

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 *Corinthians* 10:3-6)

Number 364a Copyright 2021 The Trinity Foundation Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692 June 2021
Email: tjtrinityfound@aol.com Website: www.trinityfoundation.org Telephone: 423.743.0199 Fax: 423.743.2005

A Warning to My Dear German People, Part 1

By Martin Luther

Translated by Martin H. Bertram

Editor's note: The following treatise by Martin Luther is from Luther's Works (LW hereafter), Volume 47: The Christian in Society IV, J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Editors, 3–55 (page numbers in notes refer to this edition, which includes an introduction that is not reproduced here), Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, and is reproduced with permission from Fortress Press. Footnotes are from this edition, and it is slightly edited in format for The Trinity Review.

I issued an urgent and sincere admonition publicly to the clerical members of the Diet of Augsburg in which I implored them not to let the diet—on which all the world set such great hopes and toward which it looked with longing—adjourn inconclusively, but rather work toward the establishment of peace, the cessation of some of their abominations, and freedom for the Gospel.¹ I also strove and sighed for these things with all my might in my prayers before God, as did all good Christians. However, since neither our diligent prayer to God nor our sincere warning to them availed, one can readily infer what this means: namely, that God considers them to be hardened and blinded; they are guilty of so much innocent blood, blasphemy, and shameful, impenitent living, that he does not consider that they are worthy to receive a single good thought or emotion or that they will pay any attention to a word of wholesome and peaceful admonition. Their condition is like that of the Jews at the time of Jeremiah, when God said to him (*Jeremiah* 15 [:1]): “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn to this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!” And in *Jeremiah* 7 [:16] he said,

“As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I do not hear you.”

My colleagues and I must now issue this same answer and apply it to ourselves. We have prayed in vain for the clergy. With his actions, God is demonstrating mightily that he does not want to hear our intercession in their behalf, but he is letting them go and sin against the Holy Spirit, as Pharaoh did, until they are beyond hope of repentance and reform. If anything could have been attained through prayer before God and anything achieved with the clergy through admonition, pleas, humility, patience, friendly advances, truth, justice, a good muse, *etc.*, it surely would have been accomplished now at the diet. For I know how earnestly the Christians prayed, what great humility, patience, and fervor was demonstrated there, and what a good and just cause they championed.

But now that they not only have let the diet disband without bearing any fruit and without peace but have even confirmed the discord and concluded with defiant threats,² my followers and I will also withdraw our prayers in compliance with God's command and, as St. John teaches [*1 John* 5:16], not pray for the sin unto death. Rather we shall see how God will baptize the hardened Pharaoh in the Red Sea. Our prayers and supplications for peace, even though lost on the impenitent, will help us all the more. In fact, they have already performed great miracles at Augsburg. And by the grace of God, they will also succeed in the end. For

¹ Compare Luther's *Exhortation to All Clergy Assembled at Augsburg*, LW 34, 3–61.

² Luther discusses some of these threats in this treatise: *e.g.*, that of John Eck: (see below, 23–24) and that of Elector Joachim of Brandenburg (in a treatise delivered on August 7, 1530; see below 33).

we were heard and must be heard. Our prayers have not failed us in the past, nor will they fail us now—that I know for a certainty. Amen! It will happen as Jesus said, that whenever the apostles' greetings or peace found no reception or no children of peace in a house, their peace returned again to them [*Matthew* 10:13; *Luke* 10:6]. So too in this case, since the clergy heed neither prayer nor peace, both prayer and peace will not be lost on that account but will revert to us.³ And in place of prayers, nothing but curses, in place of peace nothing but discord, and both in abundance, will be the clergy's lot. Amen.

Therefore, because their plans are built exclusively on force and their cause relies on the power of the fist, over against the manifest and known truth of God, no one need fear them. Let everyone be of good cheer and unafraid before such raging foes of God; for they do not cry or pray to God, nor are they able to pray in view of their bad conscience and cause. Out of pride and spite they attack flesh and blood; to do this they need no God, nor do they dare to ask him whether he desires what they are thinking. God surely loves this and takes great delight in it; such defiance and contempt of his grace are most pleasing to him. He makes a practice of rewarding such defiance and arrogance with good fortune and victory—so that both horse and rider lie drowned in the Red Sea and everything is overturned, and no one survives. We, however, are quite convinced that their mad undertaking does not rest in their might, but in the hand of God, and that their aims will not so soon be accomplished. He will want to be a Lord over them too, as has always been the case in the past. This they shall indeed experience. But for the present I will assume that there is no God, I will just imagine as in a dream that their plans and plots will proceed and prosper mightily.

