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Editorial ✠

MARTIN LUTHER AT WORMS: A TRIBUTE AND A REMINDER

Four hundred and fifty years ago on April 17 and 18, 1521, Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms to confront the representatives of imperial and ecclesiastical power. He was one man against many, yet subsequent history has vindicated him and found his opposition wrong. It is fitting that we recall the historical circumstances that led to the Worms confrontation and that we pay tribute to Luther by following his example. The details of the confrontation at Worms are important, but we will pass them by and recreate the atmosphere by citing some of the more significant remarks and comments made by participants and observers.¹

Throughout his early career Luther had been vigorously opposed by several ecclesiastical officials. The papal legate, Jerome Aleander, who had been entrusted with the job of disseminating throughout western Germany the papal bull that condemned Luther, was especially eager to see Luther silenced by the pope.

As for myself, I would gladly confront this Satan, but the authority of the Holy See should not be prejudiced by subjection to the judgment of the laity. One who has been condemned by the pope, the cardinals, and prelates should be heard only in prison. The laity, including the emperor, are not in a position to review the case. The only competent judge is the pope. How can the Church be called the ship of Peter if Peter is not at the helm? How can she be the ark of Noah if Noah is not the captain? If Luther wants to be heard, he can have safe conduct to Rome. Or His Majesty might send him to the inquisitors in Spain. He can perfectly well recant where he is and then come to the diet to be forgiven. He asks for a place which is not suspect. What place to him is not suspect, unless it be Germany? What judges would he accept unless Hutten and the poets? Has the Catholic Church been dead for a thousand years to be revived only by Martin? Has the whole world gone wrong and Martin only has the eyes to see? ²

That sentiment prompted the emperor to withdraw permission for Luther's appearance at the imperial diet. As a result, however, of intricate machinations involving especially Frederick the Wise, Luther's protector and eventual champion, Luther was reinvited. The emperor had been assured by Aleander that Luther would be condemned.

Luther arrived at Worms on Monday, April 16. Before a comparatively small group of delegates to the Diet he was given a hearing on April 17. Confronted with stacks of his books, he was asked whether he would acknowledge himself as author and whether

¹ One of the most useful summaries of the series of events is found in B. J. Kidd, *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), pp. 79—89.

² Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), p. 172.

he would revoke or defend them — at least in part. He was granted time to prepare his answer and reappeared the next day before an impressive audience in a large chamber of the bishop's palace at Worms. In response to his chief interrogator and frequent opponent, Johann von Eck, Luther first detailed the identity and various groups of his writings, conceding that some of his attacks had been excessively violent. Von Eck continued with a delineation of charges against Luther, asking him to revoke his assertions. Though the day's proceedings were not brought to a close by Luther's famous reply, many people began to leave soon after Luther's response, originally given in Latin:

If then, Your Majesty and rulers ask for a simple answer, I will give it without horns or teeth, as follows: Unless I am shown by the testimony of Scripture and by evident reasoning (for I do not put faith in pope or councils alone, because it is established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), unless I am overcome by means of the scriptural passages that I have cited, and unless my conscience is taken captive by the words of God, I am neither able nor willing to revoke anything, since to act against conscience is neither safe nor honest." [He then added in German: ("Here I stand! I cannot do otherwise!") "God help me. Amen!"]³

Luther's reply — respectful, courteous, but unambiguous — left no doubt in anyone's mind that the Diet's purpose was frustrated. Charles responded to Luther's refusal to recant with a strong statement of policy in which he enlisted the loyalty of all his German subjects and which became the basis of the later Edict of Worms (May 26).

My predecessors, the most Christian Emperors of the German race, the Austrian arch dukes, and dukes of Burgundy, were until death the truest sons of the Catholic Church, defending and extending their belief to the glory of God, the propagation of the faith, the salvation of their souls. They have left behind them the holy Catholic rites that I should live and die therein, and so until now with God's aid I have lived, as becomes a Christian Emperor. What my forefathers established at Constance and other Councils, it is my privilege to uphold. A single monk, led astray by private judgment, has set himself against the faith held by all Christians for a thousand years and more, and impudently concludes that all Christians up till now have erred. I have therefore resolved to stake upon this cause all my dominions, my friends, my body and my blood, my life and soul. For myself and you, sprung from the holy German nation, appointed by peculiar privilege defenders of the faith, it would be a grievous disgrace, an eternal stain upon ourselves and our posterity, if, in this our day, not only heresy, but its very suspicion, were due to our neglect. After Luther's stiff-necked reply in my presence yesterday, I now repent that I have so long delayed proceedings against him and his false doctrines. I have now resolved never again, under any circumstances, to hear him. Under protection of his

³ Robert Herndon Fife, *The Revolt of Martin Luther*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 666.

safe-conduct he shall be escorted home, but forbidden to preach and to seduce men with his evil doctrines and incite them to rebellion. I warn you to give witness to your opinion as good Christians and in accordance with your vows.⁴

