

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

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JOHN S. TORELL

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PART 8: THE BATTLE FOR FINAL AUTHORITY

A MAJOR ESCALATION

Sylvester Prierias was a Dominican theologian and an early Romanist opponent of Martin Luther.¹ His role was important because he was one of the first theologians in Rome to examine and attack Luther's Ninety-Five Theses.

Prierias was a Dominican friar, an official theologian of the papal court, and a defender of papal authority. He was not just a random critic. He was connected to the Roman Curia, and his response represented the kind of argument Rome would use against Luther.²

Rome needed a theological evaluation of Luther's ideas. Prierias was appointed to write an opinion that could be used in the case against Luther. He wrote *A Dialogue against Martin Luther's Presumptuous Theses concerning the Power of the Pope* in June of 1518.

It is important to note that Prierias did not focus solely on Tetzel's indulgence abuses or the damage caused by such preaching; instead, he shifted the issue toward papal authority. His argument was basically that if the pope approved indulgences, Luther had no right to challenge them.

Prierias' blunder was shifting the controversy from "Are indulgences being abused?" to "Does Luther have the right to question the pope?"

Luther just wanted the matter judged by Scripture. Prierias chose to make the argument about the pope's authority and that of Roman Catholicism. That move pushed Luther toward the principle that Scripture – not the pope – is the final authority.

CARDINAL CAJETAN AT AUGSBURG

Pope Leo X's response to Luther became more serious. The German monk was no longer just a professor raising questions about indulgences and Rome began treating him as a theological threat who needed to be corrected.

The papacy originally wanted Luther to answer charges more directly under papal authority, possibly in Rome. The Godhead intervened to make sure that he did not end up like John Hus and moved upon Frederick the Wise, who did not want his university professor and subject taken to Rome where Luther would have little to no protection.

¹ The Dominicans are a Roman Catholic religious order founded by Dominic de Guzmán in the early 1200s. Their work focused heavily on preaching, teaching, defending Roman Catholic doctrine, studying theology and philosophy, and opposing heresy.

² The Roman Curia is the central administrative government of the Roman Catholic Church. It helps the pope manage church affairs, doctrine, discipline, courts, diplomacy, bishops, missions, and church law. In Luther's time, the Roman Curia included officials and theologians who helped examine suspected heresy, defend papal authority, process church legal cases, and advise the pope.





Using his political influence, Frederick helped redirect the case to German territory at Augsburg.

The key papal figure was Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, a Dominican theologian, belonging to the Order of Preachers. Cajetan was trained to argue theology at a high level and Luther met with him in October 1518.

Cajetan was not there for a friendly debate. His job was to pressure Luther to recant on three issues.

1. Indulgences: Luther denied that indulgences had the power Rome claimed for them.
2. Papal authority: Luther was beginning to challenge whether the pope could command belief apart from Scripture.
3. The treasury of merits: Rome taught that the church could dispense spiritual benefits from the merits of Christ and the saints. Luther rejected the abuse and eventually the whole framework.

The meeting took place over the course of three days.

- ❖ Luther was instructed to recant his views on indulgences and papal authority, but he refused.

- ❖ Luther hoped his doctrinal stand could be judged by Scripture and reasoned argument. He wanted Cardinal Cajetan to show him where he was wrong from the Bible.
- ❖ Cajetan had no intention of pandering to Luther. He demanded submission and only then could there be a discussion.
- ❖ Luther's rebuttal was that he would only recant if Cajetan could prove him wrong with Scripture.

During the heated hearing, Luther boldly stated:

"His Holiness abuses Scripture, I deny that he is above Scripture."

That difference exposed the deeper conflict. The issue was no longer just Tetzel's sales pitch. It had become a question of final authority. Was the Roman Catholic Church the authority final, or was Scripture more authoritative?

After the hearings, Luther feared arrest. He left Augsburg secretly at night and returned to Wittenberg. This was a turning point when Luther realized Rome was not merely investigating abuse, but demanding that he surrender his position even if Scripture supported him. The Augsburg hearing pushed him closer to open conflict with Rome.

TEMPORARY TRUCE

Karl von Miltitz was a Saxon nobleman, papal chamberlain, and papal nuncio sent by Pope Leo X to deal diplomatically with Martin Luther after the indulgence controversy exploded.³ He was nothing like Thomas Cajetan, who had failed with his harsh demand for Luther to recant and Miltitz tried gentler negotiation.

Miltitz was sent to Saxony in late 1518 partly to deliver the Golden Rose to Frederick the Wise. Rome hoped this honor would soften Frederick and persuade him to stop protecting Luther. Miltitz's Saxon background made him useful as a go-between with Frederick and Luther.

Miltitz met Luther at Altenburg January 5-6, 1519, where he wisely tried to calm the situation rather than crush Luther. He placed much of the blame on Johann Tetzel's reckless indulgence preaching and the resulting agreement is often called the Altenburg truce.

