



**HERE**

**WE**

**STAND?**

## Here We Stand?

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Five hundred years ago, fully conscious and forewarned of the fate that might await him there, Martin Luther rode into the city of Worms in response to an invitation to appear before the Emperor Charles I. In scenes that brought to mind Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, large crowds had come out to greet Luther on his journey, climbing up walls and standing on rooftops to cheer him on as he passed by.<sup>1</sup> Once in Worms, when asked whether he would repudiate his books and the errors they contained, he stood firm and declared that he would recant nothing. It matters little whether or not Luther actually pronounced the phrase "Here I stand!" since the temerity and resolve reflected in his words and actions conveyed that message loudly and clearly.<sup>2</sup> Having boldly stood his ground, Luther then made his way out, uncertain as to what his future might hold.

While the stand that Luther took that day has been celebrated and admired by many down through the centuries, interpretations regarding precisely what he understood himself to be standing for have varied

considerably. Many have supposed that he was defending his convictions regarding the doctrine of justification by grace through faith or the principle of *sola Scriptura*, yet it seems doubtful that he was focused on something as abstract as that. I would instead argue that if we are to understand what it was that Luther was refusing to recant or back down from, we need to go back to what had originally generated the controversy that eventually led to his appearing at Worms, namely, his ninety-five theses.

What had Luther been seeking when he had chosen to make public his theses some three and a half years earlier? Because he had written his theses in Latin rather than German and had intended them for a very specific audience rather than the general public, hoping to generate scholarly debate on the points he raised, he was certainly not seeking to gain fame and notoriety or to be thrust into the spotlight so as to focus attention on himself. Even if he did nail a copy of his theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, at most he was simply tacking an announcement onto a bulletin board for other scholars to read.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 102-3.

<sup>2</sup> As Roland Bainton notes, the words "Here I stand; I can do no other" do not appear in the earliest printed version of the account of Luther's appearance at Worms; see *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 144.

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<sup>3</sup> Doubts exist as to whether Luther actually nailed his theses to the church door in Wittenberg. On this discussion, see Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 137-39.

What Luther thought he might gain through his invitation to discuss the theses he had drawn up is also unclear. He was hardly hoping for some type of monetary gain. Given that he was already preaching regularly from the parish pulpit, where he had the ear of the whole town, and also had access to the entire student body and faculty at the university where he taught, if he merely sought to make a name for himself, there were better ways to accomplish that objective. While one can only wonder what kind of reaction he expected when he sent his theses to Albert of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz who had authorized the sale of the indulgences to which Luther objected, he could hardly have thought that the theses would improve his standing with Albert or move Albert to be grateful to him.

In order to understand what motivated Luther to produce and share his theses, a close look at those theses themselves is necessary. Many of those theses make it very clear that what had aroused Luther's indignation was the manner in which church authorities were fleecing the general populace through the sale of indulgences and oppressing the faithful in other ways as well on the basis of highly dubious teachings that ran contrary to Scripture, tradition, and common reason, some of which clearly seemed to have been devised solely for the purpose of lining the church's coffers.

While in his theses Luther criticizes the greed and avarice of those involved in the sale of indulgences, a number of those theses make it clear that his concern was not simply to denounce the abuse and corruption of those in power but especially to stand up for the common people who were being despoiled of the little they owned. He therefore calls not

only for the abuses to stop but also for attention to be paid to the needs of the impoverished:

43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.

45. Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath.

46. Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences.

50. Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.

51. Christians are to be taught that the pope would and should wish to give of his own money, even though he had to sell the basilica of St. Peter, to many of those from whom certain hawkers of indulgences cajole money.<sup>4</sup>

Curiously, given the fact that many of the funds that financed the university where Luther taught were generated by the sale of indulgences that were similar to those being sold in Albert's territories, by questioning that practice Luther was to some extent biting the hand that fed him.<sup>5</sup> In any case, rather than seeking something for himself personally by

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from Luther's ninety-five theses are taken from the American edition of *Luther's Works* (hereafter *LW*), ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress/St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986), 31: 29-30.

