

Martin Luther:
Excerpts from his account of the confrontation at the Diet of Worms
(1521)

[The translation is from H.C. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (1903),
based on Luther's *Opera Latina* (Frankfurt, 1865-73)]

Background. In 1520, Pope Leo X issued a bull of excommunication against Luther. He directed the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation to execute it. Charles V, however, was reluctant to take this step. Only 21 years old at the time, Charles had only at great expense and with much diplomacy managed to get himself elected Emperor in 1519. He was reluctant to alienate the German princes, many of whom were already suspicious enough of the consolidation of Habsburg power. A number of these -- and most importantly, Luther's own powerful sovereign, the Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony -- insisted that German subjects be tried only before a German body. Since the Imperial Diet was then in session at Worms, Luther was summoned to appear before it for examination. Frederick insisted that Luther be granted a safe-conduct pass guaranteeing that he would not be seized if he were to appear. The Emperor agreed. Luther then set out from Wittenberg, passing through city after city where he was received with acclaim and celebration. The papal representatives at the Diet were acting under instructions from the Pope not to allow the occasion to degenerate into a debate, but to put the accused firmly on the defensive. On the first day of his appearance, Luther was asked whether he acknowledged authorship of a list of his works which had been determined to be in error. He did. He was then asked whether he was willing to recant the errors contained in them. Unwilling to answer "on the fly," Luther asked for 24 hours in which to deliberate his response. The request was granted. On the following day the examination reconvened, in the presence of the Emperor and the assembled princes and nobles of the Empire. The interrogator was Dr. Ecken, an official in the administration of the Archbishop of Trier. Luther did not compose his remarks for reading from a manuscript, but spoke impromptu. Nor was any official transcript made of the transaction. Accordingly, what transpired has had to be reconstructed. The account that follows was composed by Luther himself, not long afterwards. Bear in mind that he relates the scene in the third person, speaking in the first-person only when he quotes from memory what he said there. [Additional accounts have been published, based on the recollection of some of the persons in attendance.]

[Dr. Ecken:] . . . Do you wish to defend the books which are recognized as your work? Or to retract anything contained in them? . . .

[Luther:] Most Serene Lord Emperor, Most Illustrious Princes, Most Gracious Lords . . . I beseech you to grant a gracious hearing to my plea, which, I trust, will be a plea of justice and truth; and if through my inexperience I neglect to give to any their proper titles or in any way offend against the etiquette of the court in my manners or behavior, be kind enough to forgive me, I beg, since I am a man who has spent his life not in courts but in the cells of a monastery; a man who can say of himself only this, that to this day I have thought and written in simplicity of heart, solely with a view to the glory of God and the pure instruction of Christ's faithful people. . . .

. . . Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships: I ask you to observe that my books are not all of the same kind.

There are some in which I have dealt with piety in faith and morals with such simplicity and so agreeably with the Gospels that my adversaries themselves are compelled to admit them useful, harmless, and clearly worth reading by a Christian. Even the Bull, harsh and cruel though it is, makes some of my books harmless, although it condemns them also, by a judgment downright monstrous. If I should begin to recant here, what, I beseech you, would I be doing but condemning alone among mortals, that truth which is admitted by friends and foes alike, in an unaided struggle against universal consent?

The second kind consists in those writings leveled against the papacy and the doctrine of the papists, as against those who by their wicked doctrines and precedents have laid waste Christendom by doing harm to the souls and the bodies of men. No one can either deny or conceal this, for universal experience and world-wide grievances are witnesses to the fact that through the Pope's laws and through man-made teachings the consciences of the faithful have been most pitifully ensnared, troubled, and racked in torment, and also that their goods and possessions have been devoured (especially amongst this famous German nation) by unbelievable tyranny, and are to this day being devoured without end in shameful fashion; and that though they themselves by their own laws take care to provide that the Pope's laws and doctrines which are contrary to the Gospel or the teachings of the Fathers are to be considered as erroneous and reprobate. If then I recant these, the only effect will be to add strength to such tyranny, to open not the windows but the main doors to such blasphemy, which will thereupon stalk farther and more widely than it has hitherto dared. . . .

The third kind consists of those books which I have written against private individuals, so-called; against those, that is, who have exerted themselves in defense of the Roman tyranny and to the overthrow of that piety which I have taught. I confess that I have been more harsh against them than befits my religious vows and my profession. For I do not make myself out to be any kind of saint, nor am I now contending about my conduct but about Christian doctrine. But it is not in my power to recant them, because that recantation would give that tyranny and blasphemy and occasion to lord it over those whom I defend and to rage against God's people more violently than ever.

However, since I am a man and not God, I cannot provide my writings with any other defense than that which my Lord Jesus Christ provided for His teaching. When He had been interrogated concerning His teaching before Annas and had received a buffet from a servant, He said: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil." If the Lord Himself, who knew that He could not err, did not refuse to listen to witness against His teaching, even from a worthless slave, how much more ought I, scum that I am, capable of naught but error, to seek and to wait for any who may wish to bear witness against my teaching.

And so, through the mercy of God, I ask Your Imperial Majesty, and Your Illustrious Lordships, or anyone of any degree, to defeat them by the writings of the Prophets or by the Gospels; for I shall be most ready, if I be better instructed, to recant any error, and I shall be the first in casting my writings into the fire. . . .

Thereupon the Orator of the Empire, in a tone of upbraiding, said that his [Luther's] answer was not to the point, and that there should be no calling into question of matters on which condemnations and decisions had before been passed by Councils. He was being asked for a plain reply, without subtlety or sophistry, to this question: Was he prepared to recant, or no?

Luther then replied: Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted [convinced] of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning, I stand convicted [convinced] by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us.

On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.