

# LUTHER'S CONSCIENTIOUS STAND

When Martin Luther rode into the town of Worms in 1521, he was not a confident man.

Luther had long protested against the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church—most famously in 1517 with the posting of his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. After years of ensuing controversy, Pope Leo X finally excommunicated the German reformer in January 1521. In April of that year, Luther was summoned to appear before the Imperial Diet (Assembly) at Worms to defend his controversial beliefs before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. We may think

of Luther as big and brash and full of swagger, but he came into Worms so intimidated that on the first day of his defense his statements could barely be understood. The Catholic authorities were threatening to banish him from Charles' empire—a vast territory centered in Germany and spanning central Europe. Luther's livelihood as a professor, and his very life, were at stake.

Luther knew what the authorities wanted him to do: recant his words criticizing the Catholic Church for its teaching and practices. However fearful he may have been at the outset, by the end of the interrogation Luther had gathered his strength. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God," Luther declared. "Thus I cannot and will not repent, for going against my conscience is neither safe nor salutary. I can do no other. Here I stand. God help me. Amen."

On May 26, 1521, the Emperor rendered his decision. Luther was to be placed under a "ban and double ban." This Edict of Worms implored the men and women of the empire:

*. . . not to take the aforementioned Martin Luther into your houses, not to receive him at*

*court, to give him neither food nor drink, not to hide him, to afford him no help, following, support, or encouragement, either clandestinely or publicly, through words or work. Where you can get him, seize him and empower him, you should capture him and send him to us under tight security.*

Luther was now a man on the run. The powers that be were adamant that Luther and his writings—and anyone sympathetic to his ideas—must be silenced. And yet, Luther was willing to endure all this—expulsion, danger, maybe even death—for the sake of his conscience. In a very real sense, you could say that the history of the Reformation, the history of Europe, and the history of the entire world was, in God's providence, altered because one man refused to violate his conscience.

Praise God Luther took his conscience seriously.

I wonder if you and I are quite so careful with ours.



# PAUL'S CONSCIENTIOUS DEFENSE

Of course, Martin Luther was not the first, or the most famous, preacher to appeal to his conscience. “For our boast is this,” wrote the Apostle Paul, “the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you” (2 Cor. 1:12).

Paul’s opponents in Corinth thought he was a weak and hypocritical phony. He was (they thought) bold in his letters, but unimpressive

in person (2 Cor. 10:1–2). They also charged him with duplicity, saying one thing but doing another. Listen to Paul’s defense:

*Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? (2 Cor. 1:15–17).*

Reading between the lines, we can surmise that Paul had written to them telling them of his plans to visit them. Paul was eager to see the Corinthians and pay them a visit. Yet something happened to change the good vibes and force Paul into Plan B. At the last minute, Paul decided not to come to Corinth, not because he was fickle, but because he loved them. As Paul says in verse 23: “But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.”

You can understand the situation from the point of view of the Christians in Corinth. Paul said he was excited to see them. Then he didn't show up. What gives? They considered the change of plans one more reason they couldn't trust Paul. He was weak, fickle, feeble, and frail.

Paul, for his part, knew that his motives were pure. He was not running from trouble. He was not engaging in doubletalk. The only reason Paul didn't show up was because he considered it wise to avoid "another painful visit" (2 Cor. 2:1). The Corinthians were putting up with false teachers and so-called super-apostles. They were heading in the wrong direction. And if Paul showed up at their doorstep, he would have no choice but to sternly rebuke—in person—the people he loved. He wasn't sure the relationship could handle another face-to-face confrontation. So Paul decided it would be better to put off his planned trip. The letter of 2 Corinthians is a defense of Paul's ministry in response to the lies of these false apostles and the misunderstandings taking root in Corinth.

This brings us back to verse 12 in chapter 1 of the letter. Notice three things Paul mentions in his defense.

## **1. SIMPLICITY**

First, he says he has acted “with simplicity.” By this he means that his motives were pure, and he really did desire to see the Corinthians. When he said he would visit them, he was not making plans “by earthly wisdom.” He was not trying to be calculating. He was not interested in political maneuvering or trickery.

## **2. SINCERITY**

Second, Paul says he acted with “godly sincerity.” When he decided not to visit, and then explained his reason, Paul was forthright, honest, and candid. He did not tell them one thing, but mean another. He was not trying to be coy or evasive. He meant everything he said to them. His change of plans was motivated solely by a concern for their well-being. As such, the criticisms leveled against him were not fair.

Many of us have faced the same kind of criticisms. Plans change. Sometimes it’s the