- ❖ Luther would remain silent about indulgences and his opponents would also remain silent.
- ❖ Luther would write a conciliatory letter to Pope Leo X and the matter would not be pressed aggressively for the moment.
- ❖ Luther would publish a more respectful statement about the church/papal authority and he would not be forced to make a full retraction.
- ❖ Luther would submit the dispute to an agreed bishop/arbitrator and Tetzel and others would be restrained or blamed for excesses.

³ Papal chamberlain is an official serving in the pope's household/court. Papal nuncio is a pope's representative or diplomatic envoy.

The key condition was mutual silence. Luther would stop writing if his opponents stopped attacking him. The truce did not last because Luther's opponents kept writing, and the controversy moved beyond indulgences.

LEIPZIG DEBATE

The Leipzig Debate was a major public debate from June 27 to July 16, 1519 featuring Martin Luther, Andreas Karlstadt, Johann Maier von Eck, and Duke George of Saxony as the host in Leipzig, Germany.

Andreas Karlstadt was Luther's Wittenberg colleague and originally the main debater against Johann Maier von Eck, who was a Roman Catholic theologian from Ingolstadt, a skilled debater and defender of papal authority.

Eck was determined to remove and silence Martin Luther and so he staged a debate with Luther's friend, Andreas Karlstadt, and Luther was invited to come and be part of the debate.

It began mainly between Karlstadt and Eck over free will and grace, but when Luther entered the debate, the subject shifted to bigger issues like papal authority, church councils, purgatory, indulgences, and whether the Bible or Romanism had final authority.

Luther's dispute up to this point focused solely on the abuse of indulgences. After Leipzig, the issue converged on two points:

1. Does the pope have divine authority over the church?
2. Must the pope and councils submit to Scripture?

Johann Maier von Eck cleverly succeeded in getting Luther to admit his views were similar to those of Jan Hus, the Bohemian reformer who had been condemned as a heretic and burned at the Council of Constance in 1415. If Luther admitted Hus had been right on some points, then Luther could be painted as a heretic too.

Luther seemingly did exactly what Eck wanted by admitting that some of Hus's teachings were Christian and biblical, but he also argued that church councils could err. That was explosive because Roman Catholic authority depended heavily on the authority of popes and councils.

Luther also argued that the pope's supremacy was not established by divine command in Scripture. That was a major step toward Sola Scriptura, the doctrine that Scripture is the final authority for faith and doctrine.

The Leipzig Debate made Luther look far more radical to Rome. He was no longer the troublesome monk questioning indulgence abuse after openly challenging:

1. The pope's supremacy.
2. The infallibility of church councils.
3. The condemnation of Jan Hus.
4. The whole structure of church authority when it contradicts Scripture.

PAPAL CONDEMNATION

This led to Pope Leo X's 1520 papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, which condemned many of Luther's teachings and threatened him with excommunication. The title of "Arise, O Lord" stems from the opening words of the document. It was Rome's formal answer to Luther on June 15, 1520, after the indulgence controversy had grown into a broader challenge against papal authority.

Exsurge Domine condemned 41 statements taken from Luther's writings. Pope Leo X accused his teachings of being heretical, scandalous, false, offensive, and dangerous to ordinary believers. He also ordered Luther's books to be burned and commanded Luther to recant within 60 days or face excommunication for taking the following stance:

- ❖ Denying that the pope could free souls from purgatory by indulgences.
- ❖ Challenging the biblical basis of Rome's claims about purgatory.
- ❖ Arguing that true repentance was inward and lifelong, not satisfied by church penalties or payments.
- ❖ Denying that the pope had unlimited authority over the church.
- ❖ Arguing that councils could err.
- ❖ Opposing the execution of heretics by fire.

This was not only about indulgences anymore. By 1521, the conflict had become about final authority. Rome said the pope and church must be obeyed. Luther took the stance that the pope and church must be corrected by Scripture.

Luther refused to recant and publicly burned a copy of the papal bull at Wittenberg on December 10, 1520, along with books of canon law as a public rejection of papal authority.

Decet Romanum Pontificem was the papal bull issued by Pope Leo X on January 3, 1521, that officially excommunicated Martin Luther.

Excommunication meant Luther was formally cut off from the Roman Catholic Church. Leo X declared him outside the fellowship and authority of the church because he refused to submit to papal correction.

Excommunication did not silence Luther since he believed that Scripture stood against Rome and the papacy had no authority to command his conscience. This became one of the defining principles of the Reformation.

Luther was viewed as unredeemable and an enemy of Romanism by the excommunication, but it did not end the matter because he still lived inside the Holy Roman Empire and the political authorities would have to decide what to do with him. This led to the Diet of Worms in 1521, when Luther was summoned to appear before Emperor Charles V.