

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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PART 9: LUTHER REFUSES TO RECANT

DIET OF WORMS

The Diet of Worms was the imperial assembly where Martin Luther was ordered to answer for his writings before the emperor and the leaders of the Holy Roman Empire.¹ It took place in Worms, Germany, in 1521.

The key figures in attendance were:

- ❖ Martin Luther: the accused reformer
- ❖ Charles V: Holy Roman Emperor
- ❖ Johann von der Ecken: Imperial official who questioned Luther
- ❖ German princes and nobles: Political rulers of the empire
- ❖ Church representatives: Defenders of papist authority
- ❖ Frederick the Wise: Luther's prince and protector, who worked carefully behind the scenes

Martin Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X in January 1521, but this was a church action, and the empire still had to decide what to do with him politically. Luther was summoned to Worms to answer two basic questions:

1. Are these your writings?
2. Will you recant them?

This was not a debate. Rome and the Holy Roman Empire wanted a retraction. When Luther stood before the assembly, he was shown a pile of books and writings which he acknowledged were his. But when asked whether he would recant, he asked for time to think.

That was not cowardice. It was serious. Luther understood that he was standing before the emperor, the church, and the empire. A careless answer could cost him his life and he was granted a one-day extension to think about the matter.

The next day Luther arrived with an answer that saw him divide his writings into categories:

1. Some were basic Christian teaching that even his opponents should accept.
2. Some attacked corruption and abuse in the church.
3. Some were harsh attacks against individuals who defended those abuses.

¹ The word Diet does not refer to food, but an official political assembly. The Diet of Worms was the imperial assembly held in the city of Worms.



He admitted that he may have spoken too sharply in places, but he refused to retract the substance unless he could be shown that he was wrong from the Bible. His famous answer is usually summarized like this:

“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 will not recant anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.”

Johann von der Ecken gave the following response:

“...When the fathers of the Council of Constance condemned this proposition of Jan Hus—The church of Jesus Christ is only the community of the elect, they condemned an error; for the church, like a good mother, embraces within her arms all who bear the name of Christian, all who are called to enjoy the celestial beatitude.”



Ecken brought up Jan Hus, who had been condemned by the Council of Constance and burned in 1415. The Council of Constance had condemned Hus's proposition that "the church of Jesus Christ is only the community of the elect."

His argument was aimed at Luther's doctrine of the church. Ecken was defending the Roman Catholic visible-institutional view of the church. He believed the church was not only the invisible company of the truly elect, but visibly included all who bear the Christian name and are called toward salvation. That is why he said the church, like a mother, embraces all who bear the name Christian. He was arguing against Hus's narrower definition of the church which only included the elect.

Ecken was not merely making a comment about church membership. He was trying to force Luther into submission by tying him to Jan Hus and a proposition already condemned by a recognized church council.

This was important because Luther had already made the case that church councils could err, especially if they condemn something true or biblical. Johann Maier von Eck had already tried to trap Luther by associating him with Hus at Leipzig in 1519. Luther admitted that Hus had said some things that were “Christian and evangelical,” and this made Luther look like a defender of a condemned heretic.

This put Luther in a tight spot. If he agreed with Hus, then he stood against the Council of Constance. Doing so made Luther also stand against the authority of church councils. But if councils can err, then Rome’s authority is no longer final. That is when Martin Luther uttered the famous line:

“Here I stand, I can do no other.”

The Diet of Worms made the Reformation unavoidable. It is probable that prior to this event, Luther might have been treated as a rebellious monk who could still be corrected. After Worms, he was emboldened and openly refused to submit to Rome unless corrected by Scripture. The core issue became who has final authority: Scripture, or the pope and church councils?

After Luther left, Charles V issued the Edict of Worms in May 1521, declaring Luther a heretic, outlaw, someone whose books should be burned, and someone who could legally be arrested.

WARTBURG CASTLE

Luther had been excommunicated by Pope Leo X and now he was condemned by Charles V. Frederick the Wise anticipated this outcome and arranged a staged “kidnapping” to protect his monk.

On May 4, 1521, while Luther was traveling from Worms, armed horsemen seized him and took him away. It looked like an abduction, but it was arranged by Frederick’s people for Luther’s safety, who was taken to Wartburg Castle and hidden there.

This was a politically clever move by Frederick to protect Luther without openly defying the emperor. Luther disappeared from public view, which made it nearly impossible for imperial or papal authorities to arrest him.

At Wartburg, Luther lived under the name Junker Jörg (Knight George). He let his hair and beard grow so he would not look like a monk because Luther was now one of the most famous and wanted men in Europe. Martin Luther the monk became Junker Jörg the minor nobleman.

Luther stayed at Wartburg from May 4, 1521, to March 1, 1522. He called Wartburg his “Patmos,” comparing his exile to the apostle John’s stay on the island of Patmos. He was safe, but he was also isolated and frustrated. He heard reports that the Reformation in Wittenberg was moving quickly, sometimes recklessly, while he remained in hiding.

