

The Story of Martin Luther: the Restoration of Biblical Christianity and Apostolic Catholicism

THE STORY OF MARTIN LUTHER- Pastor Charles R. Biggs

Happy 490th anniversary of the Reformation of the Christian Church!

On October 31st 2007, the Church will celebrate the 490th anniversary of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century.

This reformation began in God's providence through a peasant miner's son who became a monk and then a great teacher of Biblical truth. It is important to remember how the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century was arguably the greatest revival of Christianity since the Apostolic Age. The Reformation was a return to Biblical Christianity and Apostolic Catholicism because the Church had degenerated into unbiblical Roman Catholicism.

This paper is submitted to remind you of God's grace and goodness, and to encourage us all to continue to stand on *Scripture Alone* as our guide for faith and life, knowing that we are justified before God by grace alone, and to know that we all can boldly access God's mercy and fatherly goodness through One Mediator, the Man Christ Jesus!

Apostolic Catholicism

In God's goodness and providence, the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century was a return to the Biblical foundation of the Apostolic Church and Age. The Reformation was not the beginning of a "new" way or form of Christianity, but a return to proper biblical foundations. To appreciate the continuity between the Protestantism of the Reformation and the Apostolic Church, we must be careful to distinguish Catholicism and Romanism. There is a similarity between pre-Christian Israel and post-Christian Judaism, and pre-Reformation Catholicism and post-Reformation Romanism. Protestantism of the Reformation reclaimed the doctrines of the early church ("Catholicism"), such as the Apostle's Creed, the anthropology and soteriology of Augustine on sin and grace, access to God through One Mediator, Jesus Christ. Post-Reformation Romanism (as well as Medieval Romanism) had added many traditions to biblical truth and was therefore no longer faithfully "Catholic" or Catholicism in character and identity because it was not built on the only foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ the Chief Cornerstone (cf. Eph. 2:20). The Reformation was ultimately a return to Apostolic Catholicism (as the "Catholic Church" confessed in the Apostle's Creed and Nicene Creed).

Prior to the Reformation, there were many abuses in the Church of Rome and a dark degeneration had occurred in the faith and practices of the church. There was false teaching (transubstantiation, sacraments of penance, saint veneration, relics, etc.), immorality and dishonesty in the leadership of the Church, more adherence to the traditions of men than the Word of God, and for many in the Church, there was a desire for a return to peace and purity. Although the Church of the pre-Reformation was corrupt and in need of a reforming, it was still the Church of Jesus Christ, and was not wholly apostate, because Jesus as Head and King of His Church has promised that gates of hell would never prevail (Matthew 16). The Reformation was

not made up of schismatics and sectarians. The Roman Catholic Church was reformed from within, and those who God had called to reform her were returning ad fontes or “back to the source”, foundation, or first principles of Biblical-Apostolic Christianity.

The Doctrines of the Reformation: Scripture Alone

The Reformation was profoundly influential and liberating in religious beliefs as well as in the influence it had more broadly on thinking in society and culture. The influence and liberty of the Reformation was because it was a return to the source and foundation of the teaching of Scripture alone over traditions of men; the grace of God found in the Lord Jesus Christ, emphasizing his merits and work, rather than the sinful attempts at good works of men; a call for all believers to recognize their place of service and worship in the Christian Church (cf. Eph. 4:11), over against a papal and priestly hierarchy. The Scriptures were the only infallible source of God’s special revelation to man and were to be the sole guide and authority for the Christian’s faith and life. The Scriptures were translated into the languages of the people and expository preaching of the Scriptures taught all of the people of God; it was no longer merely a book to be interpreted and studied by the priesthood. The Scriptures are to rule and govern the faith and practice of the Church as well as the thinking and reason of men.

Justification by Faith Alone

The return to the Scriptures alone was simultaneously a rescue and restoration of the gospel of grace. Justification by faith alone was the truth that the fullness of grace and truth of God in Jesus could be obtained through faith alone in the merits of Jesus Christ. Justification by faith alone is the doctrine of being reckoned or declared righteous by faith because a sinner is clothed in Christ’s righteousness (see Romans 4). Justification by faith alone was the heart of the good news or gospel that a sinful person could have a right standing before God not based on their own works, but on the works and merits of Jesus Christ imputed to the sinner. In the Reformation the proper distinction was made between the doctrines of justification and sanctification. Justification was a declaration of righteousness received by faith in Christ plus nothing. Sanctification naturally follows justification, but in contrast to it, is the actual making a person righteous. Justification was a declaration that a person was righteous before God based on Christ’s righteousness; sanctification was the making a person righteous as he lived and believed the scriptures throughout his life. In the pre-Reformation Church, justification and sanctification had been confused.

Priesthood of All Believers

The Reformation was also a return to the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers. This biblical truth taught the people were all saints by virtue of being united to Jesus Christ by faith, and because they were Christians they could access God the Father through One Mediator, the man Jesus Christ, and that he was the Mediator, not the hierarchical priesthood of the Church. This teaching did not undermine the authority given to ordained ministers in the Church to serve ministerially and make his word known to the people as Ephesians 4:11-16 teaches (cf. Hebrews 13:7, 17). The teaching of the priesthood of all believers did prevent the usurping and abuse of authority and despotism as had been practiced by the Medieval Roman Papacy and priesthood.

