they saw and outlined them in their charges.

Then they would probably end by telling you that Luther concluded his response by saying, **“Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning, —my conscience *is and will remain* bound by the Word of God, I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. HERE I STAND, I CAN DO NO OTHER; MAY GOD HELP ME? AMEN!”¹**

Now if that is what the good Protestant you were talking to told you about Luther's trial they would, in fact, be right...but they would only be partially right and the reason they would only be partially right is because Luther was tried not one time, but three times.

Now I am making that point because I think it is important for you to understand that the argument between Luther and the Catholic Church developed as it went along. Luther did not pass directly from the Door at Wittenberg to the Diet of Worms. There was a continual dialogue, a continual argument...there was...a great deal of interaction between Luther and the Catholic Church between Wittenberg and Worms. In fact, along the way, the Catholic Church actually granted a number of concessions regarding Luther's principal objections to the sale of indulgences. And it did that while it simultaneously attempted to reel in abusive men like Tetzel by formally charging them with disturbing the peace and purity of the church. I think you could even say that many of those in the hierarchy of the church were perfectly willing to offer up Tetzel as a burnt offering, and I am not speaking metaphorically when I say that, in order to put an end to the conflict.

But the Catholic Church was always a step or two behind in the argument. Each time it found itself willing to make a concession to pacify Luther or the Germans it found that the argument had already moved on to some other issue and there is a reason for that. The reason for that is that it took awhile for the parties to realize what they were really fighting over. In fact, even today, a few scholars still disagree over the nature and substance of the real argument behind the Reformation but that is because they find it difficult to admit that people could ever really argue about theology for the sake of truth. They want to say, instead,

that the theological argument was a convenient cover up for a developing German nationalism and discontentment. Or they want to say that the Reformation was really a battle over excessive taxation or even an increased desire for individual rights and freedom. But all that is wrong and here I am giving you my opinion and not charging you anything extra for doing that. The real fight was over how men are made right with God. That is, it was over how men are justified before a holy and righteous God.

Now it took everyone awhile to realize that that was the fight was about. For awhile the church thought it was over indulgences and then it thought the conflict was over the authority of the Pope and I guess you would have to say that there was a sense in which that was true for a moment in time. But the real issue, the heart of the matter, was the doctrine of justification.

R.C. Sproul does a wonderful job explaining this careful distinction between the issues of authority and justification, in his book *Faith Alone*. Now to do that, he uses Aristotle's famous categories of cause. You see, Aristotle made a very careful distinction between the natures of different kinds of causes. He distinguished between material cause, formal cause, final cause, efficient cause and instrumental cause. Now I don't want you to get bogged down in any of this so let me make it as simple as I can.²

Let's say a woman makes a cake. The material cause would be the material or stuff out of which the cake is made of: flour, eggs, milk, sugar, etc. The formal cause, or the form or pattern used, would be the recipe for in her favorite recipe book or in the Duncan Hines manufacturing plant where the box of cake mix was made. The final cause, or the end for which it was designed, would be the

birthday party for the woman's grandchild. The efficient cause, the principal agent causing the thing to be made, would be the grandmother. The instrumental cause would be the mixer that mixed the cake or the oven where it was cooked or the pan in which it was cooked or whatever.

Anyway, in his book Sproul focuses on the two principal underlying causes of the Reformation. That is, he focuses on the formal and the material causes of the Reformation. Sproul argues that the formal cause of the Reformation was the issue of authority. That is, the issue of the authority was the form that the argument took and it focused on this question, **"Is the ultimate authority for a Christian a combination of the Pope, the magisterium, and the councils or is it the Bible?"** Now if you are strictly looking at the form the argument took then I think Sproul is exactly right.

But Sproul goes on to argue that the material cause of the Reformation was the doctrine of justification. That is, is a sinner justified by grace through faith on account of Christ by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us, or is it necessary for a Christian to maintain his justification by the combination of works of love and penance for our sins? And you can see, I think, where that question raises another, **"Is justification a singular act in time graciously based upon the atoning work of Christ or is justification a process based partly on the work of Christ and partly upon our own works of righteousness?"** Brothers and sisters, do you see the importance of the question? I hope you do.

Anyway, we are going to look this morning at Luther's three trials and doing that we are going to focus on the formal cause or issue of authority. That is, we are going to focus on the principal **"form"** the argument took but before we do

that I think I ought to add that if you consider the five solas of the Reformation you can see how they really match up with these five categories of cause from Aristotle. I mean think about it. The formal cause of the Reformation was authority. Which of the five solas matches up to that? Sola Scriptura, of course.

