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**Title:** "Luther before the Diet of Worms," by John H. Watters

**Format:** Commencement Oration

**Date:** July 12, 1849

**Location:** Orations-1849-W346l

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Luther before the Diet of Worms  
John A. Wallers

July 12<sup>th</sup> 1849.  
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# Luther at the Diet of Worms

The general intelligence had outgrown the oppressive institutions and acquired an impetus that threatened the very foundations of the papacy. The struggles of an humble monk of Erfurth were not long to be confined to the secluded cell of their birth, but quickly they received general response as though all christendom were lighted by the same luminary in heaven. The son of a miner had declared open hostilities against those human institutions so dear to the corrupt passions of man, though the flames were already ascending <sup>before him,</sup> kindled for his consummation by an angry Pope. Having the word of life for his safeguard, he confronted the supreme pontiff at whose bidding kings and princes bowed to the earth, and who had further claimed heaven's prerogative, and sold to a deluded multitude indulgences for sin. It was not against the abuse of an order of recent origin, needing only to be shown to be abandoned, that Luther was called upon to be foremost, but, it was against an hierarchy which had attained to reputed infallibility through the interests and prejudices of priests and people.

When this mighty human fabric was now trembling to its very base, the pope, alarmed, started from his tottering throne; priests left their sacred altars to become executioners of the offending monk. Princes, nobles and courtiers, seeking favors of the pontiff, allied with his sacred host to crush the reformer and his doctrines. Exasperated by his repeated escape from their wrath; rendered furious

by the trembling condition of those institutions to which they<sup>2</sup>  
owed their dignity, they at last secured a summons for him  
to appear before the imperial diet. Etzel, for want of  
purchasery, had been compelled to quit his holy traffic.  
The Roman legate at Augsbury had laid a net to entangle  
him, but De. Vio was caught in his own toil while Luther  
escaped. The divines theologians in the Halls of Leipzig  
next attempted to put him to shame by their scholastic  
reasoning, but even there the immortal 4<sup>th</sup> of July was made  
signal by the triumph of truth and independence of right: Next,  
these milder means having failed the end designed - the  
death of Luther, pope Leo, like a second Jove, hurled a  
swift thunder-bolt, forged in his own burning brain with  
wrath hot as Etna's furnace, but this<sup>to</sup> rendered harmless, was  
received by Luther and made an effective engine in the re-  
formers cause. Now, to this last struggle all eyes were turned  
with deepest interest: His enemies looked forward to his  
appearance before the diet as a certain triumph - to themselves  
his friends could anticipate no mercy should he fall into  
hostile hands. But in this critical condition did Luther  
forsake his purpose? - did he who fought indulgence alone  
through faith in Jehovah fear what men could do unto him?  
Nay, ready to give his body to be burned so death might  
escape the pollution of the enemy, he replied to entreating  
friends, "though there should be as many devils in  
Worms as there are tiles upon the roof of the house  
I would go" So he did, and next we see this mighty  
man standing alone in the midst of his assembled  
enemies anxious for his destruction. His judges, awing

their importance to those very institutions which his acquittal  
 would finally overthrow, were prepared rather for sentence  
 than for judgement. The young <sup>emperor</sup> Charles V just-commencing  
 his reign, was anxious for favor and alliance with the  
 pope. Alexander, the blood-thirsty nuncio, scattering  
 poison with his flattering tongue, had almost persuaded  
 the diet to deliver the Monk into their merciless hands  
 without a hearing, but the light from the flames of the  
 martyrdom of Huss had not yet gone out, but was  
 still a fresh warning against imbruing their hands  
 again in innocent blood. Here Luther, alone composed  
 in the presence of this august assembly, is well rep-  
 resented as a "new Prometheus confronting the Jove  
 of the fifteenth century and the German Shemping". Armed  
 alone with strength from heaven, he bade defiance to  
 the greatest of earthly powers — to a dynasty which  
 had stood firm amidst the revolutions of ages — to  
 prejudices which had been increasing since the hour  
 when smoke was still rising from the sacrifice of  
 the pantheon and idols still worshiped in the  
 temple of Mecca, and which had long since attained  
 strength to kindle flames of martyrdom from sea to  
 mountain top. Fearless as ever, he spake in defence  
 of the word of truth <sup>before</sup> the emperor and nobles assem-  
 bled from the uttermost parts of Christendom, conscious  
 that same hand which delivered the three Israelites  
 from destruction would also protect him from

priestly wrath.