Although many critics of Protestantism and the Reformation would point out the fact that instead of one monolithic, visible, unified, Roman Catholic Church, there are many denominations, it is important to note that there can always be the unity of Christ's Church in diversity. The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church can be unified and at the same time diverse, even though it might not be visibly unified in one institution like the Roman Catholic Church.

Denominationalism might not be the ideal, but in a world of sin and misery, God in his providence can use each faithful denominational stone who hold to the once for all faith delivered to the saints that is articulated in the Apostles Creed to build his holy temple.

Liberty and Tolerance in Religion

The Reformation's influence led not only to liberation in Christ, but a liberty and tolerance in the practice of religion. There were at least three theories on toleration that have been practiced throughout Church history as articulated by George Gillespie of the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s. The first view was the Papist Theory that what the Pope and the Church teaches should be affirmed, and nothing else tolerated; in this theory heretics and schismatics are punished by the Church and civil government. The second view or theory of toleration was that the magistrate does not have the right as a civil ruler to prevent heresy and false teaching, but should enforce liberation and toleration. The third view or theory, that has also been called the "Presbyterian theory of the seventeenth century" purports that the magistrate or civil ruler may and ought to exercise his power in protecting the Church from heretics and false teachers. This third theory of toleration was included in the original Westminster Confession of Faith of the 1640s (this power to the civil magistrate was not included in the American form of the confession). The influence of the Reformation with regard to liberty and toleration extended the furthest in the Constitutional provision in the United States of America that there will be no state religion or church, and that all religion and practices will be tolerated without fear of persecution. What began as a revolt against papal tyranny became eventually a revolt against any form of tyranny by the Church or the state; this outcome we recognize because of the grace of God and the Reformation.

The study of the Reformation can be understood in particular epochs or periods, and it is important to remember certain dates. The German Reformation officially began with Luther's 95 Theses in 1517 and ended with the Thirty Year's War in 1648. The Swiss Reformation followed the German Reformation, was begun by Zwingli from 1517 until his death in 1531, then continued by John Calvin from 1531 until Calvin's death in 1564. The Reformation extended from Germany and Switzerland to Holland (Synod of Dort, 1618); to England (Henry VIII and Edward VI [1527-1553], a short Roman Catholic period under Queen Mary [1553-1558], to a continuing of the Reformation under Elizabeth [1558-1603]; to Scotland (John Knox, 1505-1572), and eventually to the United States, but was wholly suppressed in the Roman Catholic States of Italy and Spain.

Martin Luther's Reformation

The powerful and mighty Spirit of God began the Reformation through a humble German miner's son named Martin Luther. Luther was born on November 10, 1483 and lived for most of

his 63 years for the truth of the gospel until he died on February 18th, 1546. Martin Luther's father and mother disciplined him rigorously and raised him as a faithful Catholic who was greatly devoted in his life and doctrine. Luther studied theology and humanistic studies at the University of Erfurt and graduated in 1505 as a Master of Arts (or modern equivalent to the Doctor of Philosophy degree). Dr. Luther now turned his attention to the study of Law (primarily because of his father's wishes), but God's providence would intervene in Luther's life and he would become an Augustinian monk.

In 1505 Luther entered an Augustinian cloister or monastery in Erfurt, Germany and the Reformation would begin with this man's conversion and convictions. Dr. Luther's primary reason for becoming a monk was to be accepted by God and obtain grace and salvation from God. In the monastery, Dr. Luther was acutely aware of his own unworthiness before God, and as much as he tried in his rigorous devotion in prayers, worship exercises and study to be assured of his salvation, he only became more disillusioned of his sinfulness, as simultaneously God's judgment became clearer to him through the Law. As much as Luther tried to escape the sin problem found in the world by secluding himself in the monastery, the more he was aware of the problem of sin dwelling within his own heart.

Martin Luther's Hope in the Gospel of Grace

John von Staupitz was Luther's senior at the Augustinian monastery, eventually becoming his friend, and an unintentional cause of the Reformation. Staupitz taught Luther the zeal of preaching, pastoring, and theological study, as well as the hope of the gospel being found in Christ. Staupitz encouraged Luther to enter the priesthood in 1507, and to become a Doctor of Divinity in order that he might preach and teach the Bible. Dr. Luther's great struggle during this time was that his sins before God were preeminent in his mind, and he knew that he was worthy of God's strictest and severest punishment, but Staupitz helped Luther to realize the gospel of God's grace found in Christ alone as a cure for sinfulness. Staupitz has rightly been called Luther's "spiritual father" and the one who first shared the hope and healing power of the gospel to Dr. Luther who had been terribly wounded by God's Law. The Reformation happened under God's guidance and providence through the struggle of the one man Martin Luther to find grace and hope in Jesus Christ. Dr. Luther's discovery and reception of the gospel of grace would change the world and in the new found confidence Luther had in his right standing before God, others would come to know this good news as well in a time when few had any assurance of right standing.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the gospel doctrine that Luther came to understand and believe from Scripture. Through the assistance of Staupitz's counsel, and especially Luther's study of the biblical writings of the Apostle Paul, Luther came to understand the peace of God that passes all understanding in realizing that the good news of the gospel is that a man is saved by faith alone in Christ's righteousness and not in one's good works. In Luther's study of Romans (particularly the passage from Romans 1:17), he came to understand that the righteousness that God requires – God supplies to the sinner by faith in the Person and Work of Christ. The righteousness that is given to the sinner who believes in Christ is imputed to the believer, and the believer is clothed in Christ's righteousness, standing perfectly before the throne of God as a recipient of mercy and grace, rather than wrath. Dr. Luther had been taught in