The material cause of the Reformation was the doctrine of justification. Which of the five solas matches up to that? Sola Fide, of course.

The final cause of the Reformation or the end result of the Reformation was the glory of God. Which of the five solas matches up to that? Soli Deo Gloria, of course.

The efficient cause of the Reformation was God's kindness. Which of the five solas matches up to that? Sola Gratia, of course.

And lastly, the instrumental cause of the Reformation was the redemptive work of Christ. Which of the five solas matches up to that? Solus Christus, of course.

Now all that has taken us away from our topic but it is Christmas and I wanted to give something special.

Now, as I said earlier, the formal cause of the Reformation was the issue of authority and the problem that the Catholic Church had in addressing the issue of authority with Luther is that the argument kept developing and they were always one step behind in the discussion. You can see that, I think, especially in the three trials Luther faced in his opposition first to indulgences and then to papal authority. Now, I don't want to give you the impression that Luther

always realized what was happening. I am not sure that he did. Nevertheless, that does not change the fact that that is how things worked out. Now let's press on.

Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the Door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517 and they were immediately translated and distributed across Germany in a matter of weeks. Luther went from obscurity to national and even international fame overnight. Now at the same time he posted the 95 Theses he mailed a letter and a copy of the 95 Theses to Albrecht the Archbishop of Mainz, who will remember really started the whole mess when he decided to buy his third and most important bishopric and thus become one of the seven electors of the Holy Roman Empire.

In his letter to Albrecht, Luther assumed that the new Archbishop had no idea of Tetzel's abuses and he wanted to inform him because he viewed Albrecht as the undershepherd responsible for a whole number of souls that were being deluded through the sale of indulgences. Albrecht, who as I mentioned last week, had no theological inclination or understanding simply forward Luther's letter and copy of the Theses on to Rome to Pope Leo X.

By August of 1518, almost ten months after the posting of the 95 Theses, Luther was summoned by the Pope to appear in Rome within sixty days to answer charges regarding his protestations against the selling of indulgences. During that time, Luther decided to write an explanation of each of the 95 Theses explaining what he had meant by each point he had made in the Theses. He did that at that same time he made another important discovery using Erasmus's Greek New Testament. Roland Bainton puts it like this:

Luther had made the discovery that the biblical text from the Latin Vulgate, used to support the sacrament of penance, was a mistranslation. The Latin for Mart. 4:17 read *penitentiaqn agite*, "**do penance,**" but from the Greek New Testament of Erasmus, Luther had learned that the original meant simply "**be penitent.**" The literal sense was "**change your mind.**" "**Fortified with this passage,**" wrote Luther to Staupitz in the dedication of the Resolutions, "**I venture to say they are wrong who make more of the act in Latin than of the change of heart in Greek.**" This was what Luther himself called a "**glowing**" discovery. In this crucial instance a sacrament of the Church did not rest on the institution of Scripture.

Now I think in that particular example, you can see what I mean when I say that the debate continued to develop along the way. Luther had started out arguing that Tetzels abuses in selling indulgences was shameful and denigrated the nature of penance but by the time the church responded to his argument, Luther had already moved on to a different conclusion altogether...namely, that the doctrine of penance itself was founded on a mistranslation of the text and therefore not biblical.

Do you see what I mean?

Anyway, Rome had summoned Luther to appear in Rome in sixty days. Frederick the Wise, the elector of Saxony and therefore Luther's principal temporal lord, interceded on behalf of Luther and asked Pope Leo X to allow Luther to be examined in Germany by the papal delegate, Cardinal Cajetan, at an upcoming meeting of the Diet...it was called a Diet whenever the seven electors met officially with the Holy Roman Emperor. Frederick argued that whatever advantage Luther might enjoy by being examined in Germany would be more than offset by his being examined by so eminently qualified and astute a man as Cardinal Cajetan.

Now what is surprising about that is that Rome agreed with Frederick and agreed even to allow Luther to be examined privately by Cajetan and not before the Diet. Rome's reasoning for that was simple. They wanted something in return. They wanted the seven electors and the Holy roman Emperor to go on a crusade against advancing Muslims, they used the term "**Turks**", in the east. They not only wanted them to go on a crusade against the Muslims but they wanted them to finance the crusade as well. Rome's thinking was that if they were to make the concession with regard to Luther being examined in Germany instead of Rome, the electors and the Emperor would approve whatever Cajetan decided regarding Luther and agree to finance and undertake the crusade as well.

Rome could not have been more wrong about both things.