Truth was victorious, and ever will be till finally she shall reign triumphant-. Though she may be, for a season, retarded by the formidable barrier of ignorance and suppressed by prejudice and power, yet, the slow and steady progress of humanity is a gradual victory of truth over error. There is in man a chainless spirit - which refused the bonds of human oppression. Kings and ambitious tyrants may bind the flesh; ecclesiastic dynasties may prevent the promulgation of opinions and deny the right of thought; still there must be within silent secret workings of the soul which finally render impossible to live longer under such violation of right. This mighty effort of the mind to free itself from the yoke of bondage will cease only when "man, proud man dressed in a little brief authority" shall cease, "like an angry ape to play such fantastic tricks before high heaven as to make the angels weep", and the priest-hood shall no longer be vested with the supreme dispensation of the souls and bodies of their fellow men; but when universal liberty and happiness shall be the high aim and ambition of all, then "Mercy and truth will have met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

John H Watters

Commencement Oration of John H. Watters, Class of 1849  
Transcribed by Chris Altieri, May 2008  
Edited by Tristan Deveney, June 2008

### Luther before the Diet of Worms

The general intelligence had outgrown the oppressive institutions and acquired an impetus that threatened the very foundations of the papacy. The strugglings of an humble monk of Erfurth were not long to be confined to the secluded cell of their birth, but quickly they received general response as though all Christendom were lighted by the same luminary in heaven. The son of a miner had declared open hostilities against those human institutions so dear to the corrupt passions of man, though the flames were already ascending before him, kindled for his consummation by an angry Pope. Having the word of life for his safeguard, he confronted the supreme pontiff at whose bidding kings and princes bowed to the earth, and who had further claimed heaven's prerogative, and sold to a deluded multitude indulgences for sins. It was not against the abuses of an order of recent-origin, needing only to be shown to be abandoned that Luther was called upon to be foremost, but it was against an hierarchy which had attained to reputed infallibility through the interests and prejudices of priests and people.

When this mighty human fabric was now trembling to its very [one word illegible], the pope, alarmed, started from his tottering throne; priests left their sacred altars to become executioners of the offending monk. Princes, nobles and courtiers, seeking favors of the pontiff, allied with his sacred host to crush the reformer and his doctrines. Exasperated by his repeated escape from their wrath, rendered furious

by the trembling condition of those institutions to which they owed their dignity, they at last secured a summons for him to appear before the imperial diet. Tetzel, for want of purchasers, had been compelled to quit his holy traffic. The Roman legate at Augsburg had laid a net to entangle him, but De Vio was caught in his own toil while Luther escaped. The divines theologians in the halls of Leipsic next attempted to put him to shame by their scholastic reasoning, but even there the immortal 4th of July was made signal by the triumph of truth and independence of right; Next, these milder means having failed the end designed—the death of Luther, pope Leo, like a second Jove, hurled a swift thunder-bolt, forged in his own burning brain with wrath hot as Etna's furnace, but this too rendered harmless, was received by Luther and made an effective engine in the reforming cause. Now, to this last struggle all eyes were turned with deepest interest. His enemies looked forward to his appearance before the diet as a certain triumph to themselves. His friends could anticipate no mercy should he fall into hostile hands. But in this critical condition did Luther forsake his purpose?—did he who sought indulgence alone through faith in Jehovah fear what men could do unto him? Nay, ready to give his body to be burned so truth might escape the pollution of the enemy, he replied to entreating friends, “though there should be as many devils in Worms as there are tiles upon the roofs of the houses, I would go” Go he did, and next we see this mighty man standing alone in the midst of his assembled enemies anxious for his destruction. His judges, owing

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