If worse comes to worst, then one of two things will happen: either a war or a rebellion will occur, perhaps both at the same time. For there is indeed danger—we are now speaking as in a dream, as if there were no God—that if they initiate a war, an armed troop will organize and a mob band together, perhaps even among their own people, so that both they and we will perish. For in such an event they cannot rely on our teaching and take it for granted that no one will attack them, just because we wrote and taught so emphatically not to resort to rebellion, but to suffer the madness even of tyrants, and

not to defend oneself.⁴ This is what I teach, but I cannot create the doers of this teaching, since they esteem so little all the other articles of our teaching. If now the masses should reject our teaching against rebellion, especially if they were provoked by such a godless outrage and wanton war, then the devil would make real fools of them and expose them very nicely and neatly. I am still speaking in a dream. But let them see to it that the dream does not come true. The dream does not harm me, but if it hits them, so be it.

All right, if a war or a rebellion should break out as I fear (for God's wrath will have to take its course), I wish to testify before God and all the world here in this writing that we, who are derisively called "Lutherans," neither counseled it or consented to it, nor, indeed, gave any cause for it; rather, we constantly and ceaselessly pleaded and called for peace. The papists themselves know and have to admit that we have preached peace up till now and have also kept the peace, and that peace was also our ardent desire now at the diet. Consequently, if a war or a rebellion should break out, it can under no circumstances be said, "See, that is the fruit of Lutheran teaching." It will rather have to be said, "See, that is the papists' teaching and its fruit; they want peace neither for themselves nor for others." Until now we have taught and lived quietly. We drew no sword and did not burn, murder, or rob anyone, as they have done in the past and still do; rather, we endured their murder and pillage, their raving and raging with the greatest patience.

Furthermore, when our people were threatened and challenged, defied, jeered, and mocked at the diet by the papists, they humbled themselves most abjectly and let themselves simply be trampled underfoot. Despite all, they asked and pleaded for peace, and they offered to do all that God might want. That would have been more than enough, even if our party were mere beggars, to say nothing of the fact that they are great princes, lords, and godly and honorable people. Therefore, I believe that there have been but few instances of such a confession and of such humility and of such patience as long as Christendom has existed, and I trust this will not be exceeded before the Last Day. Yet all of this was of no avail. Münzer⁵ and the insurrectionists did not act thus; they did what the papists are doing now. They, too, neither wanted to have peace nor would they grant it to

⁴ Compare Introduction to "Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to His Dear German People," *LW* 47:6.

⁵ Thomas Münzer (c. 1488–1525), radical reformer and a leader in the Peasants' Revolt of 1525. For Luther's view of him, see *Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit* (1524), *LW* 40, 45–59. For a recent study of Münzer, see Eric W. Gritsch, *Reformer Without a Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

³ In his *Exhortation to All Clergy* Luther had written that he and his followers were praying for the success of the diet and for the enlightenment of the opposition. But he also warned: "...may God grant that you do not set yourselves stubbornly against it, so that our prayer must again return into our bosom, as lost and scorned by you [*Matthew* 10:13]" *LW* 34, 11.

others. They resorted to violence; they listened to no mediation and no overtures but insisted on having their own way. Moreover, they refused to submit their teaching to a hearing as our people now have done at Augsburg, but without further ado they condemned all other teaching and exalted their own by every means. In the same way the papists now refuse to make their document public, and yet they condemn our teaching.⁶ We shall hear more of that later. In brief, we cannot be blamed or accused either before God or before the world of fomenting war or insurrection.

