

Luther and Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms (1521)

Abstract

When Luther arrived in Worms under Imperial safe conduct, his teachings had already been condemned by Rome. Strictly speaking, the emperor and the Diet [*Reichstag*] possessed only the authority to enforce this condemnation by declaring Luther an outlaw. What happened next, however, had no precedent in Imperial history: the emperor and the Diet took the unusual step of offering Luther a hearing. Thus, Luther's fate differed vastly from that of Bohemian reformer Jan Hus, who, after being condemned by the Council of Constance a century earlier, was executed by the emperor who had issued his safe conduct.

These documents—Luther's declaration (A) and Emperor Charles's response to it (B)—marked a great historical moment. Luther refused to recant the published opinions Rome had condemned—in his mind, acknowledging the separate authority of the existing Church would go against the Bible, his conscience, and reason. The declaration he made at Worms became the battle cry of what would come to be known as the “Protestant Reformation.” The young emperor's reply, which was delivered by an orator the next day, was equally historic: he accepted and would defend the authority and the teachings of the Church as his ancestors had done before him. The exchange was asymmetrical, of course. Luther insisted on the autonomous, exclusive authority of the Bible; whereas Charles defended the Church's traditions and the practice of piety, which had continued unbroken since time of the Apostles. Thus, Worms brought a theological issue—the conflict between Scripture and Tradition—out of the lecture halls and into the highest forum of Imperial public life. The news of this awesome confrontation flew through the Empire on wings of (printed) paper (the German word for pamphlet—*Flugschrift*—literally means flying document), and within a few months, the exchange became the subject of unprecedented public interest.

In May 1521, the emperor issued—in the Diet's name—the act known as the “Edict of Worms” (C) against Luther, his followers, and his writings, as well as anyone who reproduced or sold them. This law provided the legal basis for the more or less effective coercion of Luther's movement for the remainder of the decade.

Source

A. Luther at the Diet of Worms, Broadsheet

‘Most serene Emperor, gracious electors, nobles and lords. Yesterday I was asked two questions: whether I would confess those pamphlets which were published under my name to be mine and whether I would persist in them or revoke them. To this I answered readily and clearly that I would now and for all eternity admit that these books were mine and were published under my name unless my opponents had changed them with deception or meddlesome wisdom or given false quotations. For I confess nothing but what I myself have written and certainly not the painstaking interpretations and comments of others.

‘Now I am called upon to answer the second question. I humbly pray your Imperial Majesty and lords, to consider carefully that my books are not all of the same kind. There are some in which I dealt with faith and life in such an evangelical and simple manner that even my opponents must admit that they are useful, innocent and worthy to be read by Christian people. Even the bull, which is otherwise quite fierce and cruel, considers some of my books to be harmless, though it condemns them on the basis of an unnatural judgment. Would I now revoke these books I would do nothing but condemn the truth which is confessed by all, friend and foe alike. I of all men would be against a common and general confession.

‘The second group of my books is written against the papacy and papal scheming and action, that is against those who through evil teaching and example have ruined Christendom laying it waste with the evils of the spirit and the soul. No one can deny or obscure this fact, since experience and complaint of all men testify that the conscience of Christian believers is sneered at, harassed and tormented by the laws of the Pope and the doctrines of men. Likewise the goods and wealth of this most famous German nation were and are devoured through unbelievable tyranny in unreasonable manner, through decretals and laws, regulations and orders. Yet Canon Law states (Distinctions 9 and 25, Questions 1 and 2) that the law and teaching of the Pope, whenever contrary to the Gospel and the opinions of the holy Fathers, are to be considered in error and be rejected. Were I, therefore, to revoke these books I would only strengthen this tyranny and open not only windows, but also doors for such unchristian ways, which would then flourish and rage more freely than ever before. The testimony of my opposition will make the rule of their bold and ignominious malice most intolerable for the poor suffering people. [...]