<sup>5</sup> See Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 54-55.

means of the protest he raised in his theses, Luther was sticking out his neck on behalf of a cause that affected the common people rather than affecting him personally, other than causing him heartache at seeing the suffering and abuses to which those people were being subjected. It was not his fellow monks, priests, and professors nor the upper and middle classes who were being impoverished by the sale of indulgences, but only those who were already enduring hardship. While some of the church teachings that Luther had come to question had at times proved a tremendous burden to his own conscience, overwhelming him with a sense of guilt and an *angst* that weighed heavily on both his body and his soul, once he had himself been liberated from those teachings by rejecting them in his own mind, he would gain nothing for himself by questioning those teachings publicly and calling on others to join him in that rejection. All that he stood to gain was trouble and more headaches for himself. And, of course, that is exactly what he got.

Ultimately, then, it was this that Luther stood up for in Worms. It was not simply some doctrine or principle or abstract truth. Rather, it was his pain, grief, and outrage at seeing how the rich and powerful in the church and the secular authorities who were in collusion with them were not merely trampling mercilessly upon the weak and poor but doing so in God's name. It was this that Luther found so heinous and intolerable that he could not keep quiet or stand to be silenced. Undoubtedly, Luther had looked to Scripture as a basis to launch his attack on the doctrines and practices that were being used to oppress the faithful, yet his writings and the teachings and interpretations of Scripture that they contained were not an end in themselves but a means to putting an end to

the oppression and freeing bodies, souls, and consciences from those who held tightly in their clutches not only their existence in the present world but their eternal destiny in the world to come as well. From Luther's perspective, therefore, to recant would have involved betraying not simply his own conscience but more importantly the countless souls who had never had anyone stand up for them in the way that he had, and much less anyone who had sought to provide them with the knowledge, power, and means to stand up for themselves in the way that Luther had through his writings.

While the Diet of Worms is generally regarded as the moment in which Luther made most decisively his stand in favor of all that he had written and taught, in reality he had already been taking that stand for several years prior to his appearance at Worms. Within weeks of the publication of his theses, which had been copied, translated into German, and circulated without his consent, Luther was already feeling the heat, and not just in a metaphorical sense. John Tetzl himself, the seller of indulgences who had been one of the primary targets of Luther's barrage, boasted that he would have Luther burned at the stake before three weeks had passed.<sup>6</sup> The highest authorities in both the secular and ecclesial realms, including the pope himself, called for steps to be taken to silence Luther. While Luther sought to defend himself, at the same time he continued to stoke the flames further by publishing tracts, treatises, and books that progressively grew even more bold and caustic in their denunciation of the abuses and oppression

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<sup>6</sup> See Walter von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 129.



that he saw stemming from many of the church's doctrines, practices, and authorities.

Luther's decision not to recant, retract, or back down from what he had said and written was therefore taken long before he arrived at Worms or stood before Charles I. At most, his appearance and confession at Worms merely ratified once more a decision he had been taking daily for several years. His trip to Worms was not the first time he had contemplated the possibility—or even probability—of being seized and sentenced to die the death of a heretic should he refuse to surrender his pen and ink well, nor was it the first time that he had declared his willingness to endure such a death if necessary.<sup>7</sup> For that reason, his "Here I stand!" in Worms was no new utterance but merely the echo of an exclamation already made far away in Wittenberg now reverberating anew within the walls of the hall where Luther stood and the emperor sat.

### Choosing Our Place

Together with millions of Christians throughout the world, many of us who are involved in theological reflection recall and celebrate the stand that Luther took five centuries ago in Worms. As we do so, however, I think we are compelled to ask ourselves whether we are really standing up for the same things that Luther stood for. Answers to that question will depend on answers to a number of related questions: What are we standing up against? Who are we standing with? Who is standing with us?

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<sup>7</sup> On this point, see my online article "Dying to be Lutheran," <https://94t.mx/dying-to-be-lutheran/>.

Where are we standing—or *failing* to stand? Do we even stand for anything at all?

While it would be good for us to ask questions such as these of ourselves, it might be even more helpful and illuminating to pose those questions to others around us. In their eyes, do we stand for anything? If so, is it the same thing that *we* think we are standing for and something that *we should* be standing for? Do they perceive us to be standing with them against the injustices and wrongs to which they and others have been subjected? Do they want to stand with us and want us to stand with them, or would they just as soon we keep our distance?

