

# **Courage in 1517—an Example for 2017**

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Oct 31, 2017, marked an important day in history: the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Physicians should study the events surrounding this religious and societal upheaval. Some have argued that modern medicine has taken on the trappings of a religion. Is there anything we can learn from the Reformation that might apply to our circumstances?

On a visit to the gritty German city of Augsburg, I learned about the Reformation. Along a street that has been converted into an outdoor shopping mall, there is an inconspicuous doorway that leads to the St. Anna Kirche (church), now hardly visible due to the new facade. Upon climbing a stairway, one enters the Luthersteige (Martin Luther Museum), which traces the events that led to the Reformation.

Martin Luther, an Augustinian friar, emerged as a champion against the corrupt Roman hierarchy and its financial abuses.<sup>1</sup> During the Middle Ages the Pope granted Indulgences, described as passports to heaven, which were not supposed to be bought and sold. These certificates were made available only through accredited agents.

At the time, the church's finances were strained by the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. As a way of raising revenue, the sale of Indulgences became common. In 1476, the Pope extended Indulgences to souls in purgatory. Martin Luther preached against the exploitations, and on Oct 31, 1517, he fastened the 95 Theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. In these 95 talking points, Luther attacked the papal policy of selling Indulgences. Divine grace cannot be cheaply acquired, he argued, saying that one must embrace the Cross and then enter Heaven through tribulation. Luther sent copies of the 95 Theses to the bishop and archbishop. The invention of the printing press in Germany allowed copies to be widely distributed. One might say they "went viral."

The Archbishop of Mainz was shocked by the arguments and forwarded the documents to Rome, requesting that Luther be subdued. He also demanded that sellers of Indulgences be admonished. There was a call for Luther to be prosecuted as a heretic. In those days heretics were burned at the stake.

Luther was summoned to an interview with Cardinal Thomas Cajeton, the papal legate in Augsburg. Luther arrived in Augsburg in October 1518, tired and sick from a stomach ailment. He had walked 550 kilometers from Wittenberg in 12 days. Luther was interrogated daily in the knowledge that a refusal to recant would place his life in danger. According to exhibits in the Martin Luther Museum, Luther repeatedly questioned the doctrine governing Indulgences. On the third day, the situation was exacerbated when Luther wrote: "I started to speak about ten times and Cajetan shouted me down as many times." Cajetan stated: "This is my heartfelt advice to you: only if you say 'I recant' will you save yourself.... Failing that, you can imagine what it means to make an enemy of the Church." Luther responded: "Blessed is he who dies under an unjust excommunication. He will receive the crown

of everlasting life because he has been chastised with such a scourge for the sake of the truth that he would not abandon." Cajeton then shouted: "I say to you recant." Luther responded: "I will not recant!" Cajeton then asked: "So where do you intend to live?" Luther: "Under the heavens." Cajeton: "Go and do not come back to me unless you intend to recant." Luther: "Never."

After the interrogation Luther wrote to a friend: "Keep living as a man, as you certainly do, teaching the students to follow the right path. I will now offer myself as a sacrifice for you and them, if that is God's will. In fact, I would rather die than recant what I have said in truth."

Like Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death" speech, Luther's words, as inscribed at the Augsburg museum, show great courage and willingness to stand on principle. He was prepared to live in misery and poverty or even die for what he believed.

Rumors circulated that Luther would be taken to Rome in chains. However, he had many friends, and they bundled him out of Augsburg.<sup>1</sup> In 1520, the Pope warned Luther in a papal bull (edict) that he risked excommunication unless he recanted within 60 days. Luther publicly set fire to the document at Wittenberg. Consequently, the Pope issued a formal excommunication in 1521.

