

**“Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted for
Righteousness Sake, Part One: Historical Storytelling”
Part Nine in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:10-12**

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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Five hundred years ago this Tuesday—October 31, 1517—Martin Luther, a German Augustinian monk and professor of moral theology at the University of Wittenberg, nailed a document containing a list of 95 theses—or propositions for formal academic debate—to the door of the university chapel, All Saints Church, an action considered by historians as the birth of the Protestant Reformation.

In the 95 Theses, Luther opposed the Roman Catholic Church’s practice of selling indulgences—“a sort of get-out-of-purgatory-free-card”¹—to raise money for the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome (and surreptitiously to enrich some of the Archbishops personally). Luther was hardly the first to condemn various corrupt practices in the Church—for example, the French Medieval spiritual leader Pierre de Vaux² did; and the Oxford professor and theologian John Wycliffe; and the Prague professor and theologian Jan Hus.³ All these men, and others who protested against corrupt practices, had experienced persecution, and many of these brave saints had been burned at the stake for their efforts to reform the Church. Why was that not the fate of Luther?

Luther and his movement survived largely because he was born at the right time—much like the Apostle Paul said of the birth of Jesus, he was born “when the fullness of time had come.”⁴ You see, less than 80 years earlier, one of the pivotal inventions in human history had occurred—Johannes Guttenberg’s printing press—and enough time had passed that by Luther’s day hundreds of presses existed in Germany, all of them clamoring for content. Publishers quickly picked up on Luther’s 95 Theses, and the first “tract war” in history ensued—somewhat akin to today’s heated Twitter wars we hear about on the evening news, but at much more than 140 characters! Luther engaged in this literary debate with the leading salesman of indulgences, Johann Tetzel, a German Dominican friar and the Grand Inquisitor of Heresy in Poland. (What a chilling title!) Tetzel is perhaps best known for his slogan used in promoting the sale of indulgences:

As soon as the gold in the casket rings,
the rescued soul to heaven springs!

(After hearing that nifty jingle, how could you not buy indulgences on behalf of your dearly departed loved ones who are suffering in purgatory?) And to increase sales, Tetzel even allowed people to purchase indulgences in advance of committing sins. (Don’t you think indulgences would sell like hotcakes on a college campus on Friday afternoon?)

Luther provided content for the printing presses that just couldn't be beat. Not only were his arguments against corruption in the Church devastating, but his very language was understandable by everyone—albeit at times even a bit, shall we say, “earthy.” Today we would say that the tract war between Luther and Tetzl and other defenders of the Church's corrupt practices “went viral.” At a time when there was no separation of church and state, “The pope had the full spiritual and secular weight of the Church on his side, but Luther had something new: public opinion. Besides, it occurred to a lot of local princes that the taxes that had formerly flowed to Rome might go into their own coffers instead.”⁵ And thus, thanks to Luther's boldness and the printing press, the Protestant Reformation was born.

One should not, however, think that Luther escaped all repercussions for his audacious, prophetic activity. As one of the leading biblical scholars of his day—and the first to translate the Bible into German—he was well acquainted with the Eighth Beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake (or for the cause of justice), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And he knew Matthew's comment on the Beatitude: “for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

In 1520, Pope Leo X issued a papal bull⁶ condemning many of Luther's teachings and demanding that he be brought before the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, on heresy charges. This legal proceeding is known as the Diet of Worms of 1521. Although the unfortunate expression might lead an English speaker to think that Luther was forced to eat a mess of those cylindrical, wiggly creatures that burrow in the earth, I need to explain that the word “Diet” was a political term for an assembly—this one an Imperial Assembly—and “Worms” is the name of the German city where the Imperial Diet convened.

The Diet's presiding officer, Johann Maier von Eck, demanded that Luther recant of the “heretical” teachings found in his writings. He refused. Tradition states that Luther concluded his brave and eloquent statement with the powerful words: “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”⁷

While the Diet met privately to determine his punishment, Luther fled the City of Worms, and Prince Frederick III of Saxony defiantly hid him in Wartburg Castle and protected him until the Church gave up on enforcing the Edict of Worms within the German States. Sadly, some of Luther's followers in the Low Countries were arrested, prosecuted under the terms of the Edict of Worms, and burned at the stake in Brussels in 1523.

Luther's courageous testimony at the Diet of Worms turned many of the German princes to his side, and growing numbers of the German people flocked to the Lutheran faith. Luther had only intended to *reform* the Catholic Church, but instead he had brought about the third major division of Christendom: in 1054 the Church had split into the Western Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, and now the Western Church split into the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church.

As you know, the Protestant Church did not remain a unified body for long. It quickly split into various denominations—Lutherans, Reformed Churches, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, and so forth—and these denominations “crossed the pond” and set up housekeeping in the New World. Although there were attempts during colonial times to create state-sponsored churches, as was the case in Europe, the founders of the United States of America wisely amended the Constitution so that individual religious liberty was protected. They erected what Thomas Jefferson described in a letter to Baptists, who had championed the First Amendment, as “a wall of separation between church and state.”⁸ This was a major step forward in the history of the church—indeed, in the history of religion in general. Freedom from all forms of religious coercion is a right to be celebrated and a political idea and ideal the United States has given to the rest of the world.

Another major step occurred on the American Frontier in the early 1800s when a group of Christians from Presbyterian backgrounds, along with some Baptists, felt the lure of God to initiate a movement to restore Christian unity. One of the leaders, Thomas Campbell, wrote, “The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.”⁹ Barton Stone, another leader, wrote, “let the unity of Christians be our Polar Star.”¹⁰

One of the most visible ways these early leaders worked to establish Christian unity was through rejecting the use of creeds and dogmas that divide, and advancing instead the idea that all Christians were free to interpret scripture for themselves; they took the Protestant idea of the priesthood of the believer most seriously. The other visible expression of this desire for Christian unity was the practice of open Communion; all are welcome at the Lord’s Table, regardless of denominational background or individual religious convictions.

The Stone wing of this frontier movement, centered in Kentucky, reflected this budding ecumenical spirit by referring to themselves simply as “Christians.” Similarly, the Campbell wing, centered in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, called themselves simply “Disciples of Christ.” Over time, of course, this movement became a denomination itself, with the somewhat awkward name, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Nevertheless, one of the chief goals of today’s spiritual descendants of the Stone-Campbell movement remains ecumenism, Christian unity, which has in recent years widened to include interfaith dialogue as well.

As you might expect, there have been and continue to be people who disagree with these Disciples of Christ distinctives, who demand that one believe certain creeds or dogmas and who practice closed communion. But fortunately, disagreement has never reached the level of persecution experienced by Luther and his predecessors. We can be glad for the moral growth of the human race in general and our Constitutional protection of religious liberty in particular. Nevertheless, there may come a time in your life when, like Luther, you are forced to take a stand for your beliefs say: “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.” But today, All Saints Sunday, let us rejoice that throughout history there have been countless people who have boldly said: “Here I stand.”

And that's today's good news. Amen

¹ Martin Snapp, "Snapp Shots: Anniversary of Luther's Act Not Given Its Due," *East Bay Times* (Oct. 24, 2017) web.

² His anglicized name is Peter Waldo.

³ His anglicized name is John Huss.

⁴ Gal 4:4.

⁵ Snapp, *ibid.*

⁶ A "bull" is a type of public decree issued by a pope, named for the lead seal or *bull* used to authenticate the document.

⁷ While there is no documentary evidence of these words, they accurately reflect Luther's spirit.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association (January 1, 1802).

⁹ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (1809).

¹⁰ Barton Stone, *Christian Messenger* (September 1832).