

The Great Controversy Series

11 Martin Luther: Here I Stand. I Can Do No Other

When someone mentions the Protestant Reformation, the name of Martin Luther probably comes to most people's minds. We have talked about the John Wycliffe, the Morning Star of the Reformation and about the martyrs John Huss and Jerome. Like the Waldenses millions of other nameless people lost their lives because they did not adhere to the doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church in the Dark Ages. Jesus described that fearful bloody period with the following words:

Matthew 24:21 "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.

But the Lord would have pity on His people and be a help to them.

Revelation 12:6 Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Matthew 24:22 "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

The Protestant Reformation would shorten the 1260 year period of papal supremacy from 538 to 1798. Jesus said:

John 8:32 "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Which truth can set people free? In Martin Luther's life, the words of Jesus were fulfilled.

Luther whose father and mother were poor and devout was born in the German city of Eisleben in the year 1483. Widespread superstitious beliefs frightened young Luther. He saw God as a merciless judge, stern and cruel instead of looking at God as kind and loving. Luther's father wanted him to study law and when he was 18 he entered the University in Erfurt. In the library he first saw a Latin Bible. He had heard some references from the gospels and from the epistles but he thought that was the totality of the Bible. A desire was awakened in him to read the whole Bible.

Luther wanted to be free from sin and have peace with God. He entered a monastery and it was necessary for him to do the most menial labor and beg from door to door. Luther thought that these were necessary because of his sins and so he carried out the duties. In the monastery there was a Bible and as often as he could he read it. He wanted cleansing of heart and he wanted to do whatever it took to supply it. He tortured himself but these could not quiet a guilty conscience.

There was a man named Staupitz in the monastery. He recommended to Luther that instead of looking to himself and the eternal punishment of the breakers of God's law that he trust to Jesus for salvation.

Luther became a priest and a professor at the University of Wittenberg. There he read the Bible closely in the original languages. He taught the Bible and Staupitz encouraged Luther to preach. At first very reserved but more boldly later as many people began to come to listen to him preach.

Luther went to Rome once. He was shocked at what he saw. The monks in Rome were not living in poverty and self-denial. They wore rich robes and their tables were full of food. Among the clergy he saw debauchery, iniquity and every kind of evil.

At that time, the pope promised an indulgence to anyone who would climb "Pilates staircase" on their knees.

According to Catholic theology, there are two punishments for sin. One is eternal and the other temporal. . (<http://www.catholic-forum.com/members/catholictracts/tract117.html>). According to this idea, in eternal punishment a soul loses heaven and is tortured in hell for eternity.

According to Catholics, this penalty is canceled through forgiveness. The temporal punishment though, remains. The sinner himself must provide atonement for this punishment. How is this provided? According to Catholic theology, through prayers, fasting, financial gifts, by doing good works and by suffering the temporal punishment for sin is atoned for.

There is one other way that it is provided. That is called indulgences. According to Catholics, Jesus, mother Mary and other saints earned more merit than was necessary for them. These merits are kept in the Treasury of the Church. If the sinner does some good deed or some prayer, then the church gives these merits to atone for the temporal punishment of sin. If a person dies before they earn enough merits then they have to go to a place called purgatory. There, they suffer for their sins.

Friends, is that what God is like? Will you pay for supposedly one part of sin's punishment by suffering physically? Is that what the Bible teaches? Or is a corrupt church using errors from paganism to hold in their clutch a people who are drowning in superstition? How do you know if you have earned enough merit? You don't know so you do an endless round of self-tortures, offerings, pilgrimages and prayers. You continually do what the church tells you. Furthermore, if it isn't enough you may burn in purgatory for years. Who knows?

With such an understanding, Martin Luther was climbing the stone stairs on his knees to pay the temporal penalty for sin. He was trying to win an indulgence. Suddenly he heard a voice like thunder: The just shall live by faith. Romans 1:17. Luther, in terror and shame and fear, got up and ran from that place. His eyes had been opened. He would never again look to human works for salvation. He would only look to Christ's righteousness.

When he returned to Wittenburg, Luther he received his doctorate. As a professor he taught that Christians should not accept and doctrine that does not come from the Bible. This concept was undermining the papacy. This concept was one of the fundamental principles of the Reformation.

