

Road to the Reformation

Step Six

1521: Luther at the Diet of Worms

The single most dramatic event of the Reformation was Luther's confrontation with the Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms. Unlike the posting of the 95 Theses in 1517, there is absolutely no doubt about what happened at Worms. There are numerous eyewitness accounts from people who were supporters of Luther and people who were opponents. Two of these accounts are available in English translation in the American edition of Luther's Works, vol. 22, *The Career of the Reformer*, pt. ii. All of the accounts, no matter the writers point of view in terms of being for or against Luther, agree on the fundamental facts of the meeting.

I would imagine that a lot of people, when growing up, were a bit perplexed when they first were told of the Diet of Worms. It does not sound in the least bit appetizing. This usage of "diet" is unfamiliar to English speakers. In Luther's day, a "diet" was a meeting of the estates of the Holy Roman Empire of the German people. The Holy Roman Empire was not a highly centralized government that unquestioningly obeyed the commands of its emperor. Instead, it was a somewhat loose confederation of principalities, various noble territories, and city-states. During the early sixteenth century, over 300 territories of varying size and power constituted the estates of the Holy Roman Empire. They would meet periodically to conduct business related to the empire. There was an imperial court system that needed to be managed. It helped mediate disputes between the various member states. The diet also had to provide for the defense of the empire which was under serious threat from the Ottoman Turks

during most of the sixteenth century. At the same time, the controversy about Luther's theological ideas had become so intense that it threatened the peace of the empire. As a result, the so-called Luther Affair came to the attention of the diet.

The Holy Roman Empire did not have a capital city. That meant that the meetings of the diet moved around and occurred in various German cities. It just so happened that in 1521, the city of Worms was the designated meeting place. That year, the meeting began on 27 January, 1521. Several weeks earlier on 3 January, the papacy had formally excommunicated Luther with the bull, *Decet Romanum Pontificus*. Although the Luther affair was reverberating throughout Europe, the diet only got around to summoning him on 6 March but it did not reach Wittenberg until 29 March.

Summoning Luther involved a lot of negotiations. Luther's lord, Frederick the Wise did not want his professor treated unfairly or endangered. He secured a promise of safe conduct from the Emperor Charles V. That success, however, was not a guarantee of safety. Earlier the Emperor Sigismund had granted a similar safe conduct to the religious dissident Jan Hus in 1414 so he could attend the church council at Constance. Church officials, ignored the safe conduct, arrested Hus, convicted him of heresy, and burned him anyway. Their actions greatly angered Sigismund but Hus was still dead. So Luther was entering very dangerous territory and all the prior negotiations might not keep him safe.

Luther has been expecting a summons, so he was able quickly able to prepare for the journey. He left Wittenberg for Worms on 2 April and did not arrive until 16 April. His two week trip was done at a fairly leisurely pace. By this time, Luther was a celebrity and he was cheered all along the way during his journey. As he travelled, he

stopped to preach, most notably at Erfurt, the home of his alma mater. Despite receiving support and acclamation, Luther was inwardly fearful. He did not want to die but he also wanted to stand firm in his beliefs. As he put it, when he entered the city of Worms, it seemed to him that the roofs of the city's buildings were infested with demons seeking to do him and humanity harm.

The day after Luther arrived, an official informed him that he was to appear before the diet at 4:00 that afternoon. When he reached the cathedral where the diet was meeting, he was brought before Charles V and a large assembly of the diet. Charles V was twenty-years old and the most powerful man in Europe, while Luther was a thirty-even year old professor of Biblical theology who only in the past few years had become well known. When he walked into the meeting, Luther had no idea what to expect. He hoped that he would be allowed to defend his ideas.

Instead, the spokesman for the Emperor, Johann von der Ecken asked Luther if a pile of his books sitting on a table were his. Luther answered yes. Von Ecken then asked Luther if he would recant what he had written. Luther said that he could not recant as he feared that he might be denying Christ and true doctrines by making a blanket recantation. Somewhat exasperated, Von Ecken gave Luther twenty-four hours to think about how he would finally answer. On that first appearance, observers in the assembly did not find Luther impressive, including his patron Frederick the Wise who had never actually met Luther or seen him close up.

One might assume that Luther spent a sleepless night in solitude. It might have been a sleepless night but it was not one of solitude. Many of the Imperial Knights visited Luther and assured him of their support against the papal representatives. One person who visited him the next morning found Luther to be

calm and in good spirits. But Luther's sense of assurance, however, did not stem from human support, it came from Luther's confidence that his theology was according to God's teachings in the Bible. This faith bolstered Luther to face whatever befell him with calm.

When Luther appeared the next day, he turned out to be the one who was in command of the room. When asked again to recant his writings, Luther proceeded to divide them into three groups. First, there were his writings that explicated the Bible. These consisted of commonly held ideas in the Church and so could not be recanted. Second, there were his writings about the abuses of the Church which were widely recognized as factual. These could not be recanted. Finally, he had written some books involving disputes about the teaching of Christ. He stated that he could not recant those writings unless he was shown to be wrong "by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason." In the process, he boldly rejected the judgments of popes and church councils. Luther then famously concluded, "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 conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen."

Luther was without a doubt, a man of courage. He was prepared to die for Christian truth as he saw it. And he was not alone. His actions on 18 April 1521 met the approval of every German in the room whose career and fortune was not tied to the Catholic Church. Luther departed the room with his hand held high in a clenched fist, the gesture of a victorious athlete. The Spaniards in Charles V's entourage called for Luther to be taken to the fire. On the other hand, for the Germans, he had become even more of a national hero.

Luther's second appearance was not an ending, it was really more of the true beginning of the Reformation than the Ninety-Five Theses had been. Further negotiations between Luther and imperial representatives took place in Worms on 24 and 25 April but no recantation was forthcoming. Luther left Worms on 26 April to return to Wittenberg. On the way home, he and his party encountered a group of armed men who took Luther into custody on 4 May. Only Luther's friend and Frederick the Wise's counselor, George Spalatin, knew that the armed men were taking Luther to the Wartburg Castle for safe-keeping. Frederick the Wise had arranged it. Meanwhile Charles V was slow to act, and for good reason, since so many German's strongly approved of Luther. He put Luther under the imperial ban on 8 May. It was not, however, until 26 May that Charles V published the Edict of Worms announcing the ban. The imperial ban meant that Luther was a declared outlaw who anyone could legally kill and no one could legally help.

Luther spent almost a year at the Wartburg under the assumed name of Junker George. He abandoned his monk's robes and dressed as a soldier for disguise. His time in hiding was hardly wasted. He translated the New Testament into German which had a huge impact on the development of a standard vernacular German. Outside of the Wartburg, Luther's teaching spread like wildfire. For the sake of preserving the Reformation, that development was crucial. Many, including Luther wanted to maintain the unity of the medieval church. A successful compromise, however, proved to be impossible as the positions of many people on both sides of the issue hardened. Luther would live on until 1546 when his increasingly poor health caused his heart to fail. The Reformation that he started continues to live on five hundred years later. That is what we are celebrating in 2017.

For further reading: The recent biography *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval* by Heinz Schilling (2017) in its Part 2, chapter 3, “The Reformer—Standing His Ground before Church, Emperor, and Empire” provides an excellent, detailed, and lucid account of Luther at the Diet of Worms.