

To Emperor Charles V Wittenberg, August 30, 1520

This letter is an official communication to Charles V. Luther gives a short report on the development of his case and calls upon the Emperor for protection and for a fair hearing to decide whether his position or his enemies' is correct. He also states his willingness to forego any Imperial protection if found guilty of doctrinal errors.

*Charles V (1500–1558) was the grandson of Emperor Maximilian I and heir to the territories of the Hapsburg dynasty. Educated in the Spanish Netherlands (which he inherited from his father, Philip the Fair of Austria-Burgundy, and his mother, Joanna the Mad of Aragon-Castile), he always remained a stranger to German life and thought. In 1516/17 he became Charles I, king of Spain. When his grandfather Maximilian died in 1519 (see p. 123, n. 3; p. 129, n. 6; pp. 96 f.), he inherited the German portions of the Hapsburg territories and was elected Roman king (a position which made him de facto emperor), although Pope Leo X and King Francis I of France tried to prevent this. The accumulation of such territorial power and political strength in the hands of one person involved the German Empire in a bitter, century-long struggle with France, in which the Papal See repeatedly shifted its support on the basis of political opportunism. The beginning of the rule of Charles V coincided with the rather rapid development of the Reformation and the dragging out of Luther's trial for heresy. In this situation Luther appealed to the young Emperor for help. In November, 1520, Elector Frederick (see pp. 49 f.) urged Charles to take the case of Luther into his hands; see S-J 1, 397 ff. **The Emperor's situation was infinitely more complicated than it might seem at first glance. To avoid interference from secular governments, the papal court finally, on June 15, 1520, issued the bull Exsurge, Domine (Arise, O Lord), which condemned Luther's teachings as heresy and threatened him with excommunication unless he recanted; see Denzinger, Nos. 741 ff. According to the close relationship which then existed between church and state, such excommunication would necessarily be accompanied by a ban under which Luther would be considered an outlaw. In spite of the pressure which the papal legate, Jerome Aleander (see O.D.C.C., p. 32), put on the Emperor not to interfere in Luther's trial and to turn Luther over to the authorities of the church (see Kidd, pp. 80 ff.; see also Aleander's letters written from Worms, a selection of which may be found in S-J 1), the Emperor yielded to the urging of Elector Frederick and summoned Luther to appear before the diet scheduled to be in session in Worms in the spring of 1521; see S-J 1, Nos. 342, 361, 412 f. See also R. Tyler, *The Emperor Charles V* (London: Allen, 1956); Bainton, pp. 151 ff.; Fife, pp. 507 ff., 587 ff.; Schwiebert, pp. 466 ff.***

This letter is available in two versions: one is a sixteenth century manuscript kept in the British Museum in London, on which, it seems, all later editions are based. The other is a printed version published by J. Grünenberg in Wittenberg late in 1520. Both versions are identical in content; however they have important stylistic variations. To the best of our knowledge the manuscript is an incorrectly dated copy of the draft Luther sent to Spalatin for correction (see pp. 172, 174); see WA, Br 2, 175. It would therefore be closer to Luther's original thought than the printed copy; the translation is based on it.

Text in Latin: WA, Br 2, 175–178, col. 1.

Jesus
Grace and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ

Everyone will be astonished, and rightly so, that I dare to address a letter to Your Most Serene Imperial Majesty, excellent Emperor and Caesar Charles. For what can be more disrespectful than that the king of kings and lord of lords be addressed by an absolutely unworthy and lowly man? However he will be less astonished who has contemplated the magnitude of this case and realized that it concerns evangelical truth. The **truth of the gospel** is worthy of approaching even the throne of the heavenly Majesty; therefore it should not seem unworthy of calling upon an earthly sovereign. In addition to this, as earthly sovereigns are images of the heavenly Sovereign, they ought to imitate him, and while sitting in high places, they should still have regard for the lowly things on earth, raise the helpless from the ground, and lift up the poor from the dung heap. Therefore I come, helpless and poor; as the most worthless of men, I am prostrate before the feet of Your Most Serene Majesty, yet I bring forward a most worthy cause.

I have published certain little books by which I have aroused for myself the envy and indignation of many and important men, although I should have been safe for two reasons.

First, I came out into the public eye against my will. Whatever I have written, I have written after being provoked by the violence and plots of others. I desired nothing more ardently than that I could stay hidden in my corner.