After a good deal of lobbying, the authorities promised that Luther would not be condemned without being heard. He was invited to appear before Emperor Charles V and other Church officials in the city of Worms. Luther's friends tried to dissuade him from going, but he was determined. On the way to Worms, Luther learned that the emperor had ordered that all his writings be burned. At Worms, he found the emperor to be cold and hostile.<sup>1</sup> A pile of his writings lay before him, and he was asked again to recant. Luther gave a long speech in which he stated that he would recant if convinced of his error either by Scripture or by evident reason. At the conclusion, it is believed that he made the statement: "Here I stand, I can do no other." These words captured the imagination of Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Despite his moral victory at Worms, an imperial edict declared Luther to be an outlaw whose works were forbidden. The edict made it a crime for anyone in Germany to give Luther food or shelter. Anyone could kill him without consequence. After masked horsemen impersonating robbers staged a mock kidnapping of Luther, he was secretly lodged at the castle<sup>1</sup> of Wartburg in Thuringerwald, probably through the intervention of Elector Friedrich the Wise. Luther went incognito by dressing as a layman, growing a beard, and gaining weight. He was known as Junker Jorg or Knight George. At the castle Luther was not idle. He translated the New Testament from the original Greek into German. This was an enormous accomplishment that had lasting influence on the German people. For the first time, the people of Germany could read the Bible in their own language.

On arriving at Eisenach, near the castle, one can drive up the mountain to the parking lot near the castle or hike the trail to the

castle. I chose to set off on foot on the trail that winds through the forest. The castle is in a dramatic setting at the top of a ridge. It is now a world heritage site, and the tour includes the garret where Luther translated the New Testament.

While Luther was at the castle, others embarked on more radical reforms than Luther had envisioned. Luther's pamphlets against the Church and hierarchy led the peasants to believe that Luther would support an attack on the upper classes in general. Between 1521 and 1525, there was a rebellion known as the Peasant's War. While Luther sympathized with some of the peasants' grievances, he reminded everyone that they had to obey the authorities and avoid violence. He reinvented himself as a conservative force within the Reformation. Without Luther's backing for the revolt, many of the peasants laid down their weapons.

In 1523, Luther helped 12 nuns to escape from a convent by arranging for them to be smuggled out in herring barrels. One of the nuns, Katharina von Bora, and Luther became engaged. "Suddenly and while occupied with different thoughts, the Lord plunged me into marriage." Luther had long condemned vows of celibacy on Biblical grounds.

As portrayed in a re-enactment on "Martin Luther and Katharina" at Trinity Lutheran Church in Oshkosh, Wis., in October 2017, they had a happy marriage, and Katharina bore six children. A former monastery in Wittenberg became their home. Katharina was good at business and helped the family earn a living by farming and taking in boarders. Luther was professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg starting in 1512, and for the rest of his life.

A visit to Wittenberg is a fascinating trip back to medieval times. Lutherhaus, the family home, is a museum with exhibits that include Indulgence chests, famous paintings, and a room furnished by Luther.

AAPS has called for a reformation in American Medicine. The time has come for physicians to reject the false dogma and nonsensical rituals that have been thrust upon us. Government and quasi-governmental authorities are constantly handing down edicts and selling compliance materials that are supposed to protect us from fee cuts, fines, and other punishment. Doctors are constantly threatened by the equivalent of excommunication from hospital staffs, insurance panels, or the profession itself, if they offend officials or hold dissenting views.

We must stop behaving like peasants or serfs. We must stand up for our principles and be willing to speak out as professionals. We must identify the essentials of practicing medicine and hold true to them. This will require courage and conviction. We must not back down when we know that we are on the right path. We must serve our patients—not the Medicare bureaucracy, the American Medical Association, the American Board of Medical Specialties and its component boards, or others who pretend to be the only source of "best practices." We should recant only if proved wrong by evidence or evident reason.

Martin Luther was a towering figure whose memory might inspire us in the fight for our profession. We must be ready to tack 95 Theses on the door to the AMA or Congress or UnitedHealthcare headquarters or any of the other interlopers who are subverting the profession of medicine.

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#### REFERENCE

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