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### **Luther at Worms and the Wartburg: Still Confessing**

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Late in the day on April 18, 1521, the imperial diet, that gathering of political representatives throughout the Holy Roman Empire, finally turned to the case of a trouble-making Augustinian monk, one Martin Luther. Rome had already condemned him as heretic and Emperor Charles was certainly no friend, so it was no mystery how this surely would turn out. But it was necessary to do things properly and in order. Luther was, after all, a German university professor, and the Emperor was to watch over the universities in his lands, so he could hardly let Rome simply reach in and pluck up a professor without giving him a hearing. The Emperor had his own legal rights and privileges to defend. But as far as Charles was concerned, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. So the representatives gathered in the city of Worms on the bank of the Rhein to play out the drama.

Since 1517 Luther had the empire in an uproar, and in the years since things only seemed to get worse. As one observer noted, "Three-fourths of the people cry 'Up with Luther!' and the other fourth cry, 'Down with Rome!'" Yet as Luther would later remark, things actually could have been much worse. "I could have made such a play at Worms," Luther wrote, "that even the Emperor would not have been able to stop the bloodshed." In fact in the days before, there had been an ominous sign that things could turn violent. A *Bundschuh*, a simple peasant's boot made of leather laced tight, had been nailed to a wall in Worms. The *Bundschuh* was the symbol of peasant revolts that had plagued Germany in decades past. Would there be an uprising in Worms in support of Luther?



That was not what Luther wanted, and rather than drag others into a fight, into a literal bloodbath he could have started, Luther fought his battles on his own two feet. Shown his writings set on the table before him, he tried to draw his opponents into a debate, to provoke a discussion of the theology. But they would have none of it. They asked bluntly if he would recant—to “rechant” as Luther later would joke, to sing a different tune. With the weight of both Roman and imperial power on him, Luther made a simple, straightforward speech in what one historian called the hinge of history, a turning point in the relationship of faith and authority. To the Emperor and the representatives of the German estates Luther said, “Since your imperial majesty and your lordships are looking for a simple answer, I will give you one without horns or teeth [that is, no tricks, no playing games]. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against one’s conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. God help me. Amen.”

That is a confession. No mention of Christ or cross, but a confession nonetheless about the necessary matter of authority, about the basis for theology. The foundation: *sola scriptura*, scripture alone. At Worms Luther said “scripture or clear reason,” but we should not think of that as two separate tools or criteria for judging. The Enlightenment would do that, and then it would quickly move to embrace reason above Scripture (if Scripture was to be thought of as some divine revelation from above). So the Enlightenment would use reason to trump and refashion Scripture. But Luther certainly did not have two standards in mind. “*Ration evidens*” (clear/evident/plain reason) was a reasoning ability that had been shaped by the Word. Luther later says his conscience is captive to the Word of God, and he sees his reason the same way. Scripture is plain on many things, but at times we need to “fill in the gaps” in our theology, as we try to speak about God. So we do that, but always remembering that attitude of *Bescheidenheit*, of modesty, because I realize that I do not know the mind of God at this point but think I am in line or in harmony or concert with what God seems to suggest. And I always am ready to take another look at rethink, even as Luther said he was willing to do—to retract what he had written if others could show his thinking was wrong. But at bottom, since clear reason is that which is aligned with the Word, the actually bottom line, the foundation, is simply Scripture—*sola Scriptura*.

Luther did not take his stand simply to be contrary, to be different from Rome. And he was not out to build a personality cult. It gave him no pleasure to have to say that, but as we heard a few days ago, he found no answers in the rituals, traditions, or the logic that Rome put forward. Instead Luther re-read the texts of the Bible. He looked at the grammar and at the rhetoric of the Scriptures with a new method, and he found comfort in Christ’s cross grasped by faith alone. Because he found Christ in the Scriptures rather than in the decrees of popes and

councils, Luther held fast to those biblical texts. The Scriptures were the swaddling clothes that held Christ.

