

Chapter 69: Martin Luther (4) The Break with Rome

Pope Leo X sits in his palace in Rome, gloomily staring at nothing. He is alarmed by the reports coming from Germany. Things are not going well there; they are heading in the wrong direction. At first, he had laughed at those squabbling monks, thinking it would just blow over. But he is



Pope Leo X 1475 - 1521

horrified to discover that he is mistaken! All of Germany and beyond is in an uproar! Luther's writings are distributed and eagerly read all over Europe! His message resonates in the hearts of the people.

Leo X does not realise that this is not just a monk's squabble but that the Lord is at work here! God is busy delivering His Church from the power of Rome.

Leo X realises that this quarrel is dangerous to his position as Pope. It's becoming an avalanche: unstoppable!! When the Lord works, who can resist Him?

That's why the Pope is looking so gloomy. He is getting worried; how will this end? He must put a stop to it! But how? He thinks hard. That monk from Wittenberg must retract his writings.

Yes, of course, retract!

Then the storm will soon pass.

That is the only way to restore peace.

But what if that monk will not retract?

What if he stubbornly stands by his writings?

What then?

Yes, then ...

He tries to dispel those troubling thoughts with a shake of his head.

Not willing?

He *must*... he *will* retract!

Soon after, Luther receives a letter from the Pope commanding him to retract his writings. Does Luther get worried? Does he give in to the Pope?

No way!

He refuses to obey. He writes a polite and respectful letter to the Pope. Luther still thinks his enemies have instigated the Pope to do this; he assumes that Leo X does not understand the issues at stake. He still has confidence in Leo X's goodwill. The Pope is not *that* bad! How wrong he is!

The Pope promptly responds to Luther's letter: Luther must appear before the Pope in Rome to give an account of himself within sixty days. Now Luther realises that it's getting serious.

Go to Rome?

No way!!

His friends also advise him not to go. They remind him of John Huss, who thought the best of the Pope, travelled to Constance but never returned. Luther realises that the same fate may await him. So, he firmly refuses to obey that papal command.

When this first plan fails, the Pope commands Frederick the Wise, the elector of Saxony, to arrest Luther and send him to Rome.

Thankfully, the elector refuses! Here we see the hand of the Lord protecting Luther. God inclines the hearts of kings and princes to do whatever pleases Him. All Rome's attempts to capture Luther fail, and Frederick the Wise becomes Luther's friend and powerful protector.

"Okay then," the Pope answers. "I will allow Luther to defend his writings in Germany."



Martin Luther

Frederick the Wise smiles to himself when he hears that. Just what he'd hoped! It couldn't be better!

This time, Luther decides to go. They arrange that Martin Luther should travel to the city of Augsburg. Cardinal Cajetan will be there as well.

LUTHER MEETS CAJETANUS

On October 7, 1518, Luther arrives at the Augsburg monastery. The monks give him a friendly welcome. The cardinal arrives as well.

That evening, Cardinal Cajetan first sends a servant to Luther, asking him to retract his writings. When Luther refuses, he must appear before the cardinal in person. Cajetan receives him kindly. Trying to persuade Luther, he says: "Come on, retract your writings quickly, then your problems are over! Be sensible, man! What's the good of all that hassle!? The interest of the Roman Catholic Church is at stake!"

But Luther has not come for *that*! He wants to defend his theses to Cajetan. That's why he travelled to Augsburg. However, the cardinal is not interested in that. Who does this monk think he is? He must obey, full stop!

Against his wish, he gets into a conversation with Luther, and it soon appears that he cannot stand his ground against Luther. That monk from Wittenberg *knows* his Bible, something which

cannot be said of Cajetan. Later, Luther mockingly joked: "Cajetan knows as much about the Bible as a donkey does about playing the harp!"

When the proud cardinal discovers he cannot get the better of Luther, he becomes angry and

starts verbally abusing and threatening him. Short and sharp, he demands: "You *must* retract!"

