

Martin Luther's Defense

- Date** ■ April 18, 1521
Place ■ Worms, Holy Roman Empire (Germany)
Type of Source ■ Speech (original in German)
Author ■ Martin Luther
Historical Context ■ In 1520 the Pope condemned Martin Luther and his writings in a public letter called a papal bull, instructing the new Emperor, Charles V, to execute Luther. Luther's own prince, Frederick III of Saxony, insisted that Luther could only be tried by a German court. Charles agreed to hear the case. As a result, Luther went to the Imperial Diet (Parliament) to face his accusers. The Diet condemned Luther, but Frederick hid him before he could be arrested. This account of the hearing was written later by Luther himself.
Internal Context ■ The previous day Luther had been asked if the condemned writings were his, and if they were, if he would renounce the ideas in them. Luther admitted he wrote the books but asked for a day to consider how to respond to the second.

Dr. Johann Eck: Do you wish to defend the books which are recognized as your work? Or to retract anything contained in them? . . .

Dr. Martin Luther: Most Serene Lord Emperor, Most Illustrious Princes, Most Gracious Lords—I this day appear before you in all humility, according to your command, and I beseech you to grant a gracious hearing to my plea, which, I trust, will be a plea of justice and truth; and if through my inexperience I neglect to give to any their proper titles or in any way offend against the etiquette of the court in my manners or behavior, be kind enough to forgive me, I beg, since I am a man who has spent his life not in courts but in the **cells** of a monastery; a man who can say of himself only this, that to this day I have thought and written in simplicity of heart, solely with a view to the glory of God and the pure instruction of Christ's faithful people.

Two questions were yesterday put to me by his imperial majesty; the first, whether I was the author of the books whose titles were read; the second, whether I wished to revoke or defend the doctrine I have taught. I answered the first, and I adhere to that answer.

Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships: I ask you to observe that my books are not all of the same kind.

There are some in which I have dealt with piety in faith and morals with such simplicity and so agreeably with the Gospels that my adversaries themselves are compelled to admit them useful, harmless, and clearly worth reading by a Christian. Even the Bull, harsh and cruel though it is, makes some of my books harmless, although it condemns them also, by a judgment downright monstrous. If I should begin to recant here, what, I beseech you, would I be doing but condemning alone among mortals, that truth which is admitted by friends and foes alike, in an unaided struggle against universal consent?

Johann Eck

Johann Eck had been friendly with Luther before 1517 but soon after became Luther's strongest opponent. In 1520 Eck convinced the Pope to issue the bull condemning Luther's writings. At the Imperial Diet he served as the main examiner.

cells

rooms in a monastery

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The second kind consists in those writings leveled against the **papacy** and the doctrine of the **papists**, as against those who by their wicked doctrines and precedents have laid waste **Christendom** by doing harm to the souls and the bodies of men. No one can either deny or conceal this, for universal experience and world-wide grievances are witnesses to the fact that through the Pope's laws and through man-made teachings the consciences of the faithful have been most pitifully ensnared, troubled, and racked in torment, and also that their goods and possessions have been devoured (especially amongst this famous **German nation**) by unbelievable tyranny, and are to this day being devoured without end in shameful fashion; and that thought they themselves by their own laws take care to provide that the Pope's laws and doctrines which are contrary to the Gospel or the teachings of **the Fathers** are to be considered as erroneous and reprobate. If then I recant these, the only effect will be to add strength to such tyranny, to open not the windows but the main doors to such blasphemy, which will thereupon stalk farther and more widely than it has hitherto dared.

The third kind consists of those books which I have written against private individuals, so-called; against those, that is, who have exerted themselves in defense of the **Roman tyranny** and to the overthrow of that piety which I have taught. I confess that I have been more harsh against them than befits my religious vows and my profession. For I do not make myself out to be any kind of saint, nor am I now contending about my conduct but about Christian doctrine. But it is not in my power to recant them, because that recantation would give that tyranny and blasphemy and occasion to lord it over those whom I defend and to rage against God's people more violently than ever.

However, since I am a man and not God, I cannot provide my writings with any other defense than that which my Lord Jesus Christ provided for His teaching. When He had been interrogated concerning His teaching before **Annas** and had received a **buffet** from a servant, He said: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil." If the Lord Himself, who knew that He could not err, did not refuse to listen to witness against His teaching, even from a worthless slave, how much more ought I, scum that I am, capable of naught but error, to seek and to wait for any who may wish to bear witness against my teaching.

And so, through the mercy of God, I ask Your Imperial Majesty, and Your Illustrious Lordships, or anyone of any degree, to defeat them by the writings of the Prophets or by the Gospels; for I shall be most ready, if I be better instructed, to recant any error, and I shall be the first in casting my writings into the fire. I have been reminded of the dissensions which my teaching engenders. I can only answer in the words of our Lord. 'I came not to bring peace but a sword.' If our God is so severe, let us beware lest we release a deluge of wars, lest the reign of our noble youth, Charles, be inauspicious. Take warning from the

papacy
the institutions surrounding the Pope

papists
an insulting name used to describe defenders of the Pope or the Catholic Church.

Christendom
all Christians

German nation
"Germany" or "German nation" refers not to a country or government but to the German-speaking regions of Europe.

the Fathers
early scholars of Christianity

Roman tyranny
Luther is referring to the rule of the Pope over Christians.

Annas
One of the high priests who condemned Jesus

buffet
punch or hit. Luther is referring to John 18:21-22.

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examples of **Pharaoh, the King of Babylon, and the kings of Israel**. God is who confounds the wise. I must walk in the fear of the Lord. I say this not to chide but because I cannot escape my duty to my Germans. I commend myself to your Majesty. May you not suffer my adversaries to make you ill disposed to me without cause. I have spoken.

Dr. Eck: Martin, you have not sufficiently distinguished your works. The earlier were bad and the latter worse. Your plea to be heard from the Scripture is the one always made by **heretics**. You do nothing but renew the errors of **Wyclif and Hus**. How will the Jews, how will the **Turks**, exult to hear Christians discussing whether they have been wrong all these years! Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they all? You have no right to call into question the most holy **orthodox** faith, instituted by Christ the perfect lawgiver, proclaimed throughout the world by the apostles, sealed by the red blood of martyrs, confirmed by the sacred councils, defended by the Church in which all our fathers believed until death and gave us as an inheritance, and which now we are forbidden by the pope and the emperor to discuss lest there be no end of debate. I ask you, Martin— answer candidly and **without horns**—do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?

Dr. Luther: Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am [convinced] of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning, I stand [convinced] by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us.

On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me.

Amen.

Pharaoh, the King of Babylon, and the kings of Israel

kings from the Bible who were warned to obey God and suffered disaster when they did not

heretics

teachers and believers in false doctrine

Wyclif and Hus

John Wyclif was English reformer who died in 1384. He was found guilty of heresy after his death and his corpse and books burned.

Jan Hus was a Czech reformer who was executed as a heretic by the Catholic Church in 1415.

Both men preached ideas similar to Luther's.

Turks

"Turks" was the common name for all Muslims.

orthodox

true. In this case, "orthodox" does not refer to the eastern churches.

without horns

without adding extra words

Source: "Martin Luther's Account of the Hearing at Worms," *Famous Trials: The Trial of Martin Luther*, 2010, <<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/luther/wormsexcerpts.html>> (May 24, 2011).