Luther left the assembly hall with his hands raised and fists clenched like a medieval knight leaving the tournament field in victory. But at the same time he muttered to himself, "I am finished." The end likely would not come that day. There were legal steps still to follow, though there was no accounting for what some zealous opponent might do on his own to rid Germany of this renegade. Realistically speaking, Luther could expect the worst as the story played out. But in fact the world had not seen the last of him.

Luther's friends remembered what had happened to John Huss a century earlier. Brought to the Council of Constance under safe conduct, the rules were changed—well, reinterpreted—once Huss was there, and he was burned at the stake as a heretic. So when Luther was given permission to leave Worms a week later—you did not simply travel around on your own in those days; you had to have the clearance of those in authority in a case such as this—Luther was quickly rushed out a side gate to head for home. The authorities were not particularly perturbed since Luther could always be arrested later when legal proceedings got to that point. But on the way back to Wittenberg, the group was ambushed by armed horsemen. Luther's traveling companions "escaped" into the brush—of course they did; they were supposed to!—and Luther was benevolently kidnapped by agents of Frederick the Wise, who had made it sufficiently plain that he did not want anything to happen to Luther, yet Frederick did not want to be directly tied to the plot. Plausible deniability we'd call it today. His men took care of it, and Luther found himself in Wartburg Castle, high above the city of Eisenach where he had once gone to school and stayed with the Cotta family. Meanwhile back in Worms, Emperor Charles had one of the pope's agents [Girolamo Aleander] draw up papers declaring Luther a stubborn schismatic and an obvious heretic, and a small group of delegates passed judgment on Luther although the diet already had officially adjourned. Some would question the legality, but Luther was now an outlaw in the empire according to this Edict of Worms.

On his way to Worms just weeks earlier, Luther had been hailed along the way as one who stood tall, who confessed theologically in the face of Rome's criticism. But many pinned their political and economic hopes on him as well. As he came to Erfurt where he had once gone to university and then had entered the cloister, his old friend, Crotus Rubeanus (a humanist), organized a welcoming party of university faculty and students who greeted Luther as though he were a liberator from the days of ancient Rome, a hero to set right the grievances of the German people against present-day Rome that seemed to care little beyond collecting German gold to fill its treasury. But along the way others held up pictures of Savonarola, an Italian critic of the church who had enjoyed the backing of both the people and rulers, only to see his support suddenly evaporate. The pictures were meant to be a warning to Luther: do you, Luther, really want to go through with this knowing how things have quickly turned sour in the past? Like Huss,



Savonarola had been burned at the stake. Would that happen to Luther? Elector Frederick realized that Luther was condemned before he even set foot in Worms, and sent word through others that Luther should turn back and stay away. But Luther was determined: he would come, he said, even if there were as many devils there as tiles on the rooftops. And so he went. And when it was time, having asked for a 24-hour delay to think things through again and make sure of his heart and mind, he stood now literally by his writings with the table there before him laden with his books, even as Luther stood by the theology that had taken charge of his heart. He confessed.

But now what? Luther was hidden in the Wartburg. He had a room in a secure part of an already secure castle at the end of a passage past guards and up a short staircase that could be raised like a drawbridge. Only a handful involved in the plot knew he was there and no one was going to get to him. It gave Luther time to think and reflect. Luther had a window that looked out on the wooded hills. The area around the Wartburg was known for the charcoal workers who worked in the forests. As they made the charcoal, the smoke from the fires hung low over the trees and obscured the view. But then would come a gust of wind and almost magically sweep the haze away and all was crystal clear again. That, said Luther, reminded him of how God dealt with sin. Sin would hang low and cloud our view and plague us. But when a word of Gospel came, those promises simply swept the sin away, never to be seen again.