Luther's sermons brought peace, joy and hope to people's hearts. The people were deeply affected by hearing of the Savior's love. The people were glad to hear that only by Jesus' righteousness could then have assurance of pardon. Luther's sermons began to be heard everywhere.

Ellen White wrote the following:

But light and darkness cannot harmonize. Between truth and error there is an irrepressible conflict. To uphold and defend the one is to attack and overthrow the other.

Luther had begun down a difficult road.

A man named Tetzel came to Germany to sell indulgences. He promised that whoever bought the indulgences would have all of their sins forgiven. It was announced to the people that by giving money, their relatives could be set free from purgatory. What does the Bible say? Can you buy spiritual blessings with money?

Acts 8:18-20 And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰ But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!

If the people had known the Bible they would not have been deceived. But they didn't know. They were tricked by priests and prelates. The number of people who were against this system of indulgences was not small yet they dared not come against the church and they remained silent. In Luther's own church were those who came seeking pardon for sin, not because they were sorry and repentant but because they had purchased indulgences. Luther rejected them. The people were surprised and went to Tetzel to complain. They wanted their money back.

Tetzel was furious but continued his sales. Luther published 95 theses against indulgences. In the thesis he put forth the argument that pardon and the cancellation of sin could never be granted by the pope or any other person. He communicated that the whole indulgence system was nothing more than a scheme to make money. In a short time, Luther's theses were spread all over Christendom.

Many people wanted to believe that they could obtain pardon for sin with money and they opposed Luther. They did not want to hear a message that said it is necessary to repent and turn from sin. They did not want to forsake their sins.

Many people were glad that someone was trying to straighten up the church. But they stayed quiet. They believed Luther was right but they understood that the price was high and they did not back Luther. They said, "If the reform is accepted, the Roman Church's power will lessen, people would have to think for themselves and if the Church would lose power we also would lose power."

Rome's supporters accused Luther of heresy. Luther was called to Rome. Luther's friends were afraid that his going would mean certain death. They protested and convinced the pope to allow Luther to be tried in Germany. For the trial, the pope gave the judges instruction. Luther was declared a heretic. Besides the emperor, any state official who did not capture Luther and deliver him to Rome would be excommunicated. The spirit of Rome is seen in this. Before a person is heard, he is condemned.

The trial would be in Augsburg. Luther was in a very dangerous position. He knew the fate of John Huss very well. Without first getting a safe-conduct, he went to Augsburg. The legate from Rome was intent on getting Luther to recant and if he could not succeed at that he would try to carry him to Rome for execution. But Luther did not venture to appear before the papal legate without a safe-conduct from the emperor. He went to the trial after he received it.

The papal legate wanted Luther to yield implicitly and to agree to everything without question. Luther respectfully said that he would answer any objection about his writings to the legate. But he added that he would not yield unless someone could show that his writings were wrong.

The papal legate only said, "Recant! Recant!" The legate didn't give Luther an opportunity to speak. The Reformer showed that his position was from the Bible and he declared that he would not deny the truth. The papal legate could not answer Luther's arguments. Instead he reproached Luther. When Luther saw that the papal legate was not listen to him, he received permission to give his answer in writing. In the following hearing, Luther used many scriptures to share his views. He gave them a written answer as well but the papal legate tossed them aside without looking at them. When the legate saw that he couldn't give a proper answers, he shouted, "Recant or I will send you to Rome and I will excommunicate anyone who accepts your writings. After declaring that he would not recant he withdrew from the hearing.

Everyone could see the two positions. Luther made his defense from the Bible. The papal legate appealed to Church tradition, The Church fathers, and the Church authority.

The papal legate appealed to the state to take Luther to Rome but the Elector of Saxony Friedrich did not permit it. The Refomer's writings and teachings spread all over Christendom. Many people wanted to support the reformation. And Luther's enemies were not a few. A papal bull condemned Luther's writings and a 60 day period was given: If the Reformer and his followers did not recant they would all be excommunicated. Luther announced that the papacy was the antichrist.

The people were in a panic. They wanted reform but to be excommunicated meant prison, torture and death. They trembled before the papal bull. Everyone expected Luther to recant or be killed. But Luther burned the papal bull in public. Luther was excommunicated but the battle did not end. It had just begun.

Now if you want to preach truth from the Bible instead of fabricated doctrines of men you may expect the treatment that was exhibited toward Luther. People have not changed. The masses have always rejected truth. The ones who accept the truth will always be a minority. This will be so until the end of time.