Medieval Roman Catholicism that a sinner must struggle and work hard before God in order to be made righteous and then hopefully declared righteous. Luther realized from the Apostle Paul that faith alone was the instrument whereby a sinner receives by imputation the righteousness of Christ, and then is declared righteous based only on Christ's merits. The Medieval Roman Catholic system of theology had confused the biblical doctrines of justification and sanctification, and this had caused a great deal of anguish in young Luther's soul because Luther knew from the Law of God that even his best works for God were tainted by sin. Luther reasoned that if his best works were sinful before God, there was no hope for him before God's judgment but to receive His damnation. Dr. Luther had stood before the Law of God condemned; he now stood by faith in the grace of God justified and declared righteous in Christ. Luther's understanding of the gospel of grace was to change his entire life and teaching, strengthen his faith, and encourage him to make this known to as many as possible no matter what the consequences; this is the heart of how the Reformation happened in one man's soul, and expanded outward to all those who believed the truth.

Luther's Visit to Rome

Luther had a significant experience when he visited Rome (ca. 1512); there he took part in certain traditions that were supposedly to help relatives in purgatory by reducing their temporal sentence of divine punishment. As he climbed the stairs of the Scala Santa ("Holy Stairs") in Rome, the tradition was that if he ascended the twenty-eight steps on bended knee he would gain an indulgence by the Pope. As Luther ascended ascetically, he remembered Romans 1:17: "The just shall live by faith" and knew in his heart that this superstitious ascetic devotional practice could never cure a man's sinful condition, and give him the hope of right standing before God. Furthermore, Luther observed in the "Holy City of Rome" much unholy, degenerate and immoral practices – even by the Pope himself; these observations in Rome planted seeds of doubt concerning the Roman Church, and was to continue to be watered and grow in Luther's realization and reform for the next few years, as well as the rest of his life.

Dr. Luther, Professor of Theology at Wittenberg

In 1502, Frederick III ("the Wise") of Saxony founded the University of Wittenberg. Staupitz was the first dean of the theological faculty at Wittenberg, and invited Dr. Luther to be a teacher of theology. Luther moved from the convent at Erfurt to the small town of Wittenberg ("the extreme boundary of civilization" in Luther's words) to become professor in 1508 for a short while, settling permanently in 1511 as Professor of Theology until his death in 1546. At Wittenberg, Luther preached and taught for the remainder of his life. The university is important in the development of the Reformation, for it was there that Luther began to study, teach and preach the scriptures in their original language, particularly with the help of Erasmus' publication of the Greek Testament in 1516, and his scholarly colleague Philip Melanchthon. Through Luther's study of the Apostle Paul's Epistles to the Romans and Galatians, as well as the Psalms, Luther became more biblically precise in his theological knowledge. In contrast to the Medieval Scholastic Theology of his time, as well as the current allegorical method of interpretation, Luther eagerly engaged in an exegetical and expositional teaching of God's Word to his students by 1516. This exposition of Scripture would have a profound effect upon Luther the man, as well as Luther the Reformer, not to mention his many students who were hearing the

gospel of God's grace in Christ for the first time. Dr. Luther made his gospel teaching known to a wider audience in his publishing of the Psalms of David in 1517. In these expositions of the Psalms written in German popularly for all the people to read, Luther clearly set forth the biblical doctrine of sin and grace, law and gospel. The Law revealed our sins before God; the gospel rescued us from God's wrath because of Law only in the gospel found in the righteousness that God has given by faith alone in Jesus Christ. Dr. Luther made known the comforting hope of the gospel of God's grace for all sinners who believe. At the beginning of 1517, Luther was a Christian who was assured of his right standing before God in Christ; he was not yet a Reformer and necessarily opposed to Roman Catholicism – this would occur later in the year.

In the summer of 1516, Dr. Luther preached a sermon against the abuse of indulgences and upset Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony. Luther had experienced the forgiveness of sins because of God's grace, and he wanted others to know that grace and forgiveness is found in Jesus Christ alone, who is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). As a pastor, and one who was becoming an influential teacher, Luther believed he should speak out about this Roman Catholic practice that he was beginning to understand undermined the true gospel of grace; but Martin Luther was still in essence a Roman Catholic monk who wanted the Church to be true to Scripture. It was not his intent at this point to start a great debate and a Reformation. Luther was following other preachers and teachers before him that had preached against indulgences such as Wycliffe in England and John Hus in Bohemia. In fact, later Luther would claim that his original arguments against Rome were rather weak compared to what he would go on to say as a powerful and gifted Reformer.