The first day of the Diet after the niceties were out of the way, the Diet rejected the idea of sending a crusade against the Muslims and it rejected the idea of paying any additional tax to make it happen. The princes felt they had already been put upon enough by Rome. They responded in a brief written statement noting their grievances and then they replied in an uncharacteristically nasty way:

These sons of Nimrod grab cloisters, abbeys, prebends, canonates, and parish churches, and they leave these churches without pastors, the people without shepherds. Annates and indulgences increase. In cases before the ecclesiastical courts the Roman Church smiles on both sides for a little palm grease. German money in violation of nature flies over the Alps. The pastors given to us are shepherds only in name. They care for nothing but fleece and batten on the sins of the people. Endowed masses are neglected, the pious founders cry for vengeance. Let the Holy Pope Leo stop these abuses.³

Privately the interview with Cajetan and Luther did not go any better. Cajetan was smug and condescending to Luther and refused to debate or argue with Luther in any way. Cajetan informed Luther that he had to recant and that was the end of it. Luther replied that if he had intended to recant he could have done that back in Wittenberg without making such a log journey to Augsburg.

Cajetan kept on insisting that Luther recant. Luther refused. They yelled at each other. Luther wanted to be shown where he was in error. Cajetan refused at first to accommodate Luther at all. Finally he responded that Luther's principal error was the denial of the Treasury of Merit set forth in a papal decree by Clement VI in 1343. Cajetan went on to say that Luther by his words and actions denied the Treasury of Merit. Luther stood silently looking at Cajetan. Cajetan held the document and said, **"This document says that the merits of Christ are a Treasure to the church."**

Without blinking, Luther said, **"If that is what it says I will recant of everything."** Cajetan smiled and agreed to turn in the text and handed it to Luther to read. Luther said, **"This says that Christ's merits acquired for us a Treasure...not that they are a treasure. To be and to acquire do not mean the same thing. If his merits acquire a treasure they are no longer the treasure itself. You need not think we Germans are ignorant of grammar."**⁴

Luther continued, **"Scripture is above the pope."**

The cardinal reminded Luther that Scripture has itself to be interpreted. The pope is the interpreter. The pope is above a council, above Scripture, above everything in the Church. **"His Holiness abuses Scripture,"** retorted Luther. **"I deny that he is above Scripture."** The cardinal flared

up and bellowed that Luther should leave and never come back unless he was ready to say, **“Revoco” – “I recant.”**⁵

“Retract!” said Cajetan; **“retract! or if you do not, I shall send you to Rome to appear before judges commissioned to take cognizance of your affair. I shall excommunicate you with all your partisans, with all who are or who may be favorable to you, and reject them from the Church. All power has been given me in this respect by the holy apostolic see. Think you that your protectors will stop me? Do you imagine that the pope cares anything for Germany? The pope’s little finger is stronger than all the German princes put together.”**⁶

The meeting ended. Luther was not quite sure what to do. He didn’t know whether to run for it or stay. That night Cajetan had supper with Staupitz and insisted that Staupitz tell Luther to recant. Staupitz answered, **“I cannot keep up with his knowledge of Scripture. You are the pope’s representative. It’s up to you.”**⁷

That night Staupitz released Luther from his monastic vows so he would not be bound to turn him over to Rome even if Rome insisted. Luther waited for a week and then heard a rumor that Cajetan had been granted the right to arrest him. That night the city gates were guarded, presumably to keep Luther from escaping. With the help of friendly citizens, Luther escaped on a donkey through a breach in the city wall. He rode all night reaching Wittenberg two days later on the one year anniversary of pasting the 95 Theses. He had temporarily escaped.

The next month he appealed for a general council. That is, he appealed to have his case heard by a council...arguing that while Scripture stood in ascendancy over the pope and councils...councils stood higher than the pope.

Two months later, in January 1519, the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian died. I think here is a very real sense in which his death kept Luther from being burned at the stake.

It was expected by everyone that Charles V, Maximilian's nephew, would succeed him. Rome did not want that to happen. Rome wanted Frederick the Wise to succeed him and as a result was willing to humor him. Frederick the Wise wanted Luther to have a hearing. Rome sent Frederick the Wise a full-size rose made out of pure gold as a sign of its affection. If even offered a cardinalship if he could get Luther to recant. Interestingly, the cardinalship was not for Frederick, it was for Luther.

In June 1519, Luther obtained permission to have a hearing at Leipzig and to debate the issue of indulgences with John Eck for some three days. A week before the debate, Frederick the Wise and the other electors chose Charles the V, as the new Holy Roman Emperor. At that debate, Luther no longer argued that church councils were above the pope. In fact, he argued that even church councils could err and that Scripture alone was the suitable guide for Christians.