Second, I strove for nothing other than spreading the **truth of the gospel** against superstitious opinions stemming from human tradition. My own conscience as well as the judgment of excellent men bear witness to this.

For this, then, I am now for the third year enduring limitless provocations, insults, perils, and whatever evil the wicked can devise. In the meantime I vainly offer silence, I vainly suggest conditions for peace,⁴ I vainly request to be informed of teachings more correct than mine. There is only one thing prepared for me: to be annihilated, together with the **whole gospel**.

I have vainly tried everything. Therefore it has finally seemed wise to appeal to [Your] Imperial Majesty, according to the example of St. Athanasius, in case the Lord deigns to help his cause through [Your Imperial Majesty]. Humbly and on my knees, therefore, I beseech Your Most Serene Majesty, Charles, foremost of kings on earth, to deign to take under the shadow of your wings not me but this very cause of truth, since it is only by this truth that authority is given you to carry the sword for the punishment of the evil and for the praise of the good. [I beseech the shield of your protection] neither farther nor longer than I need to defend this case and either have won it or lost it. I do not want to be protected if I am found ungodly or a heretic. I ask for only one thing, that neither truth nor falsehood be condemned without being heard and defeated. Your Most Serene Majesty owes this to Christ, who has power over so many kingdoms. He demands in his grace that Your Most Serene Majesty protect this **truth**. [To comply with this demand] would be the greatest mark of distinction for your Empire. It will be the remembered glory of your age if Your Most Sacred Majesty will not allow the unjust to crush and swallow him who is more just, [and will not allow] men, when ... and affliction⁹ become increasingly powerful, to resemble the fish of the sea and the reptiles who have no leader, as the prophet says.

Thus I commend myself to Your Most Sacred Majesty in trust and hope. May our Lord Jesus preserve Your Majesty to us and exalt Your Majesty to the eternal glory of his gospel. Amen.

Written at Wittenberg, August 30, the year of our Lord 1520

Your Most Serene Imperial
and
Royal Majesty's dedicated
[though]

insignificant subject,

FRIAR MARTIN LUTHER

Augustinian¹

To Lucas Cranach Frankfurt/Main, the morning of April 28, 1521

On his way back from Worms Luther reports to Cranach on the final outcome of the diet and informs him that he will go into hiding for a while. He asks Cranach to express his appreciation to the city council for the transportation they had provided him. He also suggests someone for the post of preacher which had become vacant by his absence.

*Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), one of the most famous artists of the Reformation, had a very close relationship with Luther. Cranach and his school produced many of the outstanding altar pieces of the sixteenth century, portrayed many of the theological and politically important figures of the Reformation, and furnished countless numbers of woodcuts for satirical pamphlets, as well as illustrations for the German edition of the Bible. See O.D.C.C., p. 352; G. and K. Noehles, "Cranach, Lucas, the Elder," *Encyclopedia of World Art (New York)*, IV (1959), 64 f.*

Text in German: WA, Br 2, 305.

To the subtle master craftsman, Lucas Cranach, painter in Wittenberg, my dear fellow-
godfather and friend
Jesus

My services [are yours]. Dear fellow-godfather Lucas: I bless you and commend you to God.

I shall submit to being "imprisoned" and hidden away, though as yet I do not know where. I would have preferred to suffer death at the hands of the tyrants, especially those of the furious Duke George of Saxony, but I must not disregard the counsel of good men; [I must await] his appointed time.

¹ Luther, M. (1999). [*Luther's works, vol. 48: Letters I*](#) (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.; Vol. 48, pp. 175–179). Fortress Press.

My arrival at Worms was not expected. You can all see from the mandate with which I was suddenly confronted on my way, just how the safe-conduct was kept. I thought His Imperial Majesty would have assembled one or fifty scholars and overcome this monk in a straightforward manner. But nothing else was done there than this: Are these your books? Yes. Do you want to renounce them or not? No. Then go away! O we blind Germans, how childishly we act and allow the Romanists⁸ to mock and fool us in such a pitiful way!

Give my greeting to my fellow-godparent, your dear wife, and tell her to take it easy in the meantime.