‘The third group of my books consists of those I have written against certain private individuals who attempted to defend such Roman tyranny and denounce my pious doctrine. I confess that I have been more bitter and vehement against them than is in keeping with my Christian estate and calling. I do not claim to be a saint, nor do I proclaim my life, but rather the doctrine of Christ. Thus I cannot revoke these books, since my revocation would mean the continuance of their tyrannical, violent and raging rule due to my compliance and hesitancy. The people of God would be treated more violently and unmercifully than ever.

‘What more shall I say? Since I am a man and not God, I cannot support my pamphlets through any other means than that which the Lord Jesus employed when he was questioned before Ananias and asked concerning his teaching and smitten on his cheek by a servant. He said then: “If I have spoken evil bear witness of the evil.” If the Lord, who knew that he could not err, did not refuse to hear testimony against his doctrine even from the most miserable servant, how much more should I, the scum of the earth and prone to error, hope and expect that someone should testify against my doctrine. Therefore I pray by the grace of God that your Imperial Majesty and Lordships, and everyone, high or low, should give such testimony, convict me of error and convince me with evangelical and prophetic writings. Should I thus be persuaded, I am most ready and willing to revoke all errors and be the first to throw my books into the fire.

‘From this it should be evident that I have carefully considered and weighed such discord, peril, uproar and rebellion which is rampant in the world today on account of my teaching, as I was gravely and urgently made aware yesterday. It is quite revealing as far as I am concerned that the divine Word causes factions, misunderstanding, and discord to arise. Such, of course, must be the fate and the consequence of the divine Word, even as the Lord himself said: “I am come not to send peace but a sword, to set a man against his father, etc.” Therefore we must ponder how wonderful and terrible God is in his counsels, plans and intentions. Perhaps we condemn the Word of God if we do away with our factions and dissensions. It would be a deluge of inestimable evils, indeed a cause of concern lest the imperial rule of our most pious and youthful Emperor (in whom, next to God, great hope is to be placed) should have an unfortunate beginning. [...]

‘Finally I commend myself to your Majesty and to your Lordships, humbly praying that you will not suffer me, against your will, to be subjected to disgrace and defamation by my enemies.’

After this statement the spokesman for the Empire claimed angrily that I [Luther] had not given a clear answer. Furthermore there was no need to discuss what has already been condemned and decided by councils. Therefore I was asked to answer in a simple and unsophisticated manner whether I would revoke. Thereupon I said: ‘Since your Imperial Majesty and Lordships demand a simple answer I will do so without horns or teeth as follows: Unless I am convicted by the testimony of Scripture or by evident reason (for I trust neither in popes nor in councils alone, since it is obvious that they have often erred and

contradicted themselves) I am convicted by the Scripture which I have mentioned and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Therefore I cannot and will not recant, since it is difficult, unprofitable and dangerous indeed to do anything against one's conscience. God help me. Amen.'

[...]

B. Emperor Charles' Response

The morning after Luther's second appearance Emperor Charles V assembled the rulers and stated his own position.

You know that my ancestors were the most Christian Emperors of the illustrious German nation, the Catholic kings of Spain, the archdukes of Austria, and the dukes of Burgundy, who all were, until death, faithful sons of the Roman Church. Always they defended the Catholic faith, the sacred ceremonies, decretals, ordinances and holy rites to the honour of God, the propagation of the faith and the salvation of souls. After their deaths they left, by natural law and heritage, these holy Catholic rites, for us to live and to die following their example.

I am therefore resolved to maintain everything which these my forebears have established to the present, especially that which my predecessors ordered at the Council of Constance and at other councils. It is certain that a single monk errs in his opinion which is against what all of Christendom has held for over a thousand years to the present. According to his opinion all of Christendom has always been in error. To settle this matter I am therefore determined to use all my dominions and possessions, my friends, my body, my blood, my life and my soul. It would be a great disgrace for you and me, the illustrious and renowned German nation, appointed by privilege and singular pre-eminence to be the defenders and protectors of the Catholic faith, as well as a perpetual dishonour for both us and our posterity, if in our time not only heresy, but the suspicion of heresy and the degradation of the Christian religion were due to our negligence.