Since our conscience is clear and pure and assured in this matter, and that of the papists must be guilty and impure and filled with misgiving, let come what may, even the worst, be it war or rebellion—whatever God’s wrath decrees. If an uprising should result, my God and Lord Jesus Christ is well able to save me and mine, as he rescued dear Lot in Sodom, and as he saved me in the recent uprising when I was in danger of life and limb more than once.⁷ And yet this is the thanks I earned by my efforts from those incorrigible scoundrels; I mean the papists. If God does not see fit to rescue me, I will nonetheless praise and thank him. I have lived long enough, I have certainly earned death, and I have begun to avenge my Lord Jesus properly on the papacy. Only after my death will they begin really to take Luther seriously.⁸ Even now, if I were to be murdered in such a papist and clerical uprising, I would take a throng of bishops, priests, and monks with me, so that people would say that Doctor Martin had been escorted to his grave in a grand procession. For he was a great doctor over all bishops, priests, and monks; therefore, it is fitting that they go to the grave with him, lying on their backs. People will sing and talk about it. Thus in the end we will undertake a little pilgrimage together—they, the papists, into the abyss of Hell to their god of lies and murder, whom they served with lies and murder; I to my Lord Jesus Christ, whom I served in truth and peace.

For it is easy to figure out that whoever kills Doctor Luther in an uprising will not spare many of the priests either. Thus, we shall go to our death together, they to Hell in the name of all devils, I to Heaven in the name of God. No one can harm me, that I know; nor do I desire to do harm to anyone else. But whatever evil they inflict on me, I will outdo them. No matter how hard their heads may be, they will find mine still harder. Even if they had not only Emperor Charles on their side but also the emperor of the Turks, they would not intimidate or frighten me; rather I will intimidate and frighten them. In the future they will yield to me; I will not yield to them. I will survive, they will perish. They have miscalculated grievously, for my life will be their hangman, my death will be their devil.⁹ This is what they will discover, nothing else; just let them laugh impudently about it now.

On the other hand, if this ends in a war, I will again have to resign myself to it, together with my followers, and await what our God will advise and decree in this matter. He has always faithfully assisted and never forsaken us. Here again we enjoy a great advantage. In the first place, it will not harm us if we die or come to grief, for it is written, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” [*Matthew* 5:10]. We are convinced that he who says that does not lie. The papists themselves know and confess—and may the devil thank them if they should say otherwise—that our teaching is contrary neither to any article of the Creed nor to the Holy Scriptures;¹⁰ rather it is contrary to the customs of their church and the laws of the popes. Therefore, they cannot revile us as heretics without giving their own heart and mouth the lie, since no one may be dubbed a heretic who does not teach contrary to Holy Scripture or the articles of faith. Much less may they punish us or wage war against us as heretics. As liars against themselves, as assassins and traitors, they have hitherto defamed Leonard Keiser¹¹ and his like as heretics, burned them at the stake, murdered and persecuted them. And they have not yet shown any contrition

⁶ On August 3, 1530, the Roman Catholic *Confutation* (*Confutatio Pontificia*) was publicly read. The evangelical representatives were not given a copy of this document beforehand; afterward they were to receive a copy of it only if they promised to accept its conclusions and not to hand it around. This the evangelicals refused to do. Melancthon therefore had to present his reply to the *Confutation* (the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*) without access to its text.

⁷ Luther is referring to his experiences in May 1525, during the Peasants’ Revolt, when he traveled through some of the possessions of the count of Mansfeld and through Thuringia.

⁸ A variation of a saying with which Luther taunted the papacy; he quoted it in either German or Latin. It is translated in *LW* 34, 49, as: “If I live I shall be your plague. If I die, I shall be your death.” Compare also *LW* 54, 227.

⁹ Compare note 8 above.

¹⁰ Justus Jonas had written Luther (June 30 [?], 1530) that after the reading of the *Augsburg Confession* the bishop of Augsburg, Christoph von Stadion, had shouted out, “This is pure truth; we cannot deny it!” Compare *Weimarer Ausgabe* (Weimar Edition – WA hereafter) 30^{II}, 400, note 2.

¹¹ Leonard Keiser, who had studied at the university in Wittenberg for a year and a half, was burned as a heretic, because of his Lutheran views, on August 16, 1527, in Schärding, Bavaria. Compare Luther’s treatise, *Concerning Leonard Keiser of Bavaria, Burned for the Sake of the Gospel, 1527* (*Von Lenhard Keiser in Baiern, um des Euangelii willen verbrannt*), WA 30^{II}, 452–476.

or repentance for this but remain hardened in such blood and lies. Who should be afraid of such warriors?