On the second day of the debate, Eck accused him of following Wycliffe and Huss. During the night Luther went back and read the account of the Council of Constance, the council which had condemned Huss. The next day, Luther stated in the debate that while he had always thought that Huss had been wrong, he now saw that Huss had been right and that the council had been wrong in condemning him to death. The audience and the papacy groaned.

The debate ended and Rome ordered Luther to appear in Rome in sixty days. In October 1520, Luther published his book redefining the sacraments, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.

Luther's books were condemned and burned at Cologne.

Luther publicly burned the pope's bull directed against him.

Rome issued an edict against Luther calling for his condemnation...formally excommunicating him. In April 1521, he was called to Worms...not to debate...not to discuss...not even really to recant. He was called there to be formally condemned and here I am going to let Philip Schaff tell you the story.

On the day after his arrival, in the afternoon at four o'clock, Luther was led by the imperial marshal...to the hall of the Diet in the bishop's palace where the Emperor and his brother...resided. He was admitted at about six o'clock. There he stood, a poor monk of rustic manners...before a brilliant assembly such as he had never seen: the young Emperor, six Princes, the Pope's legates, archbishops, bishops, dukes, margraves, princes, counts, deputies of the imperial cities, ambassadors of foreign courts, and a numerous array of dignitaries of every rank; in one word, a fair representation of the highest powers in Church and State. Several thousand spectators were collected in and around the building and in the streets, anxiously waiting for the issue.

...Eck, as the official of the Archbishop, put to him, in the name of the Emperor, simply two questions in Latin and German, - first, whether he acknowledged the books laid before him on a bench (about twenty-five in number) to be his own; and, next, whether he would retract them...Luther's advocate, who stood beside him, demanded that the titles of those books be read. This was done. Among them were some inoffensive and purely devotional books as an exposition of the Lord's Prayer and of the Psalms.

Luther was apparently overawed by the August assembly, nervously excited, unprepared for a summary condemnation without an examination, and spoke in a low, almost inaudible tone. Many thought that he was about to collapse. He acknowledged in both languages the authorship of the books; but as to the more momentous question of recantation he humbly requested further time for consideration, since it involved the salvation of the soul, and the truth of the word of God, which was higher than any thing else in heaven or on earth. We must respect him all the more for this reasonable request, which proceeded not from want of courage, but from a profound sense of responsibility.

The Emperor, after a brief consultation, granted him "**out of his clemency**" a respite of one day.

One catholic observer (Aleander) reported on the same day to Rome, that the heretical "**fool**" entered laughing, and left despondent; that even among his sympathizers some regarded him now as a fool, others as one possessed by the Devil; while many looked upon him as a saint full of the Holy Spirit...

That same evening Luther recollected himself, and wrote to a friend: "**I shall not retract one iota, so Christ help me.**"

The next day, Thursday, the 18th of April, Luther appeared a second and last time before the Diet. It was the greatest day in his life. He never appeared more heroic and sublime. He never represented a principle of more vital and general importance to Christendom.

He was...kept waiting two hours outside the hall, among a dense crowd, but appeared more cheerful and confident than the day before. He had fortified himself by prayer and meditation, and was ready to risk life itself to his honest conviction of divine truth. The torches were lighted when he was admitted.

Dr. Eck, speaking again in Latin and German, reproached him for asking delay, and put the second question in this modified form:; "**Wilt you defend all the books which you acknowledge to be yours, or recant some part?**"

Luther answered in a well-considered, premeditated speech, with modesty and firmness, and a voice that could be heard all over the hall.

After apologizing for his ignorance of courtly manners, having been brought up in monastic simplicity, he divided his books into three classes:

(1) Books which simply set forth evangelical truths, professed-alike by friend and foe: these he could not retract.

(2) Books against the corruption and abuses of the papacy, which vexed and martyred the conscience, and devoured the property of the German nation: these he could not retract without cloaking wickedness and tyranny.

(3) Books against his popish opponents: in these he confessed to have been more violent than was proper, but even these he could not retract without giving aid and comfort to his enemies, who would triumph and make things worse.

In defense of his books he could only say in the words of Christ, **"If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why smitest thou me?"** If his opponents could convict him of error by prophetic and evangelical Scriptures, he would revoke his books, and be the first to commit them to the flames.

He was requested to repeat his speech in Latin. This he did with equal firmness and with eyes upraised to heaven.

Eck, in the name of the Emperor, sharply reproved him for evading the question; it was useless, he said, to dispute with him about views which were not new, but had been already taught by Hus, Wyclif, and other heretics, and had been condemned for sufficient reasons by the Council of Constance before the Pope, the Emperor, and the assembled fathers. He demanded a round and direct answer, without **"horns."**

This brought on the crisis.