After the impertinent reply which Luther gave yesterday in our presence, I declare that I now regret having delayed so long the proceedings against him and his false doctrines. I am resolved that I will never again hear him talk. He is to be taken back immediately according to the arrangements of the mandate with due regard for the stipulations of his safe-conduct. He is not to preach or seduce the people with his evil doctrine and is not to incite rebellion. As said above, I am resolved to act and proceed against him as against a notorious heretic, asking you to state your opinion as good Christians and to keep the vow given me.

C. Edict of Worms

In May 1521, Emperor Charles V issued, in the name of the Diet, the following edict against Luther and his followers:

[...]

And now, particularly on account of these things, we have summoned here to Worms the electors, princes and estates of this our Holy Empire, and carefully examined the aforesaid matters with great diligence, as evident necessity demands, and with unanimous advice and consent of all, we decree what follows.

Although one so condemned and persisting in his obstinate perversity, separated from the rites of the Christian Church and a manifest heretic, is denied a hearing under all laws; nevertheless, to prevent all unprofitable dispute [...] we, through our herald, gave him a safe-conduct to come hither, in order that he might be questioned in our own presence and in that of the electors, princes, and estates of the

empire; whether he had composed the books which were then laid before his eyes. [...]

And as soon as these books were enumerated, he acknowledged them as his own, and moreover declared that he would never deny them. And he also says that he has made many other books, which we have not mentioned herein because we have no knowledge of them. [...]

Accordingly, in view of all these considerations and the fact that Martin Luther still persists obstinately and perversely in maintaining his heretical opinions, and consequently all pious and God-fearing persons abominate and abhor him as one mad or possessed by a demon [...] we have declared and made known that the said Martin Luther shall hereafter be held and esteemed by each and all of us as a limb cut off from the Church of God, an obstinate schismatic and manifest heretic. [...]

We strictly order that immediately after the expiration of the appointed twenty days, terminating on the fourteenth day of May, you shall refuse to give the aforesaid Martin Luther hospitality, lodging, food, or drink; neither shall anyone, by word or deed, secretly or openly, succour or assist him by counsel or help; but in whatever place you meet him, you shall proceed against him; if you have sufficient force, you shall take him prisoner and keep him in close custody; you shall deliver him, or cause him to be delivered, to us or at least let us know where he may be captured. In the meanwhile you shall keep him closely imprisoned until you receive notice from us what further to do, according to the direction of the laws. And for such holy and pious work we will indemnify you for your trouble and expense.

In like manner you shall proceed against his friends, adherents, patrons, maintainers, abettors, sympathizers, emulators and followers. And the property of these, whether personal or real, you shall, in virtue of the sacred ordinances and of our imperial ban and over-ban, treat in this way; namely, you shall attack and overthrow its possessors and wrest their property from them and transfer it to your own custody and uses; and no one shall hinder or impede these measures, unless the owner shall abandon his unrighteous way and secure papal absolution.

Consequently we command you, each and all, under the penalties already prescribed, that henceforth no one shall dare to buy, sell, read, preserve, copy, print, or cause to be copied or printed, any books of the aforesaid Martin Luther, condemned by our holy father the Pope as aforesaid, or any other writings in German or Latin hitherto composed by him, since they are foul, harmful, suspected, and published by a notorious and stiff-necked heretic. Neither shall any dare to approve his opinions, nor to proclaim, defend, or assert them, in any other way that human ingenuity can invent, notwithstanding he may have put some good in them to deceive the simple man.

Source of English translation: Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964, pp. 89–91, 94, 99–100.

Source of original German text: Detlef Ploese and Guenther Vogler, eds., *Buch der Reformation. Eine Auswahl zeitgenössischer Zeugnisse (1476–1555)*. Berlin: Union Verlag, 1989, pp. 245–53.

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