In the second place, we know that they are unable to begin such a war in the name of God, nor are they able to pray for it and invoke God's help. And I challenge them all, collectively and individually, to say to God with a sincere heart: "Help us, God, to fight in defense of this cause!" For their conscience is too burdened, not only with lying, blaspheming, blood, murder, and all other abominations but, over and above all this, with hardened and impenitent hearts and sins against the Holy Spirit. Consequently, since they wage war with a bad conscience for a blasphemous cause, good fortune and success cannot attend them. Therefore, we will speak a blessing over them, which will read as follows: "May God give you success and victory in proportion to your uprightness before God and the goodness of your cause! Amen!" You will fare as we Germans did when we ventured to break the peace with St. John Huss and fought against the Bohemians.¹² On that occasion the pope also handed us over to the slaughter, so that we had to satisfy his pleasure with our blood and heads, and we fought against truth and justice. Now you are doing the same thing, and so the pope, this most holy father and kind shepherd of our souls, will again have occasion to laugh up his sleeve if he can stir up such a welcome bloodbath among us. However, God can easily raise up a Judas Maccabeus¹³ (even if my followers and I sit by quietly and suffer) who will smash Antiochus with his army and teach him real warfare, as he taught us how to wage war and how to keep the peace through the Bohemians.

Nor will my followers and I leave off praying and imploring God to give them a despondent, timid, and craven heart when on the battlefield, to prick the conscience of one and then another and prompt them to say: "Alas! Alas! I am engaged in a perilous war. We are espousing an evil cause and fighting against God and his Word. What will be our fate? Where are we going?" And when they see a Maccabean warrior coming at them, they will disperse and scatter like chaff before the wind. Do you not believe that God is still able to do this? He says to his people, "I will send faintness into your hearts, so that when you go out one way against your enemies, you shall flee seven ways before them; the sound of a driven leaf shall put you to flight" [*Leviticus* 26:36;

¹² Luther is referring to the unsuccessful attempts which were made to root out the Hussites after Huss was burned as a heretic by the Council of Constance in 1415. Compare below, note 14.

¹³ The reference is to the heroic Jewish figure who led the Jews in 166–160 BC during their struggle against the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes and his successors.

Deuteronomy 28:25]. Truly, that is what he also did to the obdurate Egyptians in the Red Sea. They were probably as obstinate and secure as the papists are. Yet when the hour came that their conscience smote them, they cried, "Alas, let us flee, for the Lord is fighting against us" [*Exodus* 14:25]. Let him who does not know what it means to wage war with a bad conscience and a despondent heart try it now. If the papists wage war, he will experience it, just as our ancestors did in a similar situation against the Bohemians and Zizka.¹⁴ And we will not suppress our prayer but will offer it publicly; it will be the seventh psalm, which in its first combat slew all of Israel, so that twenty thousand men, together with Absalom, lay dead on the battlefield, slain by a small number.¹⁵ For it has a sufficient stock of guns, powder, and armor—that I know for a certainty.

In the third place, it is not fitting for me, a preacher, vested with the spiritual office, to wage war or to counsel war or incite it, but rather to dissuade from war and to direct to peace, as I have done until now with all diligence. All the world must bear witness to this. However, our enemies do not want to have peace, but war. If war should come now, I will surely hold my pen in check and keep silent and not intervene as I did in the last uprising.¹⁶ I will let matters take their course, even though not a bishop, priest, or monk survives, and I myself also perish. For their defiance and boasting are intolerable to God; their impenitent heart is carrying things too far. They were begged, they were admonished, they were implored for peace beyond all reasonable measure. They insist on forcing the issue with flesh and blood; so I, too, will force the issue with them through the Spirit and through God and henceforth set not one or two papists but the entire papacy against me, until the Judge in Heaven intervenes with signs. I will not and cannot be afraid of such miserable enemies of God. I disdain their defiance, and I laugh at their wrath. They can do no more than deprive me of a sack of ailing flesh. But they shall soon discover of what I am able to deprive them.

¹⁴ John Zizka (1376–1424) was the great military leader of the Hussites; he successfully defied Sigismund, king of the Germans and king of Hungary, and others who led crusades against the followers of John Huss after the death of Huss in 1415. Compare F. G. Heymann, *John Zizka and the Hussite Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).

¹⁵ Compare 2 *Samuel* 18:7.

¹⁶ *I.e.*, the Peasants' Revolt of 1525. Compare Luther's writings on the subject in LW 46, 17–85: *Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia, 1525; Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, 1525; and An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants, 1525.*