Luther replied, he would give an answer **"with neither horns nor teeth."** From the inmost depths of his conscience educated by the study of the word of God, he made in both languages that memorable declaration which marks an epoch in the history of religious liberty:

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the Councils

alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience."

Dr. Eck exchanged a few more words with Luther, protesting against his assertion that Councils may err and have erred. Luther repeated his assertion, and pledged himself to prove it. Thus pressed and threatened, amidst the excitement and confusion of the audience, he uttered in German, at least in substance, that concluding sentence which has impressed itself most on the memory of men:

"Here I stand. I can no other. God help me! Amen."

The Emperor would hear no more, and abruptly broke up the session of the Diet at eight o'clock, amid general commotion.

On reaching his lodgings, Luther threw up his arms, and joyfully exclaimed, **"I am through...I am through."** In the presence of others, he said, **"If I had a thousand heads, I would rather have them all cut off one by one than make one recantation."**⁸

The young emperor Charles V shook his head watching the commotion and said, **"He will never make a heretic out of me."** The Italians hissed Luther as he walked by but one old German had something else for Luther. Philip Schaff adds this historical note, one I particularly like.

When Luther left the Bishop's palace greatly exhausted, the old Duke Erik of Brunswick sent him a silver tankard of Eimbeck beer, after having first drunk of it himself to remove suspicion. Luther said, **"As Duke Erik has remembered me today, may the Lord Jesus remember him in his last agony."** The Duke thought of it on his deathbed, and found comfort in the words of the gospel: **"Whosoever shall give unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only, in the name of a disciple, he shall in no wise lose his reward."**⁹

Now Luther had been granted a safe conduct. That is, he had been granted a safe conduct to and from Worms...which meant that he was supposed to be able to come and go without being arrested. After the decision of the Diet, he was, of course, on his own. Luther left, intending to head back straight to Wittenberg and he left in a hurry remembering that Huss had been granted a safe conduct and had been arrested and burned at the stake just the same. Luther never made it back to Wittenberg. He was kidnapped before he got there...but he was kidnapped by his friends... men under the direction of Frederick the Wise. He was escorted off to Wartburg Castle to be kept in protective custody there for almost two years...imagine that...while the church scoured the country looking for Luther to arrest him. During his exile at Wartburg, Luther translated the Bible into German for the first time.

So what are we to make of the role Luther played in the Reformation and the recovery of the gospel? Without question it is wonderful, almost too wonderful for words. If ever there was a reluctant hero, it was Luther. He was not the best preacher, or by his own admission the best theologian. He was prone to bursts of profanity and sarcasm. He was always plain spoken. Indeed, sometimes he spoke when he should have held his peace but never in the history of the world had there been a man so utterly in love with the gospel. I wonder if it was because Luther had a genuine understanding of the depth of his own sin. Today, we gloss over sin not from bad motives but out of compassion. But Luther knew no such gentility. He wrestled with his sin and the bleakness of what the mystics called "**the dark night of the soul**". What he discovered was that the gospel was outside of himself. He had been looking for some mystical ladder to appropriate God's smile and found God condescending to save him in the blood and sweat of the cross. That's why he could say:

If you do not want to go wrong or be lost, then believe Scripture, which testifies that all men are sinners and that no man living is just in the sight of God. To become just they will have to become so through Christ, the blessed Seed, who was promised to Adam, Abraham, and others as He who should crush the serpent's head and redeem the whole world from the curse. This He has done. He has taken the sin of the whole world upon Himself, has become a curse for us, and in this way has redeemed from the curse all who believe on Him. Such knowledge and faith make a joyous heart which can say with certainty and assurance: I am no longer conscious any sins, for all of them rest on the shoulders of Christ, and they surely cannot rest on Him and on us at the same.¹⁰

Let's pray.

¹ J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the 16th Century*, Book 7, Chapter 9, 630. It should be noted that some scholars don't believe that Luther actually said, "**Here I stand, etc.**"

² R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 74.

³ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), 92.

⁴ Roland Bainton, 94.

⁵ Roland Bainton, 96.

⁶ J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the 16th Century*, Book 4, Chapter 7, 399. It should be noted that some scholars don't believe that Luther actually said, "**Here I stand, etc.**"

⁷ Roland Bainton, 96.

⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church; Modern History: The German Reformation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1910; rprnt 1984), 300-6.

⁹ Philip Schaff, 307.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *What Luther Says Vol. 3*. Compiled by Edwin Plass. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1259.