But Luther will not do that unless Cajetan can convince him that he is wrong based on God's Word. The cardinal becomes even angrier. He makes Luther visit him again and again, but every time Luther wins the argument. In the end, the cardinal sends him away, shouting:

"Get out of my sight and don't come back unless you want to retract!" Luther leaves.



Martin Luther before Cardinal Cajetan. Wikipedia

But Cajetan's eyes follow him out with a look of intense hatred. Then he smirks wickedly. He'll make that pesky monk eat humble pie! He won't let him get away with that! He plans to arrest Luther and send him to Rome under heavy guard, which the Pope ordered him to do. He was not allowed to let that Wittenberg monk escape. Luther knows nothing of these wicked plans to snare him like a bird in a cunningly laid trap. Luther is ignorant of the dangers that threaten him in Augsburg. How will this end?

LUTHER ESCAPES

Night has fallen on Augsburg. It is pitch dark. It is the night between the 20th and 21st of October 1518.

The streets are quiet. Everyone is asleep.



Cardinal Cajetan.
<https://www.goodreads.com/>

Perhaps Cardinal Cajetan is asleep as well. But if he had known what was happening outside, he would not be sleeping so peacefully...

The door of the monastery where Luther is staying opens softly. A figure slips outside and quietly sneaks off, keeping to the shadows of the houses. He heads for the city gates. When he gets there, one of the gates also opens softly. That dark figure slips through the open gate to get outside the city. The gate immediately closes behind him.

Who is that man?

That man is Luther.

Friends have warned him of Cajetan's evil plans and help him escape.

Friendly hands open the doors for him.

Friendly hands have ensured that a saddled horse awaits him just outside the gate. Luther mounts the animal. First, very quietly so that nobody hears him, then a little faster and finally, in a gallop, he moves away from the city. He rides for hours without a break to get as far away from Augsburg as possible before daybreak.

God watches over His servant. The cunning, devilish plan of the hypocritical cardinal to secretly arrest Luther and send him to Rome will not succeed. If the plan had worked, Luther would have been lost.

He would have never returned.

He would have been murdered in Rome.

But again, God watches over His faithful servant.

When morning comes, Luther has travelled a long way. He is not used to riding, and this night flight has made him tired. Yet, he doesn't dare to rest. He must try to reach Wittenberg as soon as possible. He won't be safe until he gets there. The power of Rome has extremely long arms. Luther realises that, and so he pushes the horse to its limit.

A few days later, he safely rides through the gates of Wittenberg.

When Cajetan realises that his prey has escaped, he is furious!

Escaped!

Escaped, after all that!

However, he does not lose courage. That arrogant monk *must* return! He will not let the matter rest. Seemingly friendly but with an underlying threat, he asks the elector to ensure Luther returns to Augsburg. The elector politely but firmly refuses.

Disappointed and full of fury, Cajetan travels back to Rome to report to the Pope that his attempt to have Luther retract all his writings has failed and that he managed to escape at the last moment! 'And yet', thinks Pope Leo X, 'the struggle in Germany must stop. It is getting more and more critical for Rome. But *how*? If that miserable monk would only retract, then his problems would be solved.

But Luther doesn't do that. Pope Leo X is fuming!

ROME TRIES AGAIN

The knocker falls on the monastery door at Wittenberg. A distinguished gentleman with a friendly smile asks to speak to Dr Martin Luther. The servant lets him come in.

Soon those two men sit chatting comfortably together. Who is that friendly gentleman?

His name is Von Miltitz, and he represents the Pope. The Pope chose him to go to Luther because of his charming and friendly character. He must try to settle the differences and come to an agreement.

Von Miltitz first visited the elector of Saxony: Frederik the Wise. He had tried to talk the elector into secretly allowing him to arrest Luther. As a reward, Frederik the Wise would receive a ribbon: a badge of honour.



Karl von Miltitz
419-1529

This still happens today. The government distributes awards to people for their special services or achievements.

