

The Reformation at 500: Luther's Journey to Worms

By PAUL J. SCHARF

It was a warm, sunny autumn Wednesday afternoon when our bus rolled into Worms, Germany—the second-to-last stop on the final day of touring on our 500th anniversary Reformation trip.

The town was decorated almost as if Luther himself were returning.

At the side of the road, we saw signs that read “Solus Christus,” “Sola Gratia,” “Sola Fide” and “Sola Scriptura”—like the placards that city residents might post to salute a winning sports team.

I wish that we had had more time in Worms, although there is not much left to see with regard to the place where Luther stood 500 years ago this month and—in the face of absolute power combined with demonic evil—declared his fidelity and commitment to the Word of God alone.

The Bishop's Palace, where Holy Roman Emperor Charles V presided over the Diet of Worms, has been gone for more than 300 years. The spot where Luther is believed to have stood is now part of a sizeable park, and it is commemorated by a large pair of bronze shoes. There is a painting of the palace where Luther faced his accusers, along with some other historical markers.

Luther had preached his way through central Germany over the course of two weeks to get to Worms, and the thronging crowds cheered him exuberantly when he arrived. Humanly speaking, the fact that he had the people on his side was one of the factors that saved him.

His friends had cautioned him against going, fearing that he would be the next *Jan Hus*. The life stories of Luther and Hus are, in fact, intertwined at several key points.

Hus, a Bohemian pre-Reformer, was condemned to death at the Council of Constance in July of 1415. Although he had been guaranteed safe passage by the German King Sigismund, the half-brother of his own King Wenceslas, the council determined that Hus, having been declared a heretic, had become unworthy of such privilege. He was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415. His crime was *Wycliffism*.

But, before he died, Hus uttered his most famous statement of all, telling his persecutors that they would roast a lean goose that day—drawing on the meaning of his last name—but that in 100 years they would hear the singing of a swan. They would never catch the swan, he said. He would escape their traps.

In April of 1507, Martin Luther was ordained into the priesthood of the mother church, of which he was a faithful son. He had an amazing experience on the night before his first Mass as a priest, in the chapel of his Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt. It became, in fact, one of the greatest ironies of history. Dr. Rhoda Schuler explains:

According to the custom of the time, former abbots were buried in the chancel or choir of the church. As part of the monastic ritual for his final vows, Luther laid prostrate on top of the grave of Abbot Johannes Zacharias, who attended the Council of Constance (1414-1418) and was a leader of those who condemned John Huss and had him burned at the stake for heresy. In this church Luther celebrated his first mass on May 2, 1507 in the presence of his father.¹

Luther might well have identified with Zacharias (or Zachariae) at that moment—had he understood his significance—instead of the *heretic* of Bohemia. Yet, 12 years later at the Leipzig Debate, Johann Eck charged Luther himself with being a *Hussite*. Luther, of course, had only known of Huss as a reprobate. But upon further study—apparently in the Leipzig library—he came to affirm: “We are all Hussites without knowing it.”

So Luther, aware of the dangers, famously said that he would go to Worms though he were to face as many devils as the tiles on the roofs. To this day, it has been observed that a great many of the houses in Worms have tiled roofs.

As our tour bus went down the highway toward Worms, I pondered Luther’s journey—and mine.

What if I were on trial? What if my life were on the line? What if I were called to answer for what I have written? What if it were demanded that I recant?

I can find no record of what the weather was like when Dr. Luther’s caravan rolled into Worms on April 16, 1521, but I can imagine it being a warm, sunny spring Tuesday afternoon.

While we do not know if there were placards then, we can imagine how the people strove to get a glimpse of him as he rode into the city.

He retired to rest in his room at the Seminary of St. John. The events of the following days would change Western civilization forever.

Paul J. Scharf (M.A., M.Div., Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) is a church ministries representative for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, based in Columbus, WI, and serving in the Midwest. For more information on his ministry, visit sermonaudio.com/pscharf or foi.org/scharf, or email pscharf@foi.org.

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ⁱ Rhoda Schuler; "Erfurt: Facts and Photos;" Dr. Rhoda Schuler at Concordia University Saint Paul; n.d.; <https://rhodaschuler.com/lutherpilgrimage/erfurt.htm>; Internet; accessed 7 April 2021.