Luther and the Selling of Indulgences

The practice of selling indulgences had quite a history already in the Medieval Roman Catholic Church. Indulgences were sold for the remission of temporal punishments in purgatory, but only God could forgive and remit sins for eternity. Indulgences could be granted by a bishops or archbishops within their dioceses and only the Pope had the authority and power to grant pardon to all Catholics. The sell of indulgences was widespread and popular during the Crusades and received formal theoretical articulation in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologicae*. Pope Boniface VIII issued the first bull of papal indulgence in 1300. Indulgences were part of the Medieval Roman Catholic sacrament of penance. This sacrament included three elements: 1) Contrition of the heart; 2) Confession by the mouth to the priest (auricular confession); and 3) Satisfaction for sins by prayers, fasting, almsgiving, etc. There was a great storehouse that the Pope could draw from called the Treasury of Merit that supposedly contained works of supererogation or works done for God by Christ and the saints, whereby a person through the sacrament of penance could withdraw other's merits to deposit in their own accounts before God's holy tribunal.

During Luther's time as Professor of Theology at Wittenberg, Pope Leo X was seeking to sell indulgences to line his greedy pockets as well as to build the Basilica of St. Peter's at Rome to his glory and memory. In one of Leo's districts in Luther's part of Germany there was the Archbishop of Mainz, Albrecht who was the head of the German clergy. Both Leo and Albrecht were extremely dishonest and greedy men and lived as secularized and luxurious men in the prominent church positions. Archbishop Albrecht appointed one of the greatest salesmen of the

Medieval Catholic Church of the time, Johann Tetzel (of the Dominican Order) to sell indulgences to the people, knowing that he was very shrewd, and he would benefit himself from much of the sales. Tetzel was not able to sell directly in Luther's Wittenberg, but was assigned the task of proclaiming and selling indulgences just over the border where Luther lived.

Johann Tetzel, the great orator and hawker of indulgences, played upon the people's sympathy and with great procession, pomp and circumstance, told the people if they would give monetarily to the church, certain friends and relatives would have a reduced time in purgatory. Dr. Luther understood that the sheep of Christ were being fleeced. He wondered that if the Pope had the authority and power to reduce time and sentence in purgatory, why he didn't empty out all of purgatory if he had true access to this Treasure of Merit, and have mercy on the people, especially poor folks who would spend their last dime to purchase this hope from Tetzel. This event was not the cause of the Reformation, but it became the occasion for the Reformation that started in Germany.

Martin's "Silver" Hammer and the Castle Church at Wittenberg

Dr. Luther was aghast at this hawkish selling of false hope to hurting and hopeless people, and chose the proper way to discuss an academic theological matter, by inviting other clergymen to a disputation concerning indulgences. Luther is not against the entire Medieval Roman Catholic traditions at this point, but he was very concerned about the abuse of the indulgences and wanted to understand more about the Pope's allowing the sell of them, while remaining charitable and giving the benefit of the doubt to the Pope's reasoning behind them. In order to invite others to academic debate, on October 31st 1517, the eve of All Saints Day when many clergymen would be present for the festival, Luther nailed ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Martin Luther never expected what would happen next. Because of the availability of the printing press, his Theses were copied and distributed literally all over Europe. The night was far spent and almost over, and the day of the Reformation had arrived – even though Luther did not realize it.

Dr. Luther's Ninety-Five Theses had the title: Disputation to explain the Virtue of Indulgences. Luther was approaching the question of indulgences with respect to the Pope; he appealed to the other ordained clergy, and with a considerate and moderate tone. At this point in Luther's life, he would have given his own life to protect the life and reputation of the Pope as he was still a faithful monk of the Roman Catholic Church. His Ninety-Five Theses the spirit of Protestantism was at work, as Luther appealed to Scripture and reason for answers. Luther began his Theses by speaking of repentance as a life-long Christian virtue; repentance was not a one time event in a person's life but was what characterized the Christian life. Luther compares biblical repentance (and a lot of his own struggle with his sins and gaining God's forgiveness through grace played into this) with the sacrament of penance. Luther says in his Theses that Jesus said to "Repent" not to "Do penance". A fundamental thesis of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses is thesis sixty-two, where Dr. Luther writes: "The true treasury of the church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." Although Luther approached his questions respectfully in this way, the Roman Church leaders, particularly Leo was threatened by his writings, and Luther opened up for himself great opposition by undermining with scriptural teaching Medieval Catholic teaching. As historian Philip Schaff wrote: "By attacking the abuses of indulgences, Luther unwittingly cut a

vein of Medieval Catholicism” (History of the Christian Church, Vol. VII, 160). Luther’s attempt at disputation caused a controversy that would lead to Reformation as God continued to build his church, and as his people stormed the gates of hell against those opposed to the gospel of free grace found only in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

Luther, Leo, and Melanchthon

Dr. Luther wrote his Theses respectfully and with hope that he could engage in a healthy debate with other clergy and the episcopacy. The time was ripe for Reformation and others such as Erasmus of Rotterdam (Holland) and Ulrich von Hutten also spoke out about church abuses; they were just unwilling to risk as much as eventually Luther realized he would have to risk, even at the point of risking his own life. As respectful as Dr. Luther tried to be, and as much as many thought his Ninety-Five Theses should be heeded due to the great need of reform, he exceedingly agitated many people, including Pope Leo X. Dr. Luther had started a great controversy that would end in Reformation. In God’s grace, he was not alone during this challenging time period of his life. God raised up a great Christian scholar of great learning in the classics, of tender and loving spirit, and one who was just a young man of nineteen when he became one of the most popular professors of the University of Wittenberg. This man, Philip Melanchthon became Luther’s lifelong friend, and one who would stand by his side during Luther’s struggle for Reformation in the Church. Melanchthon became like a son to Luther and they loved each other dearly throughout their lives. Luther needed support and friendship because he was literally standing strong against a formidable foe.

As Luther sounded the trumpet of the Reformation without full intention, he was met with great opposition from other scholars writing against him. Experienced and knowledgeable scholars such as Dr. Eck of Ingolstadt, who was at one time Luther’s friend, became his opponent. Unfortunately, no one could answer Luther’s questions and theses from the scriptures or the Latin Fathers, but had to necessarily argue for the inherent authority of the Pope and councils of the church. Through these debates, Luther became more learned, bold, and strong in standing for the teaching of the Bible. Dr. Luther’s teaching caused him to come directly into conflict with Pope Leo X and his authority over the Church.

Luther’s Apostolic Catholicism

Luther was a true Catholic; that is, Luther was a true Apostolic Catholic. He argued from the scriptures and from the early Church Fathers to prove that there was never accepted in the sacred writings, the writings of the fathers, or at any church council the doctrines expressed in the selling of indulgences. Luther argued that he was not heretic, but that he was a true Catholic by definition because he was building upon, not disagreeing with orthodox positions that had already been accepted long before him. Because of Leo’s position and pride, he at first merely discounted Martin Luther as another “drunken German monk” who when he was sober, would see clearly his position and recant. Luther was being called everything from a drunken German to an arch-heretic because of his desire to initiate a theological debate and discourse. On August 7th, 1518, Pope Leo acted against Luther. Luther was cited to appear at Rome to recant his heresies. The Pope realized that this was more than a mere monkish debate and squabble that would go away; at the heart of this debate was the Pope’s very authority over the Church and his

people. Because of the protection of Elector Frederick the Wise, who was one of the most powerful princes in Germany at this time, Luther was not required to go to Rome. Because Frederick did not want to give up one of his best professors at Wittenberg, it was decided that he would give him protection and arrange an interview with the Pope's clergy in Augsburg.

Luther, Cardinal Cajetan, and Dr. Eck

At Augsburg in October 1518, Luther continued to defend his views as Biblical and Catholic against Cardinal Cajetan who was one of the Pope's chief representatives and able theologians of the Church. At this debate that had been arranged because of Frederick's power and protection, Dr. Luther solidified his position more strongly by arguing that he had the Scriptures as his foundation and that he must obey God rather than man. By this time, Luther is openly and publicly disagreeing with the Pope, and denying his authority when the Pope undermines Scriptural teaching. The heart of the matter here in Augsburg against Cajetan was that Dr. Luther made clear that the Scriptures were the sole authority of matters of faith and life. Because of the explicit undermining of the Pope's authority, Cajetan threatened Luther with excommunication. As Luther continued to think through the matter at the time, he struggled with the fact that if the Pope was disagreeing with the scriptures, then he perhaps could be the Anti-Christ. In 1519, Luther was again commanded by the Church to revoke his heresies. Pope Leo was so desperate to silence Luther, and knew his power was limited by Frederick that he sent Karl von Miltitz to Frederick with a bribe of position and eminence –the very “kingdoms of this world -- similar to the offer the devil made to Christ in his three temptations in the wilderness. Miltitz realized how much influence Dr. Luther had with the people; many were convinced by this time of Luther's biblical position. Miltitz held a conference at Spalatin's house in January 1519 and pleaded with Luther not to divide the visible Catholic Church.

Dividing Christ's Church was never Luther's intention; his main and hopeful intention was to reform the Church. Dr. Luther felt the weight of the importance of seeking unity in the Church and for a season allowed a truce with Miltitz, even conceding that he might recant his views, but as time continued to pass and Luther grew stronger in his convictions about the authority of Scripture, Luther continued to fight. Luther's debates continued next at Leipzig in the months of June and July 1519. At Leipzig Luther was to debate with John Eck. Dr. Eck was professor of theology at Ingolstadt in Bavaria and a strong advocate of Roman Catholicism and the Pope's position. The debate between Luther and Eck revolved around the authority of the Pope. Dr. Eck was supremely knowledgeable and a gifted orator, but Luther far surpassed him in his knowledge of the Scriptures. What became the chief point of discussion and contention as his debate with Cajetan was the authority of the Pope and the infallibility of the Pope. It is at this debate in Leipzig where Luther is first identified with the Jan Huss and his heresy that was condemned at the Council of Constance, and where Huss lost his life for standing on scripture alone. At Leipzig, Luther said that not only the Pope could err, but councils could err, and have, giving the example of the unjust condemnation of Jan Huss. As Dr. Luther is now publicly admitting his being very similar to one the Roman Church considered a heretic, he realizes that he can never recant or turn back from this; he must stand, and he must prayerfully and by God's grace persevere come what may.

