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## Why Was Luther Detained at Worms after His Hearing Before the Diet?\*

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### 1. The Morning after the Great Speech.

Luther's answer "without horns and teeth" at the conclusion of his great speech before the Diet on April 18, 1521, created a fearful dilemma for the Romanists at Worms. That evening, while Luther sat, surrounded by admiring friends, in his room at the hostel of the Knights of St. John and his tense mind relaxed in cheerful conversation, agitated consultations took place elsewhere. His answer, upon close scrutiny, appeared to his adversaries a plain challenge. Luther had to the end withstood the vehement pressure of his examiner Eck for the coveted monosyllabic answer to the question whether he would recant. He had said neither yes nor no, but he had solemnly declared himself ready to say either yes or no after a proper argument. The opposition could not charge Luther with sullenness or contumacy; he had not refused recantation, but had practically paved the way for it by the only process that would have been honorable to himself and his adversaries. They saw clearly the intention which Luther afterwards acknowledged in several letters, to bring on a discussion "with a doctor or fifty who were to overcome the monk in an honest argument."<sup>1</sup>) The intolerable situation which Aleander had always foreseen and pointed out as dreadful to a conscien-

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\* The substance of this article was read at Union Seminary, New York, December 28, 1925, at the annual meeting of the American Society of Church History.

1) XV, 1936. 1902. 1904. — In this contribution the St. L. edition of Luther's Works is cited by simple Roman and Arabic numerals, for volume and column. RA stands for *Reichstagsakten*; DTC, for Dau, *At the Tribunal of Caesar*; HAL, for Hausrath, *Aleander und Luther*; EE, for Erlangen Edition; BAL, for Brieger, *Aleander und Luther*; EB, for Enders, *Briefwechsel*, in Erlangen edition of Luther's Works; FU, for Foerstemann, *Urkundenbuch*; FNU, for Foerstemann, *Neues Urkundenbuch*.

# Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in the Light of Testimony Against Indulgences Before the Reformation.

(Conclusion.)

Not because he was the most learned man and his testimony is the most valuable, but because he lived earlier than other witnesses for the truth, we mention the name of Berthold of Regensburg (d. 1272) here, the greatest popular preacher of the Middle Ages, who, on his preaching tours through many countries of continental Europe, insisted on true sorrow over sin and a sincere confession of sins. He denounced penances without contrition and declared crusades and pilgrimages valueless unless they are combined with a firm purpose to renounce sin. From this standpoint Berthold raised his voice against the preachers of indulgences, whom he calls penny-preachers, *Pfennigprediger*. He was very severe in his denunciation of the sin of avarice and registered many a sharp thrust against misers; so we can well understand why the unholy business of the peddlers of indulgences roused his ire. He says: "When I was a child, we never heard of a penny-preacher"; and he condemns their activities in the most unsparing terms: "Shame on you, you penny-preacher! What about your tongue, which is leading many thousand souls to hell? You penny-preacher, you are one of the devil's dearest servants. . . . You are one of the worst of lepers whom the world has ever seen or may ever see; for your leprosy is so malignant that many are incurably infested therewith. You are a murderer. You are ruining numerous souls for Almighty God." (Nebe, *Zur Geschichte der Predigt*, Vol. I, 306 ff.)

Celestine V, during his short pontificate of four months, in 1294, granted an *indulgentia a poena et a culpa*, but his successor, Boniface VIII (1294—1303), denounced this form of indulgences repeatedly because he considered them dangerous to the welfare of

men's souls. But his action seems to carry little weight because the *usus loquendi* from early times permitted the sense of a *remissio peccatorum* as granted by the indulgence (Herzog, *Realenzyklopaedie*, sub "Indulgenzen"), and Boniface himself issued one of this type and declared *non solum plenam, sed largiorem, immo plenissimam omnium suorum concedimus veniam peccatorum*. During the pontificate of John XXII (1316—1334) the most prominent canonists defended the term *indulgentia a poena et a culpa*, which, no doubt, caused the doughty John Wyclif (1324—1384) to protest against its use. Again, after the Council of Constance (1414 to 1418), this phrase seems to have fallen into disuse. (Kurtz, *Kirchengeschichte*, § 118, 1.) We might note here that surprise was caused in France when Sixtus IV, August 3, 1476, issued an indulgence, the benefits of which were to be extended to the souls in purgatory, making the intercession for such unnecessary, as his indulgence mongers declared. But this doctrine as well as the doctrine of the *merita supererogata perfectorum* had been sponsored by the schoolmen of the thirteenth century, who followed Thomas Aquinas (Kurtz, *Kirchengeschichte*, § 107, 2), and had been confirmed by Clemens VI in 1343. (Kurtz, *Kirchengeschichte*, § 118, 1.) Hence, the Frenchmen should not have been taken with surprise by the new and offensive doctrine.

Shortly before Luther's appearance as an opponent of papal indulgences, we find various men raising their voices against them because they were considered antagonistic to God's Word. There is John Veghe (d. 1504), a member of the Muenster House of the Brethren of the Common Life, who makes a clear and bold statement against this satanic institution. (Dargan, *History of Preaching*, Vol. I, p. 334.) There is John Pupper of Goch (d. 1475), held in high esteem by Matthias Flacius because he took a firm and a somewhat clear stand in matters of doctrine and against indulgences. The Council of Trent classed him among the arch-heretics and, in our estimation, signally honored him by placing his books in the first class of prohibited books. (Ullmann, *Reformatoren*, I, 52. 72. 136. 138.) Oliver Maillard (d. 1502), preacher at the French court, inveighed against the sins of the day and no less fearlessly against the shameful traffic in indulgences. (Herzog, *Realenzyklopaedie*, sub "Indulgenzen.") The renowned Humanist and theologian Thomas Wytttenbach (d. 1526), the teacher of Zwingli in Basel, declared the mass a Roman fraud and cried against indulgences because the death of Christ alone is the recompense for our sins. (Dargan, *History of Preaching*, Vol. I, 401.)

Erfurt has special interest for us; in the first place, because it was the main center of reform movements in Germany (cp. Heinrich Boehmer, *Der Junge Luther*, p. 39) before Wittenberg became the citadel of truth and before Luther uprooted the age-long thorns and thistles of ignorance, superstition, and lies; and secondly, because Luther studied there and later lectured at the university for a short period (1509—10). Jacob of Jueterbock (d. 1465), prior of the Carthusian cloister in Erfurt, a pious monk of the first order, taught theology at the same institution of learning. The learned John Tritheim (d. 1516) describes him as one well versed in Scriptures, whose words were heeded and respected like Apollonian oracles. He saw the great need of a reformation, and in his *Opus de Indulgentiis* he attacked one of the outstanding abuses of the day. His opinion is rather mild and conciliating, but in one passage he denies the efficacy of indulgences in lessening the pangs of purgatory and condemns the *indulgentia a poena et a culpa*, as it was commonly understood. (Ullmann, *Reformatoren*, Vol. I, 233ff.) We may, however, say with certainty that he did not encourage any person to purchase indulgences, but rather dissuaded men from investing their money in these fraudulent papers. John Ruchrath of Wesel (d. 1481) had studied at Erfurt when Jueterbock flourished there and later was a professor at the same university. Of him Luther says that his books were used extensively at the institution and that he had studied them to obtain his master's title (St. Louis ed., Vol. XVI, col. 2,243), and Wimpheling calls him an honor to the university. (Ullmann, *Reformatoren*, I, 215.) Wesel was brought face to face with the traffic in indulgences in a most commanding manner at the time when Nicholas of Cusa, during the extension of the year of jubilee to 1451, came to Erfurt and caused such a commotion that several people were killed in a crush on St. Peter's Hill (Ullmann, *Reformatoren*, I, 216), and again, four years later, when the fiery John of Capistrano came to Erfurt on a similar mission. Wesel appears as an outstanding pioneer in the crusade against indulgences. He does not only recognize certain abuses connected with the traffic, but he condemns the whole institution, as the title to his book already appears to promise, for it does not read *De Indulgentiis*, but *Johannis de Vesalia ADVERSUS Indulgentias Disputatio*. The following introductory remarks to his treatise have a truly Lutheran ring: "Since I am resolved to answer the question: Can the Pope absolve anybody from all punishments and grant him an indulgence? I, John of Wesel, rightful professor of the Holy

Scriptures, — the least though I am, — protest above all that I am not minded to say or to write anything contrary to the truth as it is contained in the Scriptures. Should my opinion or contention be adverse to that of others, the holy teachers not excepted, my remarks should not be considered as an aspersion of their honor or of their sanctity. I agree with holy Augustine, who said: "The others, no matter how distinguished they may be as holy and erudite men, I read assentingly, not because it is their opinion, but because they convince me by Scriptures or by other patent reasons that they are not deviating from Scriptures." Although Wesel offers Scriptural proof for his seven propositions and, at times, uses correct verbiage when he speaks of sin and grace, yet he, like many of his times and of the same environments, misapplies Scriptures and produces unbiblical arguments. He, like many others and like Luther in his writings before October 31, 1517, again and again injects that papistical *gratia infusa*. We shall quote some of his correct statements: "God Himself effects the forgiveness of sins, produces it, and executes it." "If God is perfect, then His grace must be perfect; and, now, that grace alone can be called perfect which effaces temporal and eternal punishment." Wesel denies that the doctrine concerning indulgences can be based on the Office of the Keys, and he denies the existence of a treasury of good works of the saints. "Such remissions or abatements called indulgences are a holy fraud, by which the believers are deceived, as many other priests have said." He distinguishes between the congregation of believers, which he calls the Catholic Church and also the Church of Christ, on the one hand, and the Church in general, on the other hand, the latter the visible Church in our parlance. This latter Church, he says, errs. "When it is said, 'The Church grants indulgences,' these come from that part of the Church which errs." "The Church should not grant them because they are based upon an error." (Ullmann, *Reformatoren*, I, 240ff.)

Finally let us record that John Wessel's arguments against this worthless and devilish ware are much the same as those of his friend Wesel. He opposes his master at Rome when he asserts that man must not render personal satisfaction to make his repentance complete, because God's forgiveness of sins is entirely sufficient. "In the midst of the Christian Church it is considered an essential doctrine that forgiveness comes through God alone and is mediated through Christ." "The Lamb of God takes the punishment and the guilt of the present and future sins away." "The authority to forgive sins or to use the keys to the kingdom of

heaven, Christ imparted not to one, but to the Church in general." Wessel, too, brands indulgences as a pious fraud, an error, and a lie. (Ullmann, *Reformatoren*, II, 491 ff.)

More evidence could have been produced, and the material here offered could have been greatly enlarged upon, but this amply suffices to make a few comparisons.

Luther was acquainted with Wesel's works, as he himself tells us, and it would hardly be called a snap judgment if we take for granted that Wesel's stand regarding indulgences was known to him. True, Wesel was compelled to recant, but his influence was very marked at Erfurt, as we have heard Luther say. Luther was not acquainted with Wessel's writings at the time when he penned his Ninety-five Theses. (St. Louis ed., XIV, 253.) Both Wesel and Wessel are more outspoken in their denunciation of the papal ware. Both stamp it a fraud without any qualifications. Their words are very plain. But Luther says in his 49th thesis: "The Christians are to be taught that the Pope's indulgence is good as long as it is used rightly; but that there is nothing more harmful if the fear of God is ignored thereby." (St. Louis ed., XVIII, 76.) Thesis 71 quoted above is relevant also at this place. And Luther, in the following theses, is making concessions which Wesel and Wessel could not have conscientiously made: 5, 20, 26, 38, 39, 42, 61, 69. Whereas Wesel treats the superfluous good works of the saints as a nonentity, Luther, in Thesis 58, still looks upon them as a source of blessing, a view which he had expressed two years before. (Cp. St. Louis ed., XIX, 736.)

The history of indulgences offers, indeed, nothing but a babel of opinions, as Wesel and Wessel correctly asserted in their days, but at no time was it denied that it was a grant of freedom from certain penalties or penances laid upon the believers for the expiation of their sins. Dr. A. L. Graebner said to his students in a lecture: "*Der Papst hatte aus der Busze eine Bueszung gemacht.*" Yea, the Church had become a penal institution. And it is Luther's contention that the Pope's power cannot, and is not intended to, go beyond such a grant. He says in Thesis 34: "For the grace of the indulgence refers only to the penances inflicted by men." In a sermon delivered October 31, 1516, Luther expresses the same opinion. (St. Louis ed., XIX, 752.) But whatever may be said about indulgences at any time, the one issued by Pope Leo X, which was to be offered to Christendom during a period of eight years (St. Louis ed., XV, 309), which, however, because of Luther's intervention, lasted but three years, promised the full forgiveness of

sins to its purchasers, with the exception of certain sins and crimes, real or fictitious, especially enumerated in the papal bull. In his official document Leo decreed that upon the purchase of his indulgence priest or monk should absolve "from all sins, transgressions, and iniquities, no matter how great or terrible the sins may be." (St. Louis ed., XV, 235.) The exceptions are also carefully noted at this place. One of a very peculiar nature has been explained in the THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, Vol. V, 346f. Indulgences granted to individuals, containing an absolution in the sense mentioned are found in the St. Louis ed., XV, 280, 357. Albert of Mayence, in his instructions to all persons connected with the sale of this ware, expressly states that its purchase is necessary to salvation. (St. Louis ed., XV, 305.) In view of these facts it is difficult to understand why Luther's Ninety-five Theses do not measure up to the unqualified denunciation of the traffic as voiced by Wesel and Wessel. We dare not say that Luther had not read the papal bull or had not seen any of the letters of indulgence which plainly declared a complete release of all sins. Luther's respect for papal authority and his hesitancy to be too outspoken in his criticism of a papal arrangement at a time when he was seeking enlightenment seem to offer the best explanation.

Other comparisons are obvious, *e. g.*, that a host of men before Luther raised their voices in solemn protest against this satanic institution. We may safely assert that this issue was as much discussed before Luther's time as the Volstead Act or the Eighteenth Amendment are discussed by the press and by the people in our own days. Recall Luther's word: "*Alle Welt klagte ueber das Ablassz.*" Recall that Wesel asserted *many* priests looked upon the indulgence as a fraud by which the believers were deceived.

But why these comparisons? They do not detract one whit from Luther's great influence upon the destinies of men as the Reformer of the Church, but they are to prove — as they prove most convincingly — that the Reformation is solely and entirely the work of God Himself. Jacob of Jueterbock presaged that the Reformation would not be brought about by one man. (Ullmann, *Reformatoren*, I, 197.) And it was not, nor even by many men. Luther was, indeed, when he penned his memorable theses, a most valiant knight, who championed the cause of the common people. Even though they were written in Latin and intended for the learned men, yet they manifest, in numerous cases, his interest in the welfare of the people. But in going forth into the fray, he grabbed a sword that was rusty and dull, and he fought against

an opponent whose wiles and knavery he underestimated. Under such conditions he could never have won against the tremendous odds if the Lord's day and time for the deliverance of His Church had not come. If we bear in mind what an insufficient tool the author of the Ninety-five Theses was, we shall know to whom all credit is due for the overwhelming success of Luther's work. The Reformation was a work of redemption, but of God alone. B.