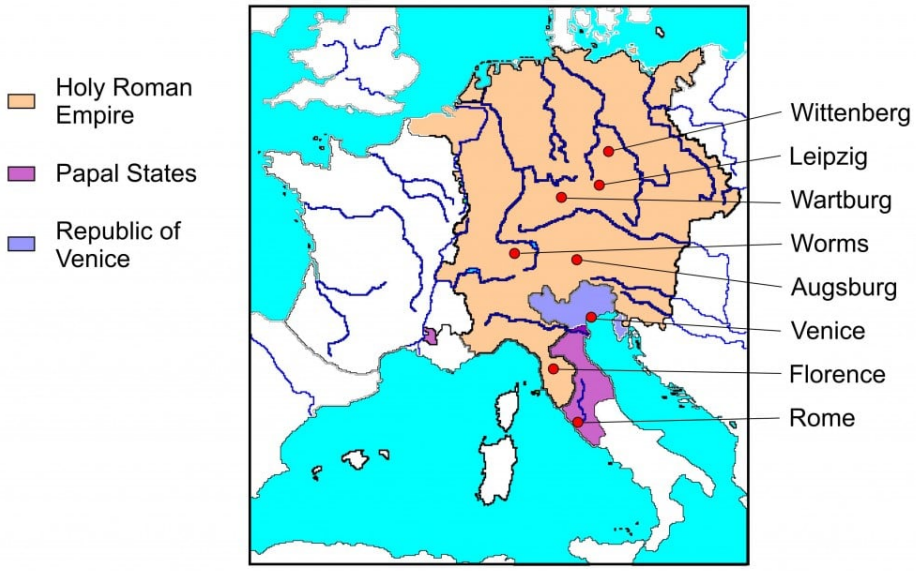
Here I stand

The Diet of Worms was an assembly of the lords of the Holy Roman Empire called together by Emperor Charles V in 1521. One of the duties of the Diet was to consider whether the writings of Martin Luther were heretical. The Diet marked the point-of-no-return for the Protestant Reformation. Luther's ringing statement "Here I stand" reclaimed the spiritual freedom of the individual. Henceforth each person could choose to interpret scripture and to commune with God without the necessary intervention of the church. However, Luther's actual concept of freedom was far more complicated than this.



Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who studied, taught and preached at the University of Wittenberg in Saxony, one of the states of the Holy Roman Empire. The engraving on the right by Lucas Cranach the Elder shows Luther in his monk's attire. Cranach was the court painter for the Elector of Saxony. He knew Luther well and made several portraits of him. This engraving was used as a frontispiece for several of Luther's early books. The Latin beneath the portrait states that Luther's depiction of his thinking was eternal but Cranach's portrait of his features only transient. At the bottom is a device used by Cranach as his signature – a winged serpent with a crown upon his head and a ruby ring in his mouth.

Luther had published his *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* in 1517. Indulgences were sold by the Roman Catholic Church as a means for the sinful to decrease their time in purgatory. Though they might have begun as a means to relieve the sinner, they had rapidly become simply a way for the church to raise money. Whether or not the theses had actually been nailed to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenburg is unknown, but they were quickly printed and made available throughout the Holy Roman Empire:



In 1518, Luther was arraigned in Augsburg before Cardinal Cajetan, the papal ambassador to the Holy Roman Empire. Cajetan insisted that Luther's views were heretical in that they questioned the authority of the pope. He asked Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, to arrest Luther and send him to Rome. Frederick refused to do so since Luther had not been formally tried and convicted of heresy.

In 1519 Luther debated on the 95 theses with Johann Maier von Eck in Leipzig. Luther insisted on the freedom of the individual to decide what was right on the basis of the scriptures and conscience, whereas von Eck insisted on the need for obedience to God's church. Their debate had no resolution.

Over the next year, Luther published several books highly critical of the Roman Catholic Church (Mullett, 1985, Chapter 5). His *Address to the German Nobility* proposed that the German states should become independent of Roman control and not send Rome its annual payments. The *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was a vituperative attack on the papacy, likening it to the power of Babylon and the Antichrist described in Revelations.

A third book *The Freedom of a Christian w*as addressed to Pope Leo and was more conciliatory. The essence of its message was that

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
> A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Christians were granted freedom from sin through the grace of Christ. Nevertheless, they must then act not for themselves but for the benefit of others. Freedom comes with duty.

However, the book was also adamantly opposed to many tenets of Roman Catholicism. Luther proclaimed that salvation comes through faith rather than by works, and that each Christian can be his or her own priest: “Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow-priests.”

