

WHY THE BOOKS OF THE
POPE AND HIS DISCIPLES
WERE BURNED

1520

Translated by Lewis W. Spitz

INTRODUCTION

The bull, *Exsurge Domine*,* threatening Luther with excommunication, also included a demand to burn his books. The official publication of the bull in Rome on June 15, 1520, was accompanied by the burning of Luther's books. Owing to a rising tide of sympathy for Luther's cause in