

Great Controversy Series

13 Protest!

The Edict of Worms recognized Martin Luther as a criminal. His writings and the preaching of his doctrines was proscribed. Despite this, in the empire there was religious freedom. Emperor Charles V. wanted to crush the Reform but every time he tried, either the Turks attacked from the east or the king of France or even the papacy, jealous of the emperor's rising power, would wage war against him. The Reform strengthened because there was confusion on every side.

In 1526 in the city of Spires, a Diet was held. The Diet decided to give every state religious freedom until a general council could be convened. Charles, called for a new Diet to be held in Spires in 1529 for the purpose of destroying the Reformation. The emperor intended to convince the princes against the Reform, at first using mild means, but if necessary he would resort to arms.

When the diet began to meet, it was put forth that the previous diet's decision which recognized freedom of conscience had encouraged chaos and rebellion. The emperor demanded that the former decision be annulled. The princes which wanted Reform were very upset. They wanted the freedom that had been given before. The papists however demanded that all the states that had accepted Reform submit without question to Rome.

After this a compromise was offered. In the proposal, in places where the Reform had not been established, the teachings of the Reform would always be forbidden. In places where the Edict of Worms was not being adhered to, no new reform would be advanced and the mass would not be resisted. The proposal was confirmed by the diet. The papists were very happy.

If the edict were enforced, the Reform could not enter a new place. In places where it existed, it could not be firmly established. Freedom of speech would not exist. The hierarchy of the papacy would be again established. Its former abuses would continue. The Reform would die.

The Reform princes came together. What should they do? Of course the easy road would be to accept the program offered by the papacy. There would be no fight or contention. There would be no bloodshed. The Reform princes could worship as they pleased. But in other regions the papacy would dominate. Whatever the pope says would rule. Those who had not yet heard the truth would remain in darkness. If the princes would choose the easy road, how many people would not have eternal life because they did not hear the gospel of Jesus? The edict actually would recognize freedom of conscience and religion, not as a right from God but only as a concession from Rome. If the princes resisted the emperor, there could be war and many people could lose their lives. The situation reached crisis proportions.

O.K., if you were in the place of the princes, what would you have done? Would you risk your kingdom for someone else's freedom of worship? Would you risk your life to give someone else the chance to hear the gospel? In the best of circumstances, as a prince, you would be resisting the emperor. You would be against approximately half the other princes. You would be the enemy of many people. Would it be worth it to you?

If you want to learn what you would do, you can look at your own life now. Do you refrain from confessing Christ in front of others? Are you afraid of their words, their jeers, that they might remove you from their society? Are you ashamed of Christ Jesus? If so, if you had been in the place of the princes you would have accepted the easy road, you would have accepted the compromise offered by the papacy. What did the princes do?

The Reform princes said, “We reject this edict. The majority has no authority in matters of the conscience.” According to the princes, in matters of religion, the state’s responsibility is only to ensure liberty of conscience. When any secular government enforces a religious rite or teaching with civil penalties, then it denies the principles it is founded on.

The emperor’s representative, King Ferdinand tried hard to get the Reform princes to abandon their position. But when he saw that they would not compromise he said, “The edict is about to be announced as a formal decree of the emperor. The only thing remaining for the Reform princes is to obey.” The Reform princes immediately wrote a protest and brought it before the diet.

The princes said, “We protest this edict. There is no certain doctrine except what conforms to God’s word. The Lord forbids the teaching of any other type of doctrine...The Bible must be explained with other more clear texts...this Bible is sufficient for the Christian in everything, it is prepared to dispel darkness and it is easy to understand. By God’s grace, we are determined to protect the preaching of the pure, unadulterated teaching of His unique word comprised of the Old and New Testaments without adding anything contrary to it. This word is alone the truth, it is the rule of all doctrine and experience and will never deceive or leave us flat. The one who builds on this foundation will stand against all the powers of hell, all human efforts designed against it will fall in front of God.

They said, “We protest.” The word protestant comes from this situation. In the protest made by the Reform princes, is included the basic principles of Protestantism. First, the intrusion of the state in religion, second, the arbitrary authority of the church. Protestantism puts the conscience above the magistrate, the authority of the Bible above the visible church. The crown of Jesus is superior to the crown of Charles V.

You remember that after Jesus resurrected from the dead, Peter and John were preaching Jesus in the temple. The Jewish authorities came and arrested them.

Acts 4:18 And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.

They said, “You cannot proselytize your religion. No way. You cannot preach something different than the predominant religion.” Isn’t that the way it is in many places in the world today? They say, “You cannot preach your religion. The people will revolt. It will cause chaos. No way! Blasphemy! You cannot preach something other than the dominant religion!” When the Jewish authorities prohibited Peter and John from preaching, what response did they give?

Acts 4:19 But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge.

That is, God commanded the gospel to be preached. No one has the right to stop it. Those who oppose it are not simply opposing man, they are opposing God.

The protestors defended the right to preach and freedom of speech. The protest at Spires was a witness against religious intolerance. It declared that everyone had the right to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience. All the reformers in Germany accepted this protest as a declaration of faith.

The Reform princes were granted an opportunity to present their case before Emperor Charles V. A year later the Protestant leaders were called to Augsburg. The Reform leaders wanted to submit their views in written format. Luther and his associates prepared the confession. In front of the emperor, instead of a humble monk were the most powerful princes of the kingdom. The ideas the emperor had prohibited were read. The emperor himself acknowledged that the confession was true. The confession was translated into many languages and published throughout the empire. This was the Reform's finest hour. The Reform shook the world.

Liberty of conscience in America and Europe is indebted to these brave German princes. If the princes had not risked their lives, their fortunes and their honor, the Reform would have been crushed. In Europe, the papacy would have continued their dominance. Freedom would not have gone to America.

But God was working. His word did not fail and does not fail. Jesus said,

Matthew 24:21-22 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. 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 restricted the papacy's persecuting power.

Protestant is not an organized church. Protestantism is a set of principles. Among these principles are the following:

1. The Bible is the sole rule of faith and the test of experience. Everyone can read it for themselves and understand it. The only unerring interpreter of the Bible is not the church or its leaders but the Holy Spirit. Every believer has the right to proclaim the teachings of the Bible.

2. Governments cannot determine or enforce people's responsibility toward God. Governments have no right to restrict the proclamation of the gospel. When they do this they oppose God. The government's work when it comes to religion is to provide and defend liberty of conscience.

Because of these courageous princes, you can freely read the Bible. This right was purchased at a great price. Many people gave their lives defending this right. If you don't read it, wouldn't it be a shame?