Subsequent negotiations by various committees representing the empire and the pope, on the one hand, and Luther and his friends, on the other, failed to establish the possibility of resolving conflict by public disputations. The edict was issued, stating:

He (Luther) has sullied marriage, disparaged confession, and denied the body and blood of our Lord. He makes the sacraments depend on the faith of the recipient. He is pagan in his denial of free will. This devil in the habit of a monk has brought together ancient errors into one stinking puddle and has invented new ones. He denies the power of the keys and encourages the laity to wash their hands in the blood of the clergy. His teaching makes for rebellion, division, war, murder, robbery, arson, and the collapse of Christendom. He lives the life of a beast. He has burned the decretals. He despises alike the ban and the sword. He does more harm to the civil than to the ecclesiastical power. We have labored with him, but he recognizes only the authority of Scripture, which he interprets in his own sense. We have given him twenty-one days, dating from April the 25th. We have now gathered the estates. Luther is to be regarded as a convicted heretic (although the bull of excommunication had not been published). When the time is up, no one is to harbor him. His followers also are to be condemned. His books are to be eradicated from the memory of man.⁵

But Luther was safe in the Wartburg, eager to attend to the movement that became "the Reformation."

What can one suggest today as an appropriate tribute to the man's memory? Surely much of our appreciation is a matter of one's own faith, conviction, and identification in a spiritual and intellectual way with him.

How did Luther come to believe and know as he did? How was it that the appearance at the Diet of Worms ever occurred at all? It might be useful for anyone, modern Lutherans in particular, to understand that, as much as the peace Luther found when he learned to believe in the righteousness of God in Christ and as much as the reality and reliability of the Scriptural revelation meant to him, also important to him was the freedom to ask questions and to search for answers to profound problems—both within himself and within the church that was his spiritual womb and cradle and teacher. Likewise important was his slowly acquired readiness, willingness, and boldness to question authority—human, political, ecclesiastical, pedagogical, or traditional—and to reject or at least to reevaluate it when convinced that the teachings of the Word of God were in collision or even open disagreement with such authority. This was not just the curiosity of the Renaissance man, the endless futile search, the cynicism of, perhaps, a Desi-

⁴ Kidd, pp. 85—86.

⁵ Kidd, pp. 87—89; Bainton, p. 189.

derius Erasmus of Rotterdam, or the economic poverty of a Hutten or a von Sickingen pushing him to rebellion and even violence on the one hand, or into a carnal resignation and debauchery on the other. Many say that Luther's search ended when he learned to know what Scripture said to him and when he subsequently discovered that after telling others about it, they too found that that is what it said to them. The point, however, is that Luther never ceased to learn what that was; he never ceased to search for what else God had to say to him in Scripture. Some regret that Luther was not able or willing to be a systematician in the pattern of great Lutheran systematic theologians beginning with Melancthon and ending, provisionally, with Valentin Loescher. But what we need desperately is the freshness, the newness, the springtime of discovery that comes with recognizing our need and God's answers to it. This needs never to grow stale, stereotyped, or rigid. Admittedly, the Holy Spirit must give His gifts and blow where He wills. Admittedly, one might mistake the movings of one's own spirit with that moving of the Spirit. Here the Scriptures can and do play a decisive role, as does history, too. The assurance that we have found, as Luther had, the peace of God that passes understanding, can never mean that we have it all, that there is not more to be found, or, for that matter, that we cannot lose it or even replace it with something of our devising. Luther is quoted as saying in his rooms in Worms on the evening of April 18, "I am through! I am through!" This did *not* mean that he was finished, of course. What it meant in actuality was that he had just begun his real search.

Luther never ceased to learn. He never ceased to learn because he never ceased to seek and to search—in the Scriptures, in the Fathers, in experience; by study, by prayer, by meditation, or by dialog. This is perhaps one way for anyone, especially those who call themselves Lutherans, to honor him and the same God whom he worshiped and adored in Christ—seeking and, by His grace, finding. Finding what? Well, Luther scarcely suspected what it was he was looking for, or what he would find, or what he could keep. Who knows, according to such an analogy, what God may still have in store for us? Really, only He knows fully.

It might be well to point out that a curious way in which some people like to prove their Lutheranism is to consider themselves latter-day Luthers. They dramatize and mesmerize themselves into a frame of mind that allows them, quite humbly they think, to play a role in their situation similar to Luther's at Worms. They are, it appears, in that way assuming a character and a task that they have sought, even fabricated, but not been given. They can indeed delude themselves into believing that with them truth would die—unless they leave a book or two behind. As unworthy a commemoration or practice of Luther's action as that would be, so certainly, however, must one assert that we are expected to give a good confession. Freed by, not imprisoned in, the divine Word, or rather in one's own interpretation of it, on any matter whatsoever, listening a great deal before we speak, maintaining that precious fellowship of love that is ours and never exchanging it for a tragic breach of brotherhood in the church, the Christian man and woman grow in knowledge, seeking, finding, and, above all, living by the faith of the Son of God. (Gal. 6:20)

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