It would also be important, of course, to define precisely to which people we would address such questions. Several decades ago, Latin American and Latino/a liberation theologians proposed revising the traditional understanding of the phrase *locus theologicus* in order to speak of the poor, the suffering, and the marginalized as the place or location from which theology is to be done.<sup>8</sup> This was, in fact, the place from which Luther had developed the theology that led him to publish his ninety-five theses. While he elaborated his theology from within the walls of the convent where he lived and the university where he taught, ultimately it was his work among the people as parish priest that gave that theology its shape and defined for him how it was to be articulated. It was by

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<sup>8</sup> A helpful introduction to the use of this phrase among many of these theologians can be found in Francis Rivers Mesa, "The *Locus Theologicus* of U. S. Hispanic / Latino/a Theology and Its Implications for Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) Curriculum Development," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 59, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 185-99.

listening to the people he served and entering into dialogue with them that he was brought to realize what he needed to say and do as a theologian of the church. In that regard, his dialogue with the common people as his *locus theologicus* defined his theology just as much as Scripture did.

While the question of the place from which we choose to do our theology is always a vital one, the pandemic from which we are now gradually emerging has made it even more so. Even before the pandemic hit, many of us were already at a distance from the contexts in which suffering and injustice are especially acute. Since then, however, that distance has not only increased but now seems in danger of becoming permanent, as more and more people of privilege can simply choose to remain within the confines of what is comfortable and pleasant for them, farther than ever from the cries of those being marginalized, excluded, and abandoned. For that reason, if we are truly to identify with all that Luther stood for, we must understand the question of where we will stand and whom we will stand with not merely in a metaphorical or figurative sense but literally. We cannot dialogue with those whose voices are out of range. We cannot see oppression from a distance, and much less claim to understand it, know how to combat it, or be moved to indignation and outrage by it. From my perspective, it is precisely the increase in this type of “social distancing” that threatens to continue to polarize and divide our world more than ever. It is easy to offer solutions to the problems of others, or conversely to hate them and blame them for all of society’s ills, when one does not have to stand in front of them physically and look them in the face.

As Luther’s experience taught him, any theology that is truly liberating will generate conflict and opposition. Latin American liberation theologians like to say that any theology that is not liberating is not truly Christian. Because liberation presupposes a condition in which people are being held in bondage and subjection by forces that are more powerful than they, it also presupposes conflict and opposition, since the only way to break the power of those forces is to stand up to them in the way that Luther’s theology brought him to do. If that is the case, it is only a small step to the conclusion that if our theology is not generating any type of conflict or opposition, we must stop and ask ourselves whether anyone is actually being liberated by it. And if not, then what purpose is it serving?

By no means is that to say that we are to seek out conflict through our theology, as if conflict itself were desirable. That was certainly not Luther’s objective, and neither should it be ours. Instead, the lack of conflict can be seen as a sign that we are simply not standing where we ought to be. If we are standing where there is injustice and oppression in order to frame theologies that can stand up to that injustice and oppression, there will be conflict and opposition. And if we are *not* standing where there is injustice and oppression, then as Christian theologians we are standing in the wrong place. In that case, whoever may be standing alongside of us, it is certainly not Martin Luther.

Those who accused Luther of being in error at Worms were right in at least one regard. There he said that he would not recant, but in reality he already had. Only a few weeks before he made his appearance in Worms, one of several of Luther’s responses to the papal bull that had declared him a

heretic and excommunicated him had appeared in print. Writing in German so that the people with whom he had chosen to stand might hear his words in their own language, Luther noted that in one of the articles that the pope had condemned, he had originally referred to the indulgences as a “pious fraud,” believing that, even though they were fraudulent, they served a “worthwhile and godly purpose” in that they helped raise money for a good cause. He then continued:

Now that the holy father pope orders me to recant, and condemns this article, I will be obedient and say, “I confess my error; this article is not true.” And this is the reason: The indulgences are not a pious fraud, but an infernal, diabolical, antichristian fraud, larceny, and robbery, whereby the Roman Nimrod and teacher of sin peddles sin and hell to the whole world and sucks and entices away everybody’s money as the price of this unspeakable harm. If this recantation is not enough, I will improve on it some other time.<sup>9</sup>

In the world in which many of us live and do our theology, the type of language that Luther uses in this passage is to have no place. It is rude and offensive. It embarrasses us and makes us blush and cringe. It alienates others and implies that we possess the moral high ground in relation to them. We can hardly tolerate invectives and outbursts such as these if we wish to stand alongside our ecumenical partners in peace, harmony, friendship, and respect.