“I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.” (Revelation 1:9)

His greatest work at Wartburg was translating the New Testament from Greek into German. He began this work in late 1521 and completed the draft in roughly eleven weeks.

This was a major turning point. Luther wanted Germans to hear Scripture in their own language, not only through Latin or through priests. His translation was not the first German Bible, but it became the most influential because it was clear, forceful, memorable, and widely printed.

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

The New Testament was published in 1522, often called the “September Testament.” He completed the Old Testament in 1534.

Luther’s time in Wartburg accomplished several things:

- ❖ He was hidden from danger as Frederick preserved Luther’s life after Worms.
- ❖ He became Junker Jörg, a disguise that allowed him to survive in secret.
- ❖ He translated the New Testament, making Scripture more accessible to ordinary Germans. The Holy Spirit would go on to use this Bible to convict people of their sins and also provide guidance.
- ❖ Luther shaped the German language because his Bible helped standardize and strengthen written German.
- ❖ He remained active from hiding, writing letters and treatises, even while out of sight.

The Godhead ensured that no harm came to Martin Luther. The castle and soldiers of Frederick the Wise protected Luther so that his fate was not the same as John Hus.

JEROME EMSER

Jerome Emser was a German Roman Catholic theologian, humanist scholar, and one of Martin Luther’s early opponents. He served under Duke George of Saxony, who strongly opposed Luther’s reforms. Emser was especially important because he fought Luther with books, pamphlets, and Bible-translation criticism rather than by political force alone.

Emser was initially not opposed to Luther since he had humanist reform interests and also wanted to curb church abuses, but he did not want a break with Rome. The split became clear after the Leipzig Debate, where Luther was pushed into admitting that

some teachings of Jan Hus were biblical. That alarmed Duke George and Emser because Saxony bordered Bohemia, where Hussite influence was still a major concern.

After that, Emser became one of Luther's sharpest critics on several fronts:

- ❖ He defended Rome against Luther's challenge to the pope.
- ❖ He defended traditional Roman Catholic teaching against Luther's reforms.
- ❖ He warned against Luther as a dangerous revival of Hussite error.
- ❖ He attacked Luther's German New Testament as inaccurate and theologically biased.

His best-known public dispute with Luther was over the German New Testament which came into being during Luther's time at Wartburg Castle and published in 1522. Emser accused Luther of corrupting Scripture through his translation choices. The irony is that Emser later published his own German New Testament in 1527 as a Roman Catholic alternative, borrowing heavily from Luther's writing and revising it to agree more closely with the Latin Vulgate and Romanist doctrine.

Luther mocked Emser as "Goat Emser," "He-goat Emser," and "Goat of Leipzig" because Emser's family crest had a goat's head. Luther often used derogatory nicknames for his opponents.

JOHANNES COCHLAEUS

Johannes Cochlaeus was a German Roman Catholic humanist, priest, theologian, and controversialist who became one of Martin Luther's lifelong literary opponents.² He was present at the Diet of Worms where Luther refused to recant. Afterward, he sought Luther out for debate.

- ❖ He opposed Luther's appeal to Scripture over pope and church tradition.
- ❖ He rejected Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone.
- ❖ He defended Roman Catholic sacramental teaching against Luther.
- ❖ He saw Luther as a rebel who fractured Christendom.
- ❖ He associated Lutheran teaching with social unrest and rebellion.

In 1529, Cochlaeus became secretary to Duke George of Saxony, one of Luther's strongest political enemies. That placed him directly inside the anti-Lutheran camp in Saxony. Cochlaeus wrote many anti-Lutheran works, but his most famous was his hostile biography of Luther published in 1549: *Commentary on the Acts and Writings of Martin Luther*. It portrayed Luther in the worst possible light and became highly influential among later Roman Catholic critics of the Reformation.

Martin Luther admitted to making strong statements about individuals and the Roman Catholic Church. He was a flawed individual just like everyone else. Luther occasionally regretted the severity of his disparaging words, but did not repent of his derogatory

² A controversialist is someone who regularly argues or writes about controversial issues, especially in public debate. In the Reformation context, a controversialist was usually a theologian or scholar who wrote pamphlets, books, replies, and attacks against opponents.

name-calling. He believed his opponents were endangering souls and saw harsh public rebuke as necessary, even when he admitted he went too far.

LUTHER'S DESIRE

In order to understand what Luther wanted for the Reformation, it is necessary to examine his words and actions.

1. He did not want to remove the existing Roman Catholic Church system; but change its teaching on salvation and abolish the pontiffs.
2. He wanted to retain the existing church service but eliminate the following:
 - a. Praying to Mary and other saints
 - b. Burning incense
3. He liked the way priests were dressed when they conducted a church service, but did not agree with papal dogma that priests should be celibate.
4. He wanted to abolish the system of monks and nuns.
5. He was horrified of independent churches and wanted to establish a church system which eventually became the Lutheran denomination.
6. He rejected water baptism of adults through immersion. He wanted to maintain the practice of sprinkling infants born to church members.
7. He wanted to maintain control of the reformation and did not want any competition; he was fearful the movement would fall apart if men were given freedom to express themselves.