

The Road to the Reformation

Step Five

1520: The Year of the Three Reformation Treatises

The Leipzig Disputation was not Luther's finest hour in terms of religious polemics since Johann Eck was considered the victor. But as far as Luther was concerned, Eck's victory was merely a rhetorical trick. Luther remained firm in his theological ideas. At the same time, Pope Leo X and his officials in Rome refused to make any concessions to Luther's ideas. Instead, they had decided to crush him under the weight of the Church's authority. Faced with such papal intransigence, Luther was coming to the conclusion that the papacy was the Antichrist or at least an Antichrist. Calling the Pope, the head of the Catholic Church, an Antichrist was a very radical position for Luther to take. Such was the unpopularity of the papacy and Italians, however, that his calling the Pope an Antichrist was well received in many quarters in Germany.

The concept of the Antichrist is fraught with all sorts of apocalyptic imagery both in the sixteenth century and today. Book and poster illustrations from the sixteenth century depicted the papal Antichrist as various sorts of monsters, who sought to rule the world for Satan. Modern novels and films generally portray the Antichrist in a human form but with supernatural powers. The modern Antichrist is still bent on world domination for Satan which will bring hell to earth. In a theological sense, however, the Antichrist is trying to take the place of Christ. Christ brought humanity salvation by his death on the cross. That was the Gospel that came through faith alone, grace alone, and Scripture alone. Luther saw the Pope and things like indulgences providing a false alternative to the Gospel. They were trying to usurp Christ's place in salvation and that made the popes an Antichrist.

At the same time, Pope Leo X had decided things had reached the point that Luther needed to be excommunicated. On 1 February 1520, a papal commission began preparing a condemnation of Luther. It was not a quick process and it was not until 1 June that a consistory of Cardinals approved a bull of excommunication. Papal proclamations are called bulls because they were sealed with a lead seal known as a *bull*. Every bull also has a Latin title based on a Bible verse. In the case of Luther's bull of excommunication, the title was *Exsurge Domine* which means "Arise, O Lord." It preceded a text that was a metaphorical condemnation of Luther which asks God to expel foxes and wild boars who are ruining the vineyard of the Church. *Exsurge Domine* was officially promulgated in Rome on 15 June. Two days later Johann Eck and Jerome Aleander, a papal diplomat, were assigned to take the bull to Germany and publish it. That was another time consuming process. It was not until from 21-29 September that Eck and Aleander managed to publish the bull in various German cities. Meanwhile, copies of the bull had fallen into the hands of sympathizers with Luther who had published *Exsurge Domine* with anti-papal commentaries during August.

Luther was not sitting idle while all of these actions were being taken against him. He wrote various defenses of his theological ideas. Faced with increasing papal hostility, Luther responded by producing his three Reformation treatises. The first of the treatises was titled *Address to the Christian Nobility of Germany*. Luther began planning that work on 7 June. It was published on 18 August even though Luther had promised his mentor Staupitz that he would refrain from publishing for the time being. The tract was written in German and its audience was the German laity, in particular the princes. Basically Luther asserted that the Church was incapable of reforming itself under papal leadership. He urged the German princes to take matters into their own hands and begin reforming the Church. Those ideas were very radical as

the papacy claimed to be a divinely appointed, absolute monarchy over the Church but many Germans agreed with Luther.

Next Luther turned his attention to explaining what was wrong with the papacy. That treatise was titled *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. He began work on that pamphlet on 5 August, and it was published in October in Latin. The content of the *Babylonian Captivity* was so radical that the conservative churchman Thomas Murner translated it into German thinking it would scandalize the laity. That was a huge blunder, Germans eagerly embraced what Luther had to say and it made him even more popular.

Besides criticizing the Pope, in *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther turned his attention to the seven sacraments of the medieval church. Besides communion, baptism, and confession, there were three other sacraments—confirmation, marriage, extreme unction (last rites), and the holy orders of priesthood. Luther considered that last four to be non-biblical and therefore invalid as sacraments. He also attacked the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine of communion into the real body of Christ when a priest consecrated the elements. This particular doctrine was based on Aristotelian philosophical principles which Luther denied could be used in the formulation of church doctrine. Transubstantiation provided the priesthood with a lot of prestige as it involved enacting a divine miracle that only a priest could do. It helped justify setting the clergy off as a uniquely holy segment of humanity. In contrast, Luther asserted that there was a priesthood of all believers and therefore there was spiritual equality not a two-tier system of Christians. In this way, Luther delivered a second serious blow to the privileged position of the medieval Catholic Church.

Exsurge Domine continued to travel around Germany. On 3 October Eck sent a copy to Wittenberg. It arrived on 11 October. Luther responded by defending himself in an open letter

that was published on 4 November. At the same time he was composing what was possibly his most famous and enduring works, the little pamphlet of thirty pages known as *The Freedom of the Christian* or *Christian Liberty*. It was published in German on 16 November. Unlike the two previous works, it is not a polemical tract, rather it was a devotional work intended to educate its readers about the nature of God's forgiveness and their resulting salvation. Luther began by stating a paradox that was also an accurate statement of theological reality by saying: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." What followed was a rejection of good works as meritorious and contributing to salvation and an assertion that we are all sinners but God loves us and wants to save us anyway. That knowledge freed people from unnecessary anxiety about their salvation. That was the freedom of the Christian.

The day after *The Freedom of the Christian* was published, on 17 November Luther appealed for a general council of the church to hear and to decide on his dispute with the papacy. Remember, Popes did not want church councils interfering with their absolute authority over the Church. In a far more radical move, on 10 December, Luther and the community of the University of Wittenberg gathered and publically burned the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* along with volumes of the Church's canon law. It was a dramatic act of defiance, particularly since book burnings were used as a weapon against heretics. Luther went on to defend his actions in print on 27 and 29 December.

A showdown between Luther and the Pope's supporters had been building for several years and it would reach its climax at the Diet of Worms in April 1521.