

Response to Luther (1523)
Sir Thomas More



Before the Diet of Worms, Luther published *The Prelude to the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in December 1520. This was an attack on the pope and the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. Many Roman Catholic theologians, political leaders, and the common people did not trust Luther or know if they should support his writings. Thomas Murner, a critic of Luther, translated *The Prelude to the Babylonian Captivity* into German with the intent that Luther's sarcastic and vehement language would convince the people that he was a radical heretic.

In London (and other places in Europe) Luther's books were burned. After the Diet of Worms in 1521, Henry VIII (1509 - 1547) was aligned with the new and young (age 19) Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Charles V needed to find Luther, arrest him, and have him executed. Henry VIII wrote a book dedicated to the pope, denouncing Martin Luther, and defending the Roman Catholic position on the seven sacraments. Pope Leo X declared that Henry's book was "written with the help of the Holy Spirit, granted him an indulgence of ten years, bestowed on King Henry VIII the title, "Defender of the Faith," which continued to be used by Protestant kings in England.

In spite of these attacks and criticisms, others supported Martin Luther because his writings were clearly documented by the word of God in the *Holy Bible*. This is a turning point in the Reformation and the source of the divisions that presently exist between Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and other Protestant faiths.

In response to the **Defense of the Seven Sacraments** by King Henry VIII and his new title as Defender of the Faith, Luther called him "King Henry, of God's Disgrace (or wrath), King of England," and heaped upon him the most abusive epithets. In a response to Luther's attack on his King and the Roman Catholic faith, Sir Thomas More (recently knighted) criticized Luther's new principle of sola Scriptura, that the *Holy Bible* is the source of all truth in the excerpt below:

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". . . if as you consistently affirm, all extra scriptural matter is to be maintained only freely and none of it held fast by faith, what is the meaning of this Apostolic admonition: "*Stand and hold fast the traditions which you have learned through our word and letter*"? [2 Thessalonians 2:15] The preservation of both word and letter is equally charged by the Apostle. Extra scriptural matter was thus handed down, and binding.... What do you say to that, Luther? And to this: "***Many things were done which are not written in this book,***" a passage of the Evangelist's? [John 20:30] These things which you have remarked as absent from the other scriptural books also, and of which John says that the whole world cannot contain them - aren't they to be regarded as miracles at least? Wouldn't you also find that an ignorance of many of them would jeopardize faith? . . .

What force has this pronouncement of Christ's: "***The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, when He comes, will guide you into all truth***"? [John 16:13] He doesn't say that the Spirit will "write" to you or whisper in your ear, but he will lead you, will form you interiorly, and with His breath will show your hearts the way to all truth. Was it the Apostles, here addressed by Christ, to whom the way was to be shown? Were they alone told, "***I am with you to the consummation of the world***"? [Matthew 28:20] Who can question the direction of this message to the Church? Will not the Holy Spirit show her the way to all truth? Was she not told, "***Go, preach the Gospel to every creature***"? [Matthew 28:19] Did they read the Gospel or preach it? And did Christ cast the new law in bronze or strike it on stone tablets, commanding that everything else be considered valueless and cast out?

Can God's own word as set down by the Apostle leave Luther untouched, "***I will put my laws in their hearts; I shall inscribe them on their minds***"? [Hebrews 8:10, 10:16] He makes no mention of stone or wood, for as the old law was stamped by Him upon external stone, so will the new be inscribed with His own finger in the book of the heart; that which existed so briefly upon the hardest material will be made to last forever on the softest. So it has pleased God to show His power. Though the old stone tablets were quickly shattered, the new remain. The word of God will remain forever uneffaced in the heart of man. The heart, the Church of Christ, will forever contain the true Gospel of Christ, written there before any of the Evangelical books. However ingenious the apparent scriptural evidence heretics may bring against the true faith, God has engraved His law in such a way that it is impervious to their guile. The strength of this spring has preserved the faith of Christ against assaults upon both His mother and Himself from their respective enemies, Helvidius and Arius . . . it is certain that Christ would not disappoint His Church on the essentials of her faith.

But if you continue dully to insist upon the written as the only valid form of transmission, and doggedly persist in ignoring the scriptural evidence from the king's book, at least clear up the enigma posed by these facts: the Father is never, at any place in all of Scripture, called "uncreated," the Son is never called "consubstantial," and the Holy Spirit never clearly described as "proceeding from the Father and Son." . . . Would you have, then, each individual man, freely and without spiritual hazard, decide for himself whether or not to believe in the Father as uncreated, the Son as consubstantial, and the Holy Spirit as proceeding from both?"

(From: The Essential Thomas More, selected and edited by James J. Greene and John P. Dolan, in modern translation, New York: New American Library, Mentor-Omega, 1967, 115-117)