So Luther had time to think and reflect. But what was going on elsewhere? If the point was to keep Luther out of the public eye, then it worked. He might as well have been dead. In fact, rumors quickly spread that he was dead, much to the dismay of those who had high hopes and who were thankful for the theology they had learned from him. Albrecht Dürer, one of the giants in German Renaissance art, spoke for many when he wrote, "O God, if Luther is dead, who will now bring to us the holy Gospel so clearly?"

That's a very good question, a good question on several levels. We talk of the Lutheran Reformation and Lutheranism today, but was Luther indispensable? Was it really his movement? (When we visited Wittenberg I noticed a snatch of graffiti on a wall: "These 1: Lutherkult abschaffen." That is, "Thesis 1: Abolish the Luther cult." Is that so? A cult? Hero worship?) Luther himself later bemoaned the fact that people were looking more to him than the message: "What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. God could raise up many Doctor Martins ... How is it that I, a poor stinking bag of maggots, should come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?" Yet to be fair to the historical record, by the time Luther complained about people talking about "Lutherans," he had used the term himself a couple of times. It was simply a convenient way to identify those who held to a particular theological position, a confession. It was the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, who seems to have been the first to use the "Lutheran" label, though Warham meant it in a negative, critical way, as if this Luther business were a power cult. Yet the point

remains: the name simply identifies. As long as words and labels are not stripped of their meaning, we know what they stand for.

Today using a name or label is not always so simple. I can think of several ways people use and react to the use of "Lutheran" today, and there are probably more than what follows. And what I'm about to suggest are also quickly blended. To start, some using "Lutheran" would like to say that they have things all put together and have a clear view of the truth that others do not echo, so those others have no right to use it because they are not Lutheran. Now we are into definition and the problem of who has the right to decide. It seems to me that while I understand this and may also think that the "other side" is not Lutheran in terms of the content of what is confessed in some parts or even as a whole, until I am made the Lord High Mayor with power over definitions and labels, there is little point in my trying to reserve the name "Lutheran" while telling others to find something else. True, I can say that and claim it is a matter of principle, but practically speaking others will do what they want. And pragmatically speaking, if there is indeed a chance to come to some understanding or to win people over to my understanding of the term, and more importantly to the theological position I have come to believe and confess, I may just have out the window a chance to get others to hear what I confess and convince them of that (though it is, after all, the Holy Spirit who finally will convince in matters of faith—but you get my point, I hope). This argument over who can claim "Lutheran" revolves around what makes up that theological position. How wide does the label stretch? What is essential and what can be ignored? Can there be variations and even differences? And how different can the differences be? Questions like these are legitimate. Just what does it mean to be Lutheran? Those who laid claim to that name in the Reformation era had to sort through these questions already in the second half of the 16th century, so this is nothing new. By 1555 in the Peace of Augsburg, the Holy Roman Empire was willing to recognize two legitimate confessions in its lands, Roman Catholic and Lutheran. So just what did Lutheran include? We'll hear about those 16th-century arguments tomorrow from Prof. Kolb.

We heard about modern problems with the Lutheran label last Saturday from Prof. Klän when he talked about the Lutheran church in Germany today in light of the Leuenberg Concord drawn up to bridge Luther, United, and Reformed. Are the Lutherans still Lutheran when on one hand they say they have certain theological positions that go with that name, but on the other hand they agree to live alongside or within or among those who have other positions that contradict the Lutheran ones? In effect they take what once was confessed, what was said to be part of a Lutheran position, and now turn it into an option. They almost make the Lutheran theological ideas or principles adiaphora, except that adiaphora are things on which Scripture does not speak but is silent—but that is not the case for these doctrinal issues drawn from Scripture, biblical teaching that was restated as doctrine, a theology—and yet it is being sidestepped here. Scripture does speak. Those are teachings that are a product of a hermeneutical and foundation, but under



Leuenberg we are simply supposed to let these teachings slide or overlook what is said. Can a person cut back on doctrine that way and still be Lutheran?

There is yet another way to look at the “Lutheran” name or label. The name is claimed by people today who are not trying to have it both ways as with Leuenberg, but rather who will say quite openly, “Of course we do not think the same things Luther did in his day. But we are in the historical line since Luther, and so we are entitled to use the name.” “Lutheran” is back there somewhere in their family tree, and so they still use the term because there is this thread running from here to there. Never mind where it is snagged along the way. It is a little like me saying that I’m German. Well, this is true (sort of) since my great-grandparents came from Hessen and Pommern (though Stolp in Pommern is now Słopsk, so that would make me half Polish)—but the point is there is a German connection though it is really historical rather than present and active. Or I could say I’m from Minnesota or Nebraska because that’s where my parents grew up, though I’ve only visited there. I’m much more comfortable saying that I grew up in Chicago! This (Chicago) is not just a matter of the sort of historic link I talked about a moment ago but really goes to identity, to what makes me me. But I would never presume then to say that the ideas I learned growing up in Chicago should be considered German. The roots may go there on paper, but I do not “live there” intellectually, so to speak. Yet in the church today something else often happens. People will on one hand admit that ideas have changed. This is usually accompanied by talk of the old being outmoded or old-fashioned in an effort to help push them out the door and to get rid of them. Instead, the argument goes, we have learned to think rightly or in a high-minded way—add those modifiers to gain acceptance. So while the position admittedly is different from a world gone by, we still deserve to keep the original label, or so the argument goes. Well, it makes me feel good to be German (it does!), but to be honest, that is little more than a label whose substance has changed. Not too much of Pomerania here but lots of Chicago. But—turning now to church and theology—what usually happens is that people want to insist that what they now confess is the legitimate evolution of Lutheranism, even though their theological positions may actually contradict what once was confessed. The only way to get by or get away with this, I think, is to go back to the issue of what falls under the tent or label of “Lutheran,” though now we find that tent is a whole lot smaller than once thought, than even Luther thought.

In any of these cases, I do not want to question the personal sincerity of people, but I do want to pay attention to how the label “Lutheran” is applied. Is it Lutheran because the doctrinal substance now confessed has been maintained since the Reformation? Or is it Lutheran in one of these other ways of speaking? It’s worth discussing. I’d like to think I understand what Lutheran ought to be, but others think the same about their view. There’s an old Scottish prayer: “Lord, grant that we may ever be in the right, for we shall surely never change our minds.” Thankfully that is not in our prayer book. Instead we discuss, confess, and do it with patience and prayer that God might give us wisdom.



Indeed, talking about “Lutheran” in terms of a position, an identity, a confession, is not always so easy. It was not easy in Luther’s day either. It took a while till labels settled in on theological positions. We tend to put the Reformers into camps rather quickly, but we have the benefit of hindsight. They took longer to sort things out. In the early years of the Reformation with so much attention on Luther, the problem is slightly different. At that point there was that danger of this becoming more about the messenger than the message. As we saw, some people such as Albrecht Dürer strongly identified the Gospel renewal with the Wittenberg professor. Hans Sachs, one of the well known “Meistersänger” or troubadours wrote a famous poem to the “Nightingale of Wittenberg” who brought Law and Gospel clearly before the people. But Luther was worried that people might lose sight of the theology and focus instead on the theologian, that they might neglect the confession and idolize the one who confessed. In fairness, both Dürer and Sachs really are concentrating on the substance of the message, though in Dürer’s case, he was understandably upset that the messenger might have been lost. You don’t want to lose someone who has brought you that kind of message. Yet if asked, Dürer no doubt would have agreed with Luther that God could indeed raise up many Martin Luthers to get the work done. Luther was simply God’s “out-sized man” for the moment. But it is an interesting question: what would happen if the messenger were not there, if Luther were taken out of the picture?

In the Wartburg, Luther had plenty of time to think about that and to think of what he’d done both in Worms and earlier in Wittenberg. His Roman opponents taunted him: “Are you alone wise?” In other words, “What makes you so smart? Who are you to come along and stand against centuries and generations of the church? Isn’t this really your own personal, private crusade, an outlet for your own ego? And does not truth finally reside in the church at large as it moves through history, and does not authority finally rest with Rome in the pope, the descendent of Peter and the Vicar of Christ?” Those challenges and more were all concentrated, all wrapped up, in that simple question, “Are you alone wise?”

At the Wartburg Luther had time to consider that question and to sort through answers. Actually, the temptation to flatter himself and to turn this all into a personal campaign had always been lurking there. But Luther could look around and find evidence to prove he was not in this alone.

The most basic proof lay in what had been going on in his study and in the classroom at Wittenberg. As Luther scrambled to come up with lecture material—a good professor always rethinks and revises, but it’s especially hard the first time starting from scratch—Luther found hints of where to go in the work of others he read, in those humanists who commented on the language and the grammar of the texts. Those were only hints and Luther would have to put the puzzle together, but it is evidence nonetheless. And then when Luther walked into the lecture hall he found a room full of students who deep down had the same spiritual questions and problems as he. And as he focused more and more on the Gospel in his lectures over the decade, he saw how that resonated with students. So he wasn’t alone.



Turning from his present to the past, Luther found evidence in history. He found voices that said some of what he himself had been finding. (History was another subject that had been neglected by the scholastics. After all, with their method, their approach, you can think through anything with syllogistic logic. Present circumstances are all that matter—no historical context. You don't need history to help guide you. It's only interesting in terms of illustration to sprinkle in after you've put everything together with logic.) But Luther found evangelical witness, evangelical confession, in history. The voices from the past were not always many or loud, but they could be found, though often drowned out by the institutional church in the same way Luther was being shouted down. Are you alone wise? "Hardly!" Luther could reply.

More, in those years from the 95 Theses until Worms and then in the early 1520s, Luther found other theologians hitting on the same basic ideas he found in the Scriptures. Johannes Brenz eventually had to leave Heidelberg after his evangelically oriented lectures drew a threat of imprisonment. Brenz moved on to become a key reformer in southwest Germany. Martin Bucer heard Luther defend his theology in 1518 before the German Augustinians, although Bucer was not an Augustinian but a Dominican. (I wonder how he got into the meeting!) But Bucer had been studying on his own and then heard of Luther so he came. Bucer never fell easily or comfortably under the Lutheran label. Circumstances in his background and factors in the unique setting of Strasbourg where he led reform would cause him to part company with Luther on some issues, but in general Bucer was on an evangelical path, finding the way on his own. Those are two of the better known, and there were certainly many more. Luther was encouraged when he looked around and could find others popping up here and there with an evangelical witness that came not from Luther but from the Bible. Luther may have been the senior figure, so to speak, and he was getting the headlines at the moment, but he certainly was not solo voice. Are you alone wise? Hardly! Just listen to others confess.

But even if he were all alone, would that mean that Luther ought to give up and confess something else? Not necessarily, though that is not really how it works. Luther did not (and we should not) theologize in a vacuum, in isolation from voices around that raise questions and challenges. Those voices provided a valuable sounding board and a testing. Ultimately Luther would make his decisions and confess, but not without running things through the refiner's fire to make sure he had a legitimate basis for what he was saying. So Luther would write and publish. As he did, he got feedback from colleagues around and from critics as well. His thinking matured. From the perspective of others, as Luther published they could see ideas unfolding. It is interesting to watch these alliances shift leading up to Worms and the Wartburg.

As Luther wrote and published, he gained support, but he also lost support of some who had first been attracted to what they saw happening at Wittenberg, but



then as they saw more things developing, they decided Luther had gone down the wrong path or had gone too far. We're talking about humanists here. Their work on the languages, grammar, and rhetoric of texts, and on history (for the necessary context) were all crucial as Luther plunged into the Bible. From his side, Luther valued the tools that Renaissance humanism had to offer—the stress on languages, for example. Luther also came to appreciate that humanism approached learning with a different spirit and a different method. Method is very important for Luther! Even if you are not entirely clear on the outcome, if you approach with a new method, you will get a different product. We heard that earlier in the week: the theology will not change in the church, Luther wrote, until the old method is discarded (that is, until scholasticism thrown out) and a new study (that is, the liberal arts pressed by the humanists) is installed in its place. Through the years of the 15-teens Luther strongly advocated curriculum change at Wittenberg. The university's charter theoretically opened the door to humanist studies, but universities traditionally had used scholasticism. But because humanism was helping Luther solve his theological problems, he wanted it there in the university in a formal way. He agitated and got language professors as regular faculty members. Melancthon came as the Greek teacher. You could learn informally on your own time at universities, but not as part of the regular course of studies. Like many universities today, there were those who taught informally. On the kiosk bulletin board today you see something like "Learn Korean—Tuesday and Thursday evenings—call ..." which is a nice opportunity and expands your knowledge, but that is not required and gets you no credit for your degree. That happened with Greek in Luther's day. There were competent Greek teachers to be found along with texts to use, so Luther learned Greek studying with Johannes Lang, a fellow Augustinian, while still in the Erfurt cloister. Luther took up Hebrew soon after, doing it on his own. But now Wittenberg would formally offer the languages and require them of students. And the preparatory schools, the gymnasia, would eventually retool their own curricula to start early on with languages, pointing toward university.

So Wittenberg led the way by making classical Latin, Greek, and Hebrew full "partners" in the liberal arts curriculum. No other university had that system at the time, so Wittenberg quickly became a model that others would follow just to keep up as students "voted with their feet" and swelled Wittenberg's enrollment. Beyond that, Luther also made sure that scholastic logic was scaled back. And history was also introduced. Meanwhile the humanists were watching what was going on at Wittenberg and applauded Luther. They saw him as a friend of the New Learning. It's interesting that during this time, Luther used the word "reformation" not for larger changes in the church. For that he talked of preaching the Gospel. At first "reformation" referred to curriculum change at the university.

But something happened. Many humanists wanted reform in the church, but they saw or understood that in terms of institutional change and personal moral reform by the clergy. Especially the humanists older than Luther were so attached to the Roman church that they could not stay with Luther when he said "faith alone." The older humanists believed in Christ but they also saw Him as a model or



blueprint they needed to follow—the *philosophia Christi*, the philosophy of Christ. That was still a mix of faith and works, that old theology that Luther would reject. They wanted a purer, simpler piety, and they hated the dogmatic hair-splitting of the scholastics (even though the substance of the theology in the end was the same, just without all the intricate logic and technical language). The humanists also were horrified by the luxury in the institutional church with its vast wealth, but they could not bring themselves to go with Luther down that evangelical path. They came to see Luther's reform as radical theological change that struck at the core, and that was simply too much for them to accept. It is an interesting footnote that every German humanist who was older than Luther finally backed away from the Reformation as a final theological position and did not ultimately commit to the evangelical cause. Their old ties to the Roman church seem to have been too strong.

This loss of support among the humanists did not happen overnight. Already privately in 1516 Luther expressed his concern about Erasmus, the most famous of the humanists, because Erasmus insisted that when Paul said in Romans 5 that we are freed from the law, Erasmus said that meant only Old Testament civil and ceremonial law while the moral law still had to be kept for salvation. In the years that followed, these theological differences would eventually erupt into the open and Luther would write "The Bondage of the Will" making plain that we do not come to God but He chooses us and converts. And in salvation, the Law only kills.

The older humanists liked Luther's condemnation of indulgences because of the excess, but again, they worried about grace alone. They especially liked Luther's rejection of Aristotle's logic in Luther's "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology"—Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light. But they worried about Luther's 1518 Heidelberg Theses that condemned the idea that we have free will to climb to God. "God's love does not find its object," Luther wrote, "God's love creates its object. Human love finds its object." That was plainly against the idea of God finding that spark of goodness within us, something lovable. In fact, there is no spark, nothing godly to like. You love something because you find something attractive there. You choose a spouse not because you cannot stand the other person (unless you are the prophet Hosea, and then he really did not choose; God did the match-making). You are attracted to your wife or husband. Human love is "therefore/ergo" love. But God does not find the lovable because the lovable is not there. Nevertheless God loves us because He creates the very thing He wants to loves. But the older humanists worried still more, now that Luther's freedom would lead to moral irresponsibility.

Then came a series of widely read treatises that pushed older humanists to the breaking point. The first was Luther's sermon on "Two Kinds of Righteousness." We heard about that from Prof. Kolb. And where is the Law? Where is my part to make myself presentable to God? This again seemed morally risky to the older crowd. Then in less than a year in 1520 Luther issued three bombshells. "The Address to the Christian Nobility" put forth a radical design even while relying on a



centuries-old idea. The church, the bishops, were resisting the Reformation, dragging their feet when it came to promoting the Gospel. Could nothing be done about this? Rome had erected a wall (metaphorically speaking) between sacred and secular vocation, and claimed that only the sacred had anything to say about the church. But that was a false distinction, Luther said. All vocations can be God-pleasing when filled by Christians. And princes should look to the example of the emperor who had centuries of historical precedent being the protector of the church—so do your jobs and make it easier for pastors to proclaim the Gospel. Yet older humanists worried about the issue of authority.

Luther's next 1520 treatise that shook things up was "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" where Rome and its priests held Christians hostage with the way they treated sacraments. For Rome, sacraments were a way to exercise power as priests stood as mediators between God and people. In fact, Luther argued, sacraments were God's gifts of grace (not the priests' possessions or weapons). And by the way, there are not seven sacraments anyway, Luther claimed, because it's saving grace that finally counts. Finally in 1520 came Luther's "Freedom of a Christian." All you need to hear are the two famous sentences: "The Christian is the perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian is the perfectly dutiful servant of all subject to all." We do not *become* free by combining faith with our efforts. We *are* free! End of discussion. Then because of that, we truly can be servants—but not to get anything from God. It's the same pattern as the "Two Kinds of Righteousness." This was too much for many of the humanists and they distanced themselves from Luther. They were with Luther on the criticism of morality and the church's institutional failure, but Luther was striking at the heart of theology—Gospel, authority, priestly power, and more—and that was simply too much. Every humanist who was older than Luther eventually stayed with Rome. But at the same time, many (though not all) of the younger crowd rushed to his support.

The point here is this: Luther put out his ideas to test them. At the same time, while he obviously would like the support, he finally cannot alter what he believes to be the biblical message simply to gather more support. As Luther once put it, "Peace if possible, but truth at any rate." Luther confessed what he believed. Some would have none of it, but others searched the Scriptures themselves, like the Bereans did even with St. Paul, and they decided Luther was right—really the Bible was right. But note how this involves a balance. Luther was not willing simply to take something for granted because the church said so. In fact those answers brought no comfort. But he also did not decide on some theological position simply to be contrary. He decided to confess what he did because he looked first into the Scriptures and then put his theological ideas to the test, putting them out before others and against what the church had taught through the centuries. But confession, belief, doctrine need to be used. We confess not to hear ourselves talk or to talk merely to ourselves or to pat ourselves on the back for being guardians of the truth even as we drive people away with our self-congratulatory attitudes or with the way we go about trying to teach and witness to



that truth. This is all included in what Luther did. There are ragged edges all along the way when it comes to application, but that's just the way it is this side of the parousia as long as God builds his church through sinners he saves and then sends out to witness.

Are you alone wise? The answer is clear by now. Luther was always willing to rethink, but at the same time he was not paralyzed by questions. He moved forward while at the Wartburg and beyond. While there he occasionally went out in disguise, and he could find out about the reaction to Worms and to the Gospel on the loose. Back in Wittenberg some said the Reformation had not gone far enough or fast enough. Andreas Karlstadt, another professor, read the Bible like a new rule book: "Let no man call you master," said the New Testament, so he gave up academic degrees and titles—not quite what Jesus had in mind. Karlstadt forced the laypeople to take the Lord's Supper in both kinds, bread and wine, even though they traditionally were not used to this. In principle, giving the cup was correct, but Luther's approach was to preach the Gospel and be patient as other issues were worked through. Rather than give comfort in the Sacrament, Karlstadt brought anxiety as the people were still working things through. And then came the iconoclasm, the destruction of church art—graven images, Karlstadt and the radicals argued. If people worshipped the images, then they had to learn differently, but the art could also teach the illiterate. All this threatened to get in the way of the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins by grace alone grasped by faith alone, so Luther did something about it. He made a quick trip back to Wittenberg to preach against the excesses—a kind of public confession of what the evangelical Reformation is all about.

Also during the time in the Wartburg, Luther offered resources to help others see the Gospel and confess it. He wrote "On Monastic Vows," in which he argued that both celibacy and running off to the cloister were less valuable to society than living a normal life in the tasks God might send. In other words, that supposedly sacred vocation of monk was less valuable than the Christian freed to live as a servant of all in daily life. Monks claimed to practice *contemptu mundi*, that is, contempt for the world. But Luther sees true contempt as rolling up your sleeves and staying put, not going anywhere. We stand there squarely on two feet, confident that we are redeemed and are put into a world Christ has reclaimed as His own, so nothing is going to be surrendered or conceded to Satan. Luther dedicated the writing to his father as if to say "you were right—I should have stayed in school and out of the cloister." (What if he had?!) But the most important Wartburg work was Luther's translation of the New Testament. In eleven weeks he gave the Germans what arguably was the most important contribution for confessing the Gospel, putting the texts into the hands of the people to read for themselves in language they could readily understand. Are you alone wise?—"Read for yourselves," Luther could say. They would see what he had found and could confess the same.



There is much more to point to in the aftermath of Luther's stay at the Wartburg—sermon books, catechisms, and more. In a sense, everything was aimed at confessing some part of God's truth that revolved around the central message of saving grace promised in Christ. Circumstances prompted Luther to respond to problems at hand. He is called an "occasional writer," not because he wrote once in a while. There are over 120 thick volumes in the set of his complete works. That's not writing once in a while, that's responding to a lot of occasions. And that's yet another important part of confessing: there is a truth to be had, but we never come to the end. It is applied in so many ways and in so many circumstances. That does not make truth relative. It means rather it is inexhaustible. It also means we have to be very aware of our circumstances, of the world in which we live. Context, context, context when it comes to confessing. Luther's age was highly religious but confused. Today, as Pope Benedict said just over a week ago at the Youth Gathering in Cologne (and I think at least on this part he's right), our age is highly secular (certainly in Europe and North America and likely elsewhere), and much has happened that has challenged and targeted the Gospel in a different way than in Luther's time. That does not mean the biblical message is yesterday's news. It's today's news and tomorrow's hope—but we have to look around and figure out how to get the intellectual foot in the door to best engage the world. Once Luther came clear on just what that message was, he spent his life pursuing it. He spent his life confessing. "*Non moriar sed vivam et narrabo opera dei*"—"I shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord." This was Luther's motto from Psalm 118. It speaks of the activity of confessing and of Luther's attitude of confidence and trust, speaking forth a message of God's wonderful saving works given to him. And that just what Luther did no matter how many tiles or devils there were on rooftops all around.

Luther's life ended where it began, in the village of Eisleben. He stopped there while traveling, and already in bad health, he died of a heart attack in February 1546. On his deathbed he was asked, "Do you confess Christ, the Son of God, our Savior and Redeemer?" to which Luther replied with a single word, with a loud and clear "Yes." In the end, it was the most important confession Luther (or we) could ever make.