As the controversy spread and as many learned men critiqued Rome and the Church's abuses of the times, Luther critiqued the Church and the Pope for what was most important to him, and in his mind what was their greatest sin: a disregard and profound misunderstanding of the gospel of God's grace found in Jesus Christ. Dr. Luther truly believed that the Word of God would destroy all of Christ's enemies and restore the Church to be a shining light of the gospel to all men. Luther believed the scriptural truth of the Prophet Zechariah: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts" (Zech. 4:6). As Luther stood on the Word of God through the year 1520, the Pope of Rome began a process of excommunication in order to permanently silence Luther. This year and period would be the most arduous time for Dr. Luther as he spoke and wrote publicly, honestly, and boldly about the undermining of the Word of God and the sins and abuses of the Papacy and episcopacy, even to the point of claiming that the papacy as it presently existed was antichristian in nature and practice. Luther wrote a letter to Pope Leo X saying: "The Church of Rome, formerly the most holy of all churches, has become the most lawless den of thieves, the most shameless of all brothels, the very kingdom of sin, death, and hell; so that not even the Antichrist, if he were to come, could devise any addition to its wickedness."

Luther's Early Writings: Address to the German Nobility

Encouraged by his friend Philip Melancthon, Dr. Luther wrote three popular books entitled Address to the German Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and the Freedom of the Christian Man. Luther's main intent in writing the books was to express the importance of scripture as the rule of faith and life and the judge of all the ancient teachings and doctrines of the Fathers of the Church. Luther wanted all to know the gospel of the Word of God, and to be warned of the antichristian, unscriptural traditions of men that threatened to bind a Christian's conscience; Luther fought for true freedom in Jesus Christ!

In Luther's book Address to the German Nobility, he writes: "The time for silence is gone, and the time for speaking has come." This Address is dated June 23, 1520, and when it went into print, many read and were influenced by this powerful book; this was one of the great 'bestsellers' of the day in Germany, and was extremely popular with the lay people. Dr. Luther addresses German nobles for the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He encourages them to make it possible for the gospel of grace to go forth from the sound preaching of God's Word and to use their secular power to free the Christian people from the bondage of the wicked papal powers that be. Dr. Luther teaches in his Address the importance of understanding the biblical teaching of the "priesthood of all believers" that basically teaches that it is up to every man, every conscience to read the Bible for himself, and to compare the teachings and traditions of men with what the Bible teaches. Rather than merely the priest craft having access to God through Christ, and the people having to come to Christ through them, Luther taught correctly that all believers had access to God through One Mediator, who was Jesus Christ. Luther's teaching allowed room for a biblical understanding of the ordained ministry and office, but it cut down the mammoth tree of papal abuse and control over the people of God. Luther taught that men have callings, some to ordained office, some to other vocations, but that all were equally "saints" or "priests" in God's sight.

In his Address, Dr. Luther calls upon the German Nobility to intervene in this struggle between biblical Christianity and antichristian abusive power, declaring how the papacy has lived untruthfully and unbiblically, yet protected with great power to achieve their diabolical schemes of greed, corruption, immorality, and lies. Luther ends his Address with twenty-seven practical articles of suggestion for change such as the abolition of the sell of indulgences, the practice of clerical celibacy, the performance of masses for the dead, the observation of certain festivals of the Church Year, a reduction of the number of monasteries, and that fasting should be optional and voluntary for the Christian. Luther concludes his Address by saying “My greatest care and fear is, lest my cause be not condemned by men; by which I should know for certain that it does not please God. Therefore let them freely go to work, Pope, bishop, priest, monk, or doctor: they are the true people to persecute the truth, as they have always done. May God grant us all a Christian understanding, and especially to the Christian nobility of the German nation true spiritual courage, to do what is best for our unhappy Church. Amen.”

Luther’s *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*

Dr. Luther took up the pen next to write *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in October 1520, 1520 being a very prolific writing year for him. This book contrasted to the Address was written for scholars and clergy to consider Dr. Luther’s teaching. In Captivity Luther criticizes the entire sacramental system of the Roman Church that controlled the Christian people and held them captive through their entire lives, preventing them from hearing and understanding the true Gospel. Luther articulates in this book that because the Roman Church has deceived the people with the Roman sacramental system, and has held them in bondage, the Roman Church being the very image of the Babylonian tyranny enslaving the people in darkness. The first errors of the Roman sacramental system that Luther addressed had to do with the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, particularly condemning the withdrawal of the cup from the laity, the doctrine of transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass. Dr. Luther uses the gospels to show that Jesus’ cup was meant for all: “Drink ye all of this,” was not meant by Jesus to be merely for the clergy. Luther argues from the Apostle Paul that the transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine are more Aristotelian than they are Pauline. Luther did not believe that the elements were transubstantiated, and that the real presence of Christ was in the bread and the wine (a doctrine of Luther’s that would later be called consubstantiation in contrast to transubstantiation; that Christ’s presence is in, with, and under the bread and wine). Finally, Luther pointed his corrective finger at the superstitious sacrifice of the mass, and struck the heart of the Roman Church’s aberration of true worship in spirit and truth. Luther was appalled at this unbiblical teaching, describing it as a bloodless re-sacrificing of Christ on the cross when the priest uttered the words of the mass in Latin. In Luther’s next point in his book, he addresses what he thought the Bible taught about baptism. For Luther, as well as for the Roman Church of his time, baptism was a means of regeneration (the Reformation Church would have to await Calvin’s honed theological mind to correct this error). Finally, Luther says that there are only two sacraments commanded and given by the Lord: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Luther denied that the Bible gave to the Church seven sacraments, and that confirmation, ordination, marriage, and extreme unction were traditions of men. Dr. Luther pointed out that marriage was to be a gift of God to man as the Apostle Paul taught in Ephesians 5, not a sacrament for laity to enjoy, and clergy to avoid.

Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*

As Luther was being formally condemned as a heretic of the Holy Catholic Church, he wrote his next and perhaps most influential and enduring book *The Freedom of a Christian*. In this book, Luther exegetes and expounds the gospel primarily from Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, and says that the Christian is freed in Christ to live as sons of God, obediently and joyfully serving our Lord Jesus Christ. The memorable and most important thesis of the book is: "The Christian is the lord of all, and subject to none, but virtue of faith; he is the servant of all, and subject to everyone, by virtue of love." For Luther, the Gospel freed a person from bondage to sin and self, so that they could love and serve God and neighbor, or as the Apostle Paul teaches: "faith working through love." Rather than being under the Roman Church's tyranny and enforced bondage to the sacramental system of penance and good works, Christ has freed us from Law and other forms of tyranny in order to love and serve; as Jesus taught in Matthew 11, his yoke is easy, and his burden is light compared to the awful yoke of slavery and the heavy and hard burden of law. Dr. Luther shows a mature understanding of the gospel theologically and practically in *Freedom* by pointing out the purpose of the Law to lead a man to the end of himself and recognize his deserved condemnation, only to look and find the righteous requirements of God's law in the Person of Jesus Christ, which is the freeing and glorious gospel of God's grace and mercy. In the Person of Jesus Christ, a righteousness from God is found, and Christ is condemned in our place, so that we might receive God's mercy and love. The Roman Church would criticize Luther and other Reformers unfairly by saying that promoting the gospel leads to a disregard for God's Law (antinomianism), but here we have Luther's clear teaching of the place of the Law in the Christian life, but how the Law is obeyed and lived out of love and the power of the Spirit in Christ. The Christian is freed from bondage to love and serve, and thus fulfill the Law by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this little tract written in 1520, Dr. Luther countered any unfair criticism from the Roman Catholic Church implying that he and other Reformers were antinomians, or those opposed to good works out of obedience to God's commands.

Pope Leo, Charles V, and the Papal Bull of Excommunication

It had been almost three years since Luther had posted his *Ninety-Five Theses*, and much growth spiritually and intellectually had occurred in Dr. Luther as he countered Rome and brought about a Reformation of the Christian Church. Ultimately, in response to Luther's writings, a Papal Bull of Excommunication was written for Luther to be condemned as a heretic. In the bull, the Pope arrogantly assumes the very position of Christ over the Church, and pompously speaks as if his words are equal to the Bible's revelation. In the bull, Pope Leo calls St. Peter and St. Paul and the whole body of the saints to aid against "the boar out of the wood" and the "wild beast of the field" that had broken into the vineyard of the Lord to waste and destroy it. The Pope condemns the writings and doctrines of Luther as heretical and a threat to Roman Catholicism. Pope Leo X explicitly and tyrannically states in the bull that the writings of Martin Luther are to be burned, he is to be brought to Rome with the promise of safe conduct, Luther is suspended from ministry, all Catholics are not allowed to read, print or publish Luther's writings, and if anyone conceals, hides, or protects Luther, the place will be under an Interdict from the papacy. The bull was published all over Europe and especially in Germany, but few took notice of it due to Luther's cogent biblical argumentation and his popularity. When Luther received this bull, he disregarded

it and burned it on December 10th, 1520 along with other papal decrees and the writings of Eck (who was the Pope's messenger to make the bull known to the world), and he sought refuge under the secular power of Frederick the Wise. We dare not underestimate this brave and courageous act; one man; one monk; a miner's son; a theological professor and great preacher; this one monk stood up to the most powerful man on earth at the time – a man more powerful than many kings, greatly revered and feared – a man who the whole world served and fell at his feet as though dead.

The emperor of the Holy Roman Empire at the beginning of Luther's career as professor at Wittenberg and as a powerful Reformer was Maximilian I who died in January 1519. At the height of Dr. Luther's peak of powers against the papacy, the emperor to succeed him was Charles V, who ruled from 1520-1556. Charles V ruled during the height of the German Reformation, and reigned ten years after Luther's death in 1546, and almost to the end of the Counter-Reformation, Roman Catholic Council of Trent. It is important to remember at this time in the history of the Holy Roman Empire, that the emperor swore to protect and uphold the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church at his coronation. Charles was a powerfully shrewd and wise emperor like Charles "the Great" before him that God raised up providentially to be in place during the remainder of Luther's life. He was a devoted Roman Catholic, although he as many other emperors had their vices and sinful practices, but died speaking the name of "Jesus" as his final word. Charles fully endorsed the Papal Bull written against Luther, and regarded Luther's Reformation as a rebellion against the Church and the State.