Frederik the Wise would receive one of those high distinctions if he allowed the Pope to imprison Luther. Thankfully, the noble elector refuses. He does not want to earn that 'Judas reward.'

So, Von Miltitz decides to visit Luther anyway and discuss matters of concern with him.

He is amicable and pleasant to Luther. Yes, he praises and flatters him. "But," says Von Miltitz, "do us a favour and as from today keep quiet about it. You can promise that, can't you?" No, he does not demand that Luther must retract everything, but he must keep *silent*. This is another popular tactic of the devil. He will try this if he cannot succeed in other ways. If nothing else succeeds, a Christian must keep silent about his beliefs.

This request takes Luther by surprise and he gives in because of Von Miltitz's friendliness. Okay then, from now on, he will keep quiet about it, but on one condition: his enemies must also stay quiet about it!

Von Miltitz promises this. Luther can count on it. Of course, that's fine! From both sides, the matter is closed and put to rest. Mission accomplished! Bowing and with a firm handshake, Von Miltitz leaves the monastery. He organises Tetzl to be locked up in a monastery to end his abominable indulgence traffic. At last, success! Satisfied, he travels back to Rome.

But God has decided otherwise. Luther is not allowed to be silent. The light of God's Word may not be hidden under a bushel but must shine in the darkness and spread light everywhere.

The *enemies* of Luther broke the silence, which released Luther from his promise. It wasn't *Luther* but his *opponents* who broke the silence. Can you see the golden thread of God's providence? He directs everything in such a way that it serves the glory of His Name!

The man who broke the silence was Johan Eck. He was highly educated and a professor at a university in a German city. This professor had also read Luther's theses.

They had made him angry. He would sort out this issue! He thought: 'I will prove to that obstinate monk from Wittenberg that he is entirely wrong. But I do not want to discuss that matter privately with Luther; no one will hear it! No, I, Dr Johan Eck, will publicly shame and ridicule that monk! If nobody else can do it, I will! Then I will be popular and honoured!'



Johan Eck
1486-1543

And so, he challenges Luther to a public debate. Yes, now Luther may not remain silent; otherwise, everyone would think he was unsure of his case or was afraid. So, he accepts that challenge. They agree to hold the debate in Leipzig.

DEBATE BETWEEN LUTHER AND ECK

In the summer of 1519, the opponents travel to Leipzig. Some of Luther's students accompany him.

A large crowd gathers to witness the debate. The tension is palpable.

The Roman Catholic professor cunningly guides the debate away from the 95 theses knowing he can't win an argument about them. So, he opens the discussion with the claim that the Pope is the representative of Christ on earth. Luther responds that the Pope does *not* have that power and continually appeals to the Bible, while Johan Eck repeatedly appeals to the decisions of previous synods and popes.

Luther says: "Oh no, those decisions don't mean a thing because both the Pope and councils can err, which means that the ecclesiastical assemblies can also err. *I stand by God's Word, for that cannot err!*"



The debate in Leipzig between Martin Luther and Johan Eck. Wikipedia

Johan Eck thought he would soon silence that simple monk but discovered a formidable opponent in Luther. Luther knows the Bible well; this could not be said of Johan Eck.

Luther said: "John Huss was right. But the Roman Catholic Church silenced him by burning him at the stake in Constance. That was wrong." When Eck hears that, he gives a nasty smile. Now Luther has just incriminated himself! He cries out indignantly: "You are a heretic and must burn at the stake, just like John Huss!"

In the end, Johan Eck loses the debate. The crowd went home, but Luther had sowed the good seed, and that seed would bear fruit in God's time.

Eck travelled to Rome to visit the Pope. There he accused Luther of being a dangerous heretic who must be silenced. He advised the Pope: "You must excommunicate Luther!"

And yes, the Pope listened to him. In 1520 the Pope issued the papal bull. He demanded that Luther must retract everything. For the second time, he commanded Luther to appear in Rome within *sixty days* to retract all his writings there. If he refused, the Pope would excommunicate him!

How did Luther respond?
Did he go to Rome?