In the summer of 1520, Pope Leo X issued the bull *Exsurge Domine* (Arise Lord), which listed the heretical ideas proposed in Luther’s writings. The pope requested that Luther come to Rome and recant; failure to do so would result in his excommunication. The pope arranged for the burning of Luther’s books in Rome. In Wittenberg, a defiant Luther publicly burned his copy of the papal bull.

The pope assigned Cardinal Girolamo Aleander the task of bringing Luther to trial. His task was facilitated by the

coronation of the new Emperor Charles V in November, 1520. Anxious to display his faith, Charles agreed to bring Luther before the Diet of Worms in the spring of 1521. Frederick the Wise of Saxony insisted that Luther be guaranteed safe conduct to and from Worms.

Luther appeared before the Diet on April 17. Since Cardinal Aleander did not allow himself to be in the same room as a confirmed heretic, the examination of Luther was conducted by von Eck, who had previously debated Luther in Leipzig. The following woodcut by an anonymous artist (from a Freiburg History webpage) was used to illustrate one of the early reports of the Diet. In the background is Charles V surrounded by six electors (Frederick of Saxony, Joachim of Brandenburg, Ludwig of Rhine, and the Archbishops of Mainz, Trier and Cologne). The seventh elector (from Bohemia) was not present. In the foreground Luther stands on the right and von Eck on the left. In the center are Luther's books.



Luther was not allowed to present any of the ideas in his books. Rather he was simply asked to acknowledge and recant his authorship. Luther acknowledged that some of his writings had perhaps been too polemical ("more severe than befits my

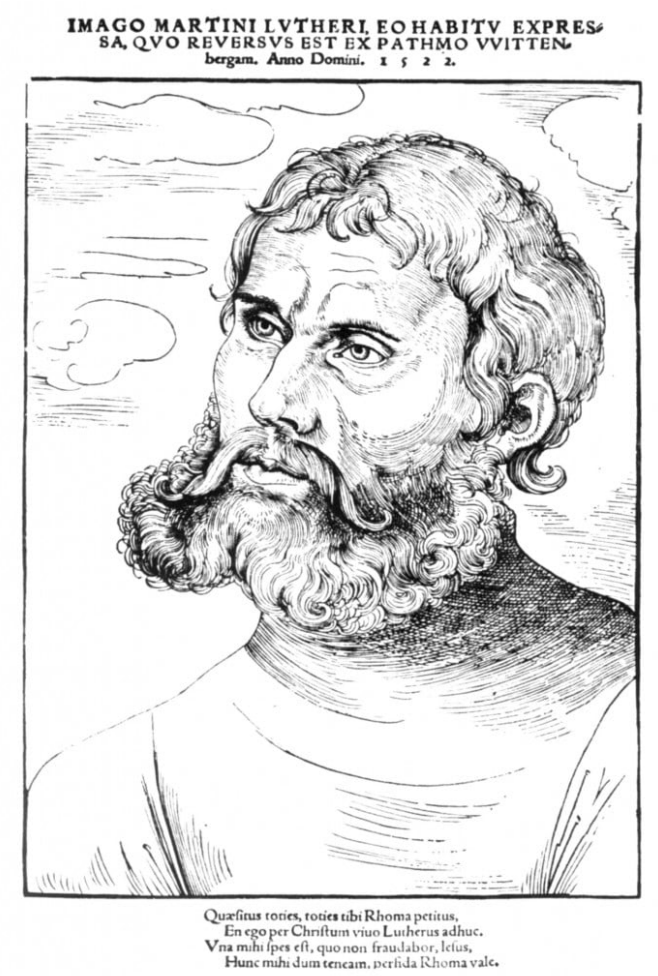
religion or my profession"), but claimed that the criticisms they voiced were nevertheless correct. He asked to have time to consider his response, and this was granted. The next afternoon, he appeared again before the Diet. Von Eck requested that he not make inappropriate comments, but simply state whether or not he would "revoke and retract your books and the errors contained in them" (Atkinson, 1971)

The final words of Martin Luther were variously reported (*Deutsche Reichstagsakten*, pp. 555-559; Atkinson, 1971; Whitford, 2011; Linder 2010, webpage *The Trial of Martin Luther*). Luther spoke in both Latin and German. He refused to recant the opinions expressed in his books since no scriptural evidence had been produced to prove them wrong:

> 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. (Brecht, 1985).
>
> Nisi con victus fuero testimoniis scripturarum aut ratione evidenti, nam neque papae neque concilio solis credo cum constet eos errasse saepius et sibi ipsis contradixisse, vinctus sum scripturis a me adductis, et capta conscientia in verbis Dei, revocare neque possum neque volo, cum contra conscientiam agere neque tutum neque integrum. Gott helfe mir. Amen. (*Reichtagsakten*, p. 555)

Some reports include the statements "Here I stand. I can do no other." (*Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders*) before "May God help me." These words were certainly in the mind of Luther. Whether or not they were actually spoken is unknown. Most experts think not.

