

Luther's Answer before the Emperor and the Diet of Worms,

18 April 1521

On the next day, the fifth of the Festival (Misericordia Domini) just after four p.m., the herald came and led Dr Martin to the imperial court. The princes were engaged, and he had to wait till six p.m. among a great crowd of people which by their very number wearied and fretted him. But when the assembly began and Martin stood forward, the official [Eckl broke out with these words:

“Yesterday evening His Imperial Majesty prescribed this hour for you, Martin Luther, when you had publicly acknowledged as your own the books which we yesterday read out by name. But when you were asked if you wished any of them to be withdrawn, or whether you stood by all that you had published, you asked for time to think it over. This **time** is now at an end — and indeed by rights you should not have been granted any more time for consideration, for you have known long enough why you have been summoned here.

“Indeed, every man ought to be sure enough about his religious beliefs to be able to give a confident and trustworthy account of them whenever it is demanded, especially a man like you — so great and so experienced a Professor of Theology. Come now: answer at last His Majesty's question — you have appreciated his kindness in obtaining for yourself time for reflection: do you wish to stand by the books recognized as yours? Or do you wish retract anything?”

The official had spoken in Latin and German, and Dr Martin replied in the same two languages, speaking like a suppliant, yet without raising his voice — modestly, but with no lack of Christian warmth and firmness, which whetted their appetites for the speech of his antagonist and the sight of his own high spirit bumbled. Above all they looked most eagerly for his revocation, some hope of which they had conceived from his request for time of deliberation. This is what he said:

'My lord, emperor most serene, princes most illustrious, lords most gracious, I am here obedient to the order made yesterday evening that I should appear at this time. By the mercy of God, I beseech your most Serene Majesty and your most illustrious lordships to deign to hear with forbearance my cause — which (I hope) is both just and true. If through my inexperience I do not give any one his proper title, or offend in any way against courtly etiquette, I beg you of your kindness to pardon me as a man whose life has not been spent

in the courts of princes but in the cells of monks, and who can testify of himself nothing more than that he has hitherto taught and written with a simplicity of mind which looked solely to the glory of God and the sincere upbuilding of Christian believers.

Most serene emperor, most illustrious princes: two questions were put to me yesterday by your Highness, whether I acknowledged as mine a list of books published under my name, and whether I wished hold to my defence of them or to revoke them. I gave a deliberate and plain answer to the first, and I stand by it and always shall — namely, that the books were mine, being published by me under my name, unless perchance it has happened that by the guile or meddlesome cleverness of my rivals things in them have been altered or omitted. For I only acknowledge what is solely my own and what I alone have written, and not the interpretations which the industry of others has added.

“In answer to the second question, may I ask your Highness and your lordships to deign to take note that my books are not all of the same kind. In some I have dealt with religions faith and morals so simply and that my very antagonists are compelled to confess that these books are useful, harmless and fit to be read by Christians. Even the Bull, savage cruel as it is, grants that some of my books are harmless, even though it condemns them by a judgment that is simply monstrous. If then, I were to start revoking them, what (I beg you) should I be doing? Should I not alone of mankind be condemning that very truth which friends and enemies alike confess? Should I not alone be wrestling against the agreed confession of all?

Another class of my writings consists of polemic against the Papacy and the doctrine of the Papists, as men who by their most evil teachings and examples have laid waste all Christendom, body and soul. Nobody can deny or dissemble this: the experience and the complaint of all men bear witness that by the laws of the Pope and man-made doctrines, the consciences of the faithful have been most wretchedly ensnared, tormented, tortured; that above all, in this renowned German nation, goods and wealth have been devoured by tyranny unbelievable, and to this day the devouring goes on, endlessly and by most grievous means. Yet the canon law of the Papists itself provides that Papal laws and doctrines contrary to the Gospel or the opinions of the Fathers should be counted erroneous and rejected. If then, I revoke these books, all I shall achieve is to add strength to tyranny. and open not the windows but the doors to this monstrous godlessness, for a wider and freer range than it has ever dared before. The memorial of my revocation would be the kingdom of their wickedness, with licence complete and unbridled, exercising over its wretched subjects a sway by far the most intolerable of all, and even strengthened and stabilised if word got abroad that I had revoked my books with the authority of your serene Majesty and all the Roman Empire. What wickedness and tyranny should I then let loose!

“A third class of my writings has been aimed at certain private person and (as they say) people of consequence, who have laboured to defend the Roman tyranny and undermine my religious teaching. Here I confess I have been more acrimonious than befits my religion or my calling. For I do not pose as a saint and I am not disputing about

my own life but about the teaching of Christ. Yet the way is not clear for me to revoke even these writings, for by such revocation I should lend my countenance to the reign of tyranny and wickedness, which would hold more savage and violent sway than ever among the people of God.

“However, because I am a man and not God, I can bring no other protection to my writings than my Lord Jesus Christ brought to his own teaching, when at the interrogation before Annas he was struck by a servant and said: "If I have spoken evil, testify to the evil." If the Lord himself, who knew he could not err, did not disdain to listen testimony against his teaching, even from the meanest of slaves, how much more should I, the dregs a man, who cannot but err, seek and await for someone to bear witness against my teaching? I therefore beg by the mercy of God that your serene Majesty, your illustrious lordships, or anyone at all, from the highest to the lowest, who is able, should bear witness, convict me of error, vanquish me by the prophets or the evangelists of scripture. I shall be only too ready, if I am convinced, to revoke any error, and in that case I shall be the first to cast my books into the fire....”

To these words the imperial orator replied in tones of reproach that Luther's answer was not to the point; it was not for Luther to call in question things which had once been condemned or defined by Church councils. He therefore demanded a simple answer with no strings attached: would Luther revoke or not?

Luther replied: **“Since your serene Majesty and your lordships request a simple answer, I shall give it, with no strings and no catches. Unless I am convicted by the testimony of scripture or plain reason (for I believe neither in Pope nor councils alone, since it is agreed 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 neither can nor will revoke anything, for it is neither safe nor honest to act against one's conscience. Amen.”**