Luther and the Diet of Worms (1521)

On January 28th 1521, Charles V opened his first Diet at Worms; this was to be the most memorable and consequential Diet, not only in Germany, but for the entire world. Here at Worms, a German town on the left bank of the Rhine, Dr. Luther would formally stand firm on God's word as the absolute and final guide for faith and life. On March 6, Emperor Charles V cited Luther to appear to recant of his writings and teachings before the Diet under the safe protection of the Empire. Frederick the Wise also sent letters of safe-conduct on Luther's behalf. Luther saw this as an opportunity given by God himself. Although Luther had been summoned to Rome the year before by Pope Leo, he and Frederick the Wise disregarded the summons. Now, believing the emperor to be fair and noble in his invitation, Luther agreed to go to Worms. Dr. Luther was determined as he traveled not to recant, but to bear witness to the truth of the scriptures. Luther left Wittenberg on April 2nd and traveled with a colleague and student from the university; Melanchthon was unable to travel at this time with his dear friend. As Luther traveled with representatives of the college in an open farmer's wagon, he was greeted and welcomed along the way by great cheer for his heroic stand for the gospel of grace; Luther even found time to preach as he traveled and stayed briefly in certain towns. Later in Luther's life, he would recall God's grace to him during this fearful time in his life; he remembered how God had made him so bold that he was willing to lose his life for the gospel, knowing that the truth of Christ would live on.

Luther reached his destination at Worms on Tuesday, April 16th, 1521. Luther was dressed in a monastic gown and preceded by an imperial herald. The most significant dates during his visit at Worms were his testimonies to the truth of Scripture during the Diet on April 17th and 18th.

Luther entered the Diet surrounded by clerical episcopates and distinguished, powerful men of the state. Dr. Johann von Eck asked Luther two important questions: 1) Did he acknowledge the books and writings as his own that were laid out before the august assembly? 2) Would he be willing to retract his teaching? Luther proceeded boldly because of his profound sense of responsibility in standing up for the truth of the Word of God.

On April 18th, after much prayer to God for grace, and meditation on his present circumstances before God and man, Luther told the assembly that he would not retract writings that biblically supported what the Word of God taught, nor would he retract his honest observations and criticisms concerning the abuses of wickedness and tyranny in the papacy, and he said: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if I have spoken well, why smitest thou me?" which were very similar words that Christ himself had used before his accusers of the church and state at his crucifixion. Dr. Luther was even so bold as to address the most powerful secular ruler in the world, Charles V, and he pleaded with him not to begin his rule by condemning the Word of God. That most important day, Dr. Luther did not recant or retract his writings, but boldly stated before all the secular dignitaries and powerful Roman Catholic clergy: "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments, 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 anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience." Luther ended his talk by saying: "Here I stand. I can not do otherwise. God help me! Amen."

Although many of the papal delegates of Rome considered Luther to be an obstinate and erring heretic, many of the German delegates were quite impressed with how Luther handled himself. One delegate, Duke Erik of Brunswick sent Luther some of his finest beer to enjoy, and Luther's own Elector Frederick expressed to Spalatin: "How excellently did Father Martin speak both in Latin and German before the Emperor and the Estates! He was bold enough, if not too much so." Dr. Luther's popularity spread like wildfire especially among the people of Germany; the common people recognized Luther as a great hero of the people for his courageous actions. Although the papal party formally triumphed at the Diet of Worms, it was Luther and the Word of God that ultimately triumphed in the end. The gates of hell did not prevail against Christ's true church all because one man, a miner's son and monk stood humbly, yet boldly for the truth of God's Word. It cannot be denied that Luther stood for the truth of the word of God over the tyranny and abuses of man, against the false traditions of man, and the council that had erred in Jesus' name, and the supremacy of God's Word was restored to the Church and the people!

Luther the Apostolic Catholic

Luther was a true Catholic. He did not stand against Catholicism per se, but the degenerated Roman Catholicism that undermined the word of God of his day. Luther affirmed the decisions of the first four ecumenical councils of the Church (Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon); Luther recognized the authority of the Church Fathers when they rightly interpreted God's Word; Luther understood himself as an ordained man with a responsibility to witness to the truth of God's Word; and he stood on the truth revealed in the Apostle's Creed. Luther did indeed take a stand against Roman Catholicism as a true Catholic and man of God, and by God's grace was successful to bring about the greatest event in the history of the Church since the time of the Apostles. For standing against the papacy, the Pope encouraged Charles V to hand him

over to the Roman Church to be executed at the stake, but the emperor refused and Luther was sent back home to Wittenberg with safe-conduct. This protection of Luther was the greatest service that Charles rendered to the Reformation (Schaff, Vol. VII, 317). However, Luther was formally under edict as a heretic from Church and State, but he lived because of the faithfulness and mercy of God, and the protection of Frederick the Wise. The world would never be the same, and the Reformation was now fully underway. The gospel of the Lord Jesus, under the authority of Christ, was continuing to go forth to the ends of the earth, and as Martin Luther stood for the Word of God, the Great Commission continued.

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