A few days later, Luther left Worms to journey back to Wittenberg. Afraid that the safe conduct granted by Charles V might be revoked, Frederick the Wise arranged a sham kidnapping of Luther, who was spirited away to the castle at Wartburg. There Luther remained incognito. He grew a beard, and was known as Junker Jörg (Squire George). The woodcut on the right (again by Lucas Cranach) shows Luther with this new identity. The verse below the portrait states that “though so often sought and persecuted by Rome, I, Luther, still live by Jesus Christ in undeniable hope. As long as I have this, farewell perfidious Rome!”



The results of Luther’s examination before the Reichstag was published as the Edict of Worms in May 1821. Luther was denounced as an “obstinate, schismatic heretic.” He was to be apprehended and punished. Those favoring or supporting him would be guilty of treason against the empire and would forfeit all their goods. All of Luther’s books were to be burned.

Luther found the seclusion in Wartburg a relief from the disputations and polemics of the preceding years. He considered it his Patmos – the island where legend has it that St. John wrote Revelations. During his retreat in Wartburg, Luther translated the New Testament into German. In March 1822 he returned to Wittenberg. Frederick the Wise had negotiated

with Charles V that the Edict of Worms did not apply to him. The young emperor did not wish to alienate one of the most powerful princes of his empire. Luther resumed his teaching and his writing.

One of his works on his return was a reply to the book *On Free Will (De Libero Arbitrio),* published in 1524 by Desiderius Erasmus, the humanist scholar. Erasmus was actually reacting to Luther's earlier scriptural interpretations that man had no free will. The papal bull *Exsurge Domine* had listed this claim as one of Luther's heresies. Luther had replied in an *Assertion of all Articles*: "free will is really a fiction and a label without reality because it is in no man's power to plan any evil or good … everything takes place by absolute necessity" (Winter, pp. 44-45). All that mattered to Luther was salvation through the grace of God. Erasmus recognized the grace of God but insisted that we could accept or reject this salvation. Furthermore we could choose to do either good or evil. Why would the scriptures exhort us to follow God's commandments, if there were no choice between obedience and disobedience?

In 1525 Luther denounced the ideas of Erasmus in his book *On the Bondage of the Will* (*De Servo Arbitrio*). Since God is omniscient and omnipotent,

> all things which we do, although they may appear to us to be done mutably and contingently, and even may be done thus contingently by us, are yet, in reality, done necessarily and immutably, with respect to the will of God. (p. 27)

Luther proposed that the purpose of the commandments is simply to demonstrate that man cannot obey them without the grace of God.

> man, by the words of the law, is admonished and taught what he ought to do, not what he can do … he is brought to know his sin, but not to believe that he has any strength in

> himself. Wherefore, friend Erasmus, as often as you throw in my teeth the Words of the law, so often I throw in yours that of Paul, “By the law is the knowledge of sin,”(Romans 3:20) – not of the power of the will. (pp. 111-112)

Luther interpreted the words of Paul as irrefutable truth. He had replaced the authority of the Church with the authority of the scriptures. There is no reason to accept either. Both represent incomplete attempts to understand how we should act.

These ideas bring into question Luther’s statements at the Diet of Worms. According to our understanding, we exercise free will when we choose to act in one way when we could have acted otherwise (van Inwagen, 1983). Typically this requires “deliberation” – we imagine the outcomes of our possible acts, and evaluate these against our principles of what is good or right.

One of the great paradoxes of Judeo-Christian thought is how free will is possible when God knows everything that will happen. In our modern and more agnostic times, this paradox has been transformed. Now we wonder whether free will is possible when science proposes that everything is determined. Most consider that free will and determinism are compatible but it remains unclear how this can be so.

Much of what we do occurs without thinking. We often respond instinctually or reflexively. Sometimes we do things for reasons of which we are unaware. After the act we invent rationalizations for our behavior. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that some of our actions are truly deliberate. We choose to do them because we have thought carefully about the consequences. Various options are freely available to us. We select what we think is best. We try to do the right thing.

Luther had deliberated overnight whether to recant. In the end he decided not to. Yet he believed that this decision was not his. He was merely acting out God’s preordained will. He could

do no other.

Luther had constructed his personal system of values from his interpretation of the scriptures. This set of values had determined his decision. He attributed his ideas about what he should do to God. He did not say so for fear he might be wrong. For he had conceived these ideals, and he chose to follow them. He could have done otherwise.

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