The Jews once in a while have to chant: “*Jo, Jo, Jo.*” But Easter Sunday will also come for us, and then we will chant “*Alleluia.*” For a little while one has to be silent and suffer. For a little while you will not see me, and again in a little while you will see me—so said Christ.¹¹ I hope it will now be the same way [with me]. But God’s will, the very best possible, be done in this—as in heaven, so also on earth. Amen.

Greet master craftsman Christian and his wife. Please express my deep appreciation to the city council for my ride.¹³ If you do not find Licentiate Feldkirch satisfactory, then you may ask Mr. Amsdorf¹⁵ to be your preacher; he will gladly do it.

Goodbye. With this I commend you all to God. May he protect in Christ the minds and faith of all of you from the Roman wolves and dragons and all their followers. Amen.

Frankfurt/Main, April 28, 1521

D. MARTIN LUTHER²

To Duke John Frederick Wittenberg, October 30, 1520

*Luther thanks the Duke for supporting his case and tells of his determination to continue his public activities in spite of the bull *Exsurge, Domine* (see p. 179, n. 1).*

Duke John Frederick (1503–1554) was the son of Duke John, the brother and successor (1525–1532) of Elector Frederick (see pp. 49 f.). Educated by George Spalatin (see pp. 8 f.), he was deeply attracted by Luther and by the Reformer’s thought and work. In 1532 he became Elector of Saxony; he was the last member of the Ernestine family to hold this office. During the tragic battle between the Protestant Smalcald League and the Imperial army at Mühlberg on April 24, 1547, he was captured by the Emperor and sentenced to death for rebellion and high treason. Later his death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and the forfeiture of his Electoral dignity. Shortly afterward, however, his imprisonment was ended. In comparison with the shrewdness of Elector Frederick, John Frederick’s political abilities were limited, especially in dealing with the Emperor. Yet his character was strong; this was especially evident in the days of his imprisonment. Throughout his entire life he had been convinced of the correctness of the Reformation; as a result he was not willing to yield a single point to the political and religious demands of the Roman Imperial party, and, although defeated by the Emperor, he refused to

² Luther, M. (1999). [Luther’s works, vol. 48: Letters I](#) (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.; Vol. 48, pp. 200–203). Fortress Press.

acknowledge any decisions concerning religious issues which might be reached by any council in which the Reformation party was not granted equal representation. From his earliest youth he had dedicated his whole energy to the development of the Reformation; together with his father he instituted the visitations of the congregations in Saxony and Thuringia. Especially after 1530 he tried to strengthen the political position of the Protestant Estates against the Emperor and his policy of supporting the Roman church.

Text in German: WA, Br 2, 205–206.

Jesus

Serene, Noble Sovereign, Gracious Lord: Before all else, my humble prayer and all my services are always at Your Grace's disposal. Gracious Lord, I have received Your Grace's letter, and read it with great joy. From it I have learned of Your Grace's special good will and favor toward me, unworthy though I be, and also of your great steadfastness and enthusiasm for the holy and divine truth. Although I am too lowly to have brought this about in Your Grace even in a small way, yet at all times I want to be diligent in thanking and praising God for it, according to my humble ability; may he strengthen and preserve Your Grace's heart and mind in such a Christian attitude. Your Grace's constant concern in this cause, so as to write so assiduously to my Most Gracious Lord, Duke Frederick, elector, etc., stirs up great hope in me that God will help **his gospel** through Your Grace.

As the bull has in no way frightened me, I intend to preach, lecture, and write in spite of it. I suspect, however, that the people of Leipzig, if they could, would drive me out of Wittenberg, with the help of Duke George and the Bishop of Merseburg, who have developed toward me a hatred defying description. But I have commended all this to the divine will. I well realize that they try to destroy not me but rather Your Grace's small university at Wittenberg. They have played with this thought for some time, and now they rejoice that they have found a "just" reason. May they do whatever God has destined them to do. I shall await the next throw of the dice.

With this, I want humbly to commend myself—but before all else, the cause of the **Christian truth**—to Your Grace. May God bless, strengthen, and govern you for us, according to his divine will. To him be praise and honor. Amen.

Wittenberg, October 30, 1520

Your Grace's dedicated
priest,

D. MARTIN LUTHER

Augustinian³

³ Luther, M. (1999). [Luther's works, vol. 48: Letters I](#) (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.; Vol. 48, pp. 181–183). Fortress Press.