No, he knew better than that! He knew he would not return alive if he did. Did he then retract all his writings?

No, he was *not allowed* to do that because his writings were according to Scripture.

Do you know how Luther responded?

Just come with me, and I will show you.

BURNING THE PAPAL BULL

Like most cities in those days, Wittenberg had a city wall with gates. The name of one of those gates was The Elstergate.

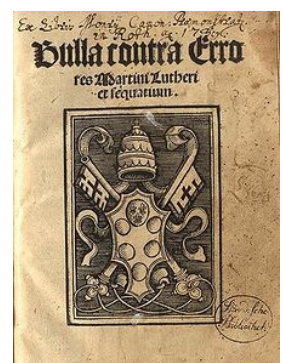
On Monday, December 10, 1520, a large crowd gathers outside the Elstergate. Among all those people are some of the professors and students from the university at Wittenberg. They are standing around a stack of firewood ready to be lit.

What's happening?

Is Luther going to be burned at the stake like John Huss was?

No! On top of the wood lay various Roman Catholic books! Sixty days have passed since Luther received the papal bull. December 10 is the deadline! Luther must respond to the Papal letter *now!*

His answer is going to be unmistakably clear!



The Papal bull, issued in 1520

Look, the brave monk walks towards the woodpile. His face is solemn. In the one hand, he carries the papal bull.

It becomes quiet, the tension tangible.

One of the professors lights the fire.

A cloud of smoke blows into the faces of the bystanders. Soon the flames blaze up high. Solemnly Luther steps closer to the fire. He holds the papal bull above the flames and declares:

"Since you have angered the Holy One of the Lord, may everlasting fire trouble and consume you!"

Then he drops the papal bull into the flames. Soon nothing but ash is left.

Then he leaves calmly and soberly.

"Since you have angered the Holy One of the Lord, may everlasting fire trouble and consume you!" Luther

Students and professors follow him. The crowd disperses and goes home. They are deeply

impressed by what has taken place.

Perhaps you think: 'What is so unique about a piece of paper getting burned?' It is unique

because what Luther has just done changed the course of history!

By burning the papal bull, he publicly severed all ties with Rome! He had come to the point of no return!

This does not mean that the struggle is over! Oh no, it has just started! This *act* of Luther required much courage: the courage and act of *faith*!



A c. 1885 painting by Karl Aspelin showing Martin Luther burning the papal bull. December 1520.

Soon this act was known throughout all of Germany. The Pope hears about it as well. He is furious. How dare that brazen monk do that?

In 1521, the Pope officially excommunicates Luther and pronounces a ban on all his followers. That simple monk from Wittenberg brought commotion to all of Europe! Luther wrote various booklets which were eagerly read by thousands. In these booklets, he attacked the Pope and the Roman Catholic doctrines.

He called the pope 'the antichrist', 'God's enemy', 'Christ's persecutor', and 'the destroyer of Christianity!'

As you see, Luther was sharp, very sharp, but the Pope only had himself to blame! Luther realised that a severe struggle awaited him. However, he did not shy away from it. That struggle *had* to come, and it *did* come, bitter and fierce!

QUESTIONS

1. Explain the following actions of the Pope:
 - a. Asking Luther to retract
 - b. Asking Frederik the Wise to extradite him.
 - c. Demanding Luther appear before Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg.
2. Why did Cajetan fail to convince Luther to retract?
3. How was Luther's life preserved? Where did he go?
4. Identify Von Miltitz. What agreement did he make with Luther?
5. Why did Luther violate the terms of this agreement? Was he correct in this?
6. Identify Johan Eck. What did he want to do?
7. What did Luther base his arguments on during the debate at Leipzig?
8. What advice did Eck give the Pope? Was this advice followed?
9. What was the importance of the burning of the papal bull?
10. How did Luther describe the Pope?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Luther's break with Rome came gradually. What new views did Luther have at this time that he did not have when he posted the Ninety-five Theses?
2. Why did the papal ban fail to have its usual effect on the people?