To any who would react to Luther’s words in that way, I would respond: You have

not yet stood where he did. You have not heard little children screaming from hunger for days on end because their father spent an entire three months wages on indulgences for himself and his dead parents, overjoyed at the fine purchase he has made. You have never met a widow who just sold the last hen left to her by her husband in order to pay for masses for his soul, unable to sleep at night due to her terror at the priest’s graphic descriptions of the flames that continue to engulf her husband’s soul because she has not yet done enough. You have not watched an adolescent girl thrashing and flailing away desperately as she is dragged into a convent from which she will never again emerge, not only because she will be forbidden from leaving, but also because she will be told that should she refuse to take “voluntarily” the vows that will keep her there for life, she will be shunned and left out on the street by her family and everyone she knows. You have not gazed on the dried blood caked on the barbs of metal whips hanging on the wall of a monastery or the gouges left in the backs of those who have been taught how pious and God-pleasing it is to use them. In short, you have not seen the bodies, souls, consciences, and possessions of the faithful being devoured in countless ways by those who claim to speak and act in God’s name and with God’s authority. And because you have experienced none of these things, you think Luther is exaggerating and overreacting and that he should have been more measured and moderate in the way he expressed himself. Perhaps at Worms he should even have stopped being so hardheaded and recalcitrant and reconsidered the possibility of taking back the crude and uncharitable things he had said and written, since they were hardly conducive to Christian unity and love.

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<sup>9</sup> LW 32: 64. These words are taken from the *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther which Were Unjustly Condemned by the Roman Bull*, published in March of 1521.

Karl Barth is renowned for having said that Christian theology is to be done with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. I imagine that would involve sitting rather than standing. Many of us live in the delusion that we can see and understand the injustice and oppression in the world merely by opening a newspaper, turning on the news, or browsing the internet. In contrast, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), which was so scathing and shocking that even many of those who had supported Luther up to that point accused him of having gone too far, Luther described his plight by citing an old Latin adage: “Hoc scio pro certo, quod, si cum stercore certo, vinco vel vincor, semper ego maculor.”<sup>10</sup> Roughly and euphemistically paraphrased, that means: “This I know for a fact, that whenever I get locked in a struggle with excrement, whether I win or lose, I always end up being covered in it.” Obviously, to be involved in that kind of struggle requires standing in places that none of us like to stand. Yet any who dare to go to those places will find large pools of people who have been left with no choice but to stand there. They will also discover that the suffering and injustices in such places are too gut-wrenching, unbearable, and appalling to be mentioned in the news or shown on a TV or computer screen. For that reason, those who have never gone out to stand in those places believe that they do not exist and accuse any who affirm that they do of making them up or exaggerating what they claim to have seen. And the type of theologians that Luther repeatedly denounced and excoriated

in his writings will insist that the existence and proliferation of such places has nothing to do with theology and therefore that, even if they do exist, they are no place for true theologians to stand and work.

Given where Luther chose to stand and the high price he expected to pay and constantly did pay for standing there, I suspect that many of us Christians and Christian theologians who celebrate the stand he took at Worms five hundred years ago would prefer to stand at a distance so as to let his “Here I stand!” stand as it is rather than substituting a “we” for the “I.” If that is the case, then I also suspect that the mouth from which we would hear echoing most loudly the impassioned cry of “Recant!” would be, not that of those who stared angrily upon Luther as they sat in judgment over him, but that of Luther himself, standing alone in their midst as he directs his disconcerted and indignant gaze at us.

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<sup>10</sup> D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, ed. J. F. K. Knaake, Karl Drescher, and Konrad Burdach (Weimar: Boehlau, 1883), 6: 501.