A new emperor, Charles V succeeded to the throne. Papists ran to his side to incite him to execute Luther. Now let's stop and think a minute. What is happening? The papacy appealed to the state concerning a doctrine and wanted the death of those who did not accept the Church's commands. The Reformers were not espousing thievery, adultery, murder, lying, or social disorder. It was only a matter of belief. This is state religion. When civil penalties accompany religious rules, that is state religion. You remember the statue of Daniel 2. The feet were clay mixed with iron. The state and religion were mixed and the two didn't cleave to each other. Why? Because each wanted to be in control. The papacy shouted, "Let Luther be executed!" The Elector of Saxony Friedrich said, "No." Again the papacy appealed to the state, that is to the emperor, to carry out its own will.

In a place called Worms there was to be a general council of the German states. The emperor and many princes wanted Luther to come and make a defense. The papal legates were furious. Luther's being tried again was annulling the church's excommunication. How could it be that the state did not accept the Church's decree without question? How could someone speak who had been condemned by the church? It is not acceptable!

The papal legate Aleander tried with all his power to have Luther condemned. Yet he tried so hard that everyone could see the spirit that actuated him: not justice and mercy but hate and revenge. Aleander spoke before the emperor and all the princes. His case was as follows: Luther was a heretic. The Catholic Church is great and Luther's supporters few. Those supporting Luther were poor and uneducated and few in number. How is it that the great Church is wrong and this small group is right? Aleander's speech was very impressive.

In this manner people also war with the truth. Popular religions shout, "The majority can't be wrong!" But throughout history the majority have never been right in religious matters.

Luther was not present and therefore did not defend himself. What would the council do? Duke George of Saxon rose to his feet and spoke. Actually, George was not on Luther's side. But he enumerated the papal abuses. He wanted the Church to be straightened up. Later, Luther was called to the council. Again Aleander objected but it was not accepted. Luther would go to Worms.

The council condemned Luther's writings even before he arrived at Worms. Everyone thought that Luther was going to Worms only for his execution. The papal legate wanted Luther executed as soon as he arrived in Worms and he appealed to the emperor. But the emperor had given a safe-conduct and he did not do what the emperor Sigismund did to Huss one hundred years previously. Charles kept his word.

Finally Luther was before the council which was called a Diet. Up until that time no one had appeared before such an imposing council of which Luther would defend his faith. "This appearance was of itself a signal victory over the papacy. The pope had condemned the man, and he was now standing before a tribunal which, by this very act, set itself above the pope. The pope had laid him under an interdict, and cut him off from all human society; and yet he was summoned in respectful language, and received before the most august assembly in the world. The pope had condemned him to perpetual silence, and he was now about to speak before thousands of attentive hearers drawn together from the farthest parts of Christendom. An immense revolution had thus been effected by Luther's instrumentality. Rome was already descending from her throne, and it was the voice of a monk that caused this humiliation."—J.H. Merle D'Aubigne History of the Reformation., b. 7, ch. 8.

Luther came from a poor and humble family and nearly alone he stood in front of the emperor. But he kept the Lord's words:

Matthew 10:18-20 "You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ "But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; ²⁰ "for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

The Reformer answered: "Since your most serene majesty and your high mightinesses require from me a clear, simple, and precise answer, I will give you one, and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the councils, because it is clear as the day that they have frequently erred and contradicted each other. Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by the clearest reasoning, unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted, and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the word of God, I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me. Amen." --Ibid., b. 7, ch. 8.

Emperor Charles rejected Luther's defense. Like many people before him, he embraced the traditions and customs of his ancestors. When God send people new light, they reject it because it is new, it was not given to their ancestors. We are responsible for the light given to us. To reject truth is to reject God who is the author of truth.

We see it again: People like Staupitz and Luther were Catholic. They were righteous, faithful and honest people. Many people in the fallen Catholic Church wanted reform. If Luther had

yielded on a single point he would have lost his influence. Satan and the papacy would have won. But he did not yield. This man who dared to think for himself on religious matters influenced the church and the whole world.

At the end of time, the believers will be brought to the same situation. The believers will be proscribed, reproached and belittled. They will be accused of being trouble makers against the government and peace. They will have few supporters. They will appear before kings and governors. My prayer is that like Luther, you will also say, "Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen."