

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Twenty Four

Fighting the Good Fight Part Three of the Life of Martin Luther

The Challenge

At the time Luther was being led into the truth by the Scriptures and realizing that righteousness was to be found in Christ alone, many others were continued to be led into falsehood through wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15), and thus continued to be bound by fear and ignorance. The teaching of the Catholic Church at that time was that souls were saved only through the Catholic Church and that when Catholics sinned, they could be reconciled to God and to the church through confessing to a priest and doing works of penance. These works of penance could be charitable acts, making a pilgrimage, or donating money or land to the church.

In addition, the church encouraged the purchase of indulgences. Indulgences were certificates that promised to shorten the purchaser's time in purgatory – a place where souls suffer for their sins before going to heaven. In time these indulgences were also purported to shorten the time in purgatory for people who had already died. Relatives of the deceased were encouraged to relieve the suffering of their loved ones by buying indulgences for them.

Indulgences were sold at local fairs by touring monks and friars, and were sanctioned by the pope in order to raise funds. At Luther's time the funds were mainly raised for the building of St. Peter's basilica in Rome. The practice of selling indulgences riled Luther. He knew there was no basis in the Scriptures for this practice, and he was well aware that those who sold the indulgences were in most cases nothing more than money loving crooks. He had also heard of the words of Pope Leo X: "What an immense sum have we made out of this fable about Christ!"

Germany's chief vendor of indulgences was John (Johann) Tetzel. Tetzel's hawking played upon the emotions of the unlearned and gullible. He urged people to heed the cries of their deceased relatives for mercy and buy indulgences. He called the crowds to "come and get remission of your sins and freedom from the terrors of purgatory." He offered "letters all properly sealed, by which

even the sins you intend to commit may be pardoned. He promised, "There is no sin so great that an indulgence cannot remit. Only pay well, and all will be forgiven." An oft-quoted jingle was "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

Luther felt a need to bring this matter out in the open; he began to speak up in boldness. He proclaimed to those in Wittenberg that only those who repent to God receive forgiveness of sins, and that forgiveness is based upon the sacrifice of Christ on the cross; not on any money given to the Catholic Church. Luther believed that this issue should be addressed by the learned university professors. He therefore prepared 95 theses to be discussed among them. As was the custom of the time, he posted his concerns as a challenge on the castle church door in order to call for a public debate.

Ninety-Five Theses, 1517

In these 95 theses, Luther listed his differences with the church regarding many matters. He openly disagreed with the teaching that the pope had the authority to release anyone from the guilt or penalty of sin or that anyone needed a letter of pardon from him. The posting of these theses caught the interest of not only of professors and the clergy, but also the common people. Many people had felt the same as Luther, but were afraid to speak up. Although Luther did not relish the attention, he nevertheless became the voice of many. In a short period of time the words of the 95 theses spread over Germany and then to all of Europe. Some feel that the posting of the 95 theses on October 31, 1517, at Wittenberg was the starting point of the reformation.



Initially, there was a mixed reaction to these theses. At first, Pope Leo X just laughed it off as a squabble; many Germans were thrilled; some of the clergy severely criticized and opposed Luther; and John Tetzel immediately charged Luther with heresy. Luther felt he had defended his statements with many proofs from the Bible and thought he was defending the honor of the church. He thought Rome would condemn Tetzel, not him. But no blessing came from Rome. Instead in August of 1518 Luther was given a summons to appear in Rome within sixty days to support his statements that were being considered as heresy.

Diet at Augsburg, 1518

But the Lord's sovereign hand was upon Luther. He did suffer greatly during this time. He felt somewhat alone in his stand since not many of his friends united with him. He later wrote of this time, "No one can know what my heart suffered during those first two years and into what despondency, I may say, into what despair I was sunk." The powerful Elector Frederick, however, did support Luther during this difficult time, and intervened to prevent Luther from going to Rome. But the papacy did not give up, but sought another venue. Cardinal Cajetan, as the pope's representative, proposed Luther be tried at Augsburg, where a formal gathering of princes known as a diet was to assemble. To Augsburg Luther proceeded, accompanied by his good friend and mentor Staupitz. There Luther was asked to revoke all he had written with regard to indulgences and repentance. Luther refused to do this unless he could be shown that he was in error. Cajetan would have nothing of Luther's unwillingness and declared, "Go! Recant or never come to me again!" Although Cajetan threatened Luther and insisted he be delivered to Rome, the Elector Frederick stood by him and would not submit to that demand.

The Leipzig Debate, 1519

Then Satan attempted a kinder and gentler approach. The pope sent a savvy representative this time, Johann Miltitz, who quickly renounced Tetzel as a swindler and tried to assure Luther that the pope wasn't all that disagreeable. Miltitz asked Luther if

he would simply be quiet for a period of time to let the dispute calm down. Luther agreed to refrain as long as those opposing him would do the same. It appeared there was a lull in the battle until Andreas Carlstadt, one of Luther's colleagues, reignited the flame by challenging Dr. Johann Eck, a professor who in turn attacked Luther once again. Eck accused Luther of being a Hussite who was spreading the heresy of the Bohemian Brethren. The truce was broken, and the result was more debates, one at Altenburg, and another at Leipzig in the summer of 1519.

Luther was bit by bit departing from his previous commitments to Catholicism. He realized that the clergy would not reason with him based on the Word of God. He clearly was taking his stand with the Scriptures, and could no longer espouse faithfulness to the Roman Catholic Church. He proceeded therefore to expose many falsehoods of the Romish Church in writing. In his publications he continued to fight saying that the pope and his entourage were not above the secular powers. Luther asserted that the pope was not infallible, nor was he the only one who could interpret the Scriptures. He held that all God's children could be taught of Him and come to understand the things of God unfolded in the Bible. He argued that people should not follow those who live in a manner contrary to the Scriptures or who are without faith or the Spirit, even if they are clergy. Luther was beginning to attack the papal system directly by challenging its authority, doctrines, and practices.

Burning the Papal Bull, 1520



Rome had enough of Luther and his new publications after the Leipzig Debate. Pope Leo X issued a writing against Luther called

a “papal bull” in June of 1520. It was posted and circulated throughout Germany. The pope claimed that he had tried everything to rescue Luther from his deviations and return him to the way of the church. But since Luther was uncooperative and continued to promote his erroneous teachings, he could no longer be tolerated. The pope alleged Luther’s views to be “poisonous and pernicious, and seductive to godly and simple minds.” Luther was thus charged to recant, within the next sixty days, of all that he had spoken and written, or be excommunicated. The bull declared that all his heretical publications were to be burned. Luther’s followers were deemed heretics and “withered branches of the vine of Christ” who were, along with Luther, worthy of punishment also.

Eck glowingly brought the bull into Germany, but was surprised to find that it was not well received, but opposed. Many Germans by this time were reading Luther’s works and felt he was being unfairly condemned. They saw Luther not as a heretic, but as a liberator from the oppression of Rome. The battle was becoming more intense. Luther said, “Eck is stirring up the bottomless pit against me.” Luther realized the seriousness of the situation and counted it an honor to bear the Lord’s reproach. By this time he felt that the “Pope was the Antichrist and that his throne is that of Satan himself.”

Most German officials posted this bull in remote places so that it would rarely be read. But at the university at Erfurt, the students rallied to Luther’s defense by shredding the bull and casting its pieces into the river. The professors at Wittenberg refused even to post it. Then, out of their zeal, on December 10, 1520 many gathered in a courtyard in Wittenberg and set several papal writings aflame. Luther joined them, and threw the bull which was against him into the fire, thus marking a complete break with Rome.

Luther’s Stand at the Diet of Worms, 1521



A couple weeks later, on January 3, 1521, Leo X announced the formal excommunication of Luther and his followers. Now he just waited for the state to condemn him as well. This was to be accomplished through the new emperor, Charles V, who was supportive of Rome and who sought the favor of the Pope. Therefore, in March, 1521, Martin Luther was summoned to Worms to account for his “German heresy.” At the request of Frederick, Luther was given a hearing and a chance to speak in his defense. The question was whether or not Luther intended to insist upon his writings or renounce them. Luther knew the papists were hoping for an imperial ban to be pronounced against him. He said, “The papists do not desire my coming to Worms, but my condemnation and death.”

At Worms, Luther was confronted, “Do you acknowledge these books to have been written by you? And next, “Are you prepared to retract these books and their contents, or do you persist in the opinions expressed in them?” Luther, after time before the Lord in prayer, answered, “First, the books are mine; I deny none of them.” Luther declared that his conscience was bound in God’s Word and that unless he could be convinced by proofs of the Holy Scriptures that he was in error, he could not recant or go against his conscience. He proclaimed before all, “I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”

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Condemnation

After Luther’s stand was made clear to all, the emperor joined the Pope in condemning Luther. Luther was officially excommunicated by the Pope, and Charles consented to an edict of banishment. The fury of his enemies began to be released. He was declared an outlaw and heretic on May 26, 1521. He no longer had any property rights, his books were all to be burned, and he himself was to be turned over to the authorities for punishment.

While these condemning documents were being prepared and proclaimed, Luther was already on his way back to Wittenberg. But

when it was time for him to arrive, he did not appear. What happened? A famous German artist spoke out of his concern, "O God, if Luther is dead, who will henceforth teach us the holy Gospel so clearly?" But Luther was not dead, but he had been rescued from his enemies by the elector Frederick and other friends and transported to a fortress called Wartburg in the forest. Thus, Luther escaped the evil power of Rome.

Luther's Patmos

It was in this isolated secluded castle that Luther was to live and work for some days to come in what he considered, "his Patmos." It was within these secure walls at Wartburg that Luther was able to devote his time and attention to begin the work of translating the Bible into the German language from the original Hebrew and Greek. Thank the Lord for this faithful steward who stood firm during those dark days. It was by his stand that the recovery of the truth of justification by faith was able to come to the generations that followed. We would agree with J. N. Darby who said, "I see in Luther an energy of faith, for which millions of souls ought to be thankful to God. I can truly say I am." Watchman Nee also appreciated the work of Luther. He said, "I believe that no one will doubt that Martin

Luther was a servant of the Lord and the Reformation was the work of God. The Reformation was a great work, and it was a divine reaction. Surely the Lord used Luther as a mouthpiece; he was a man especially chosen by God."

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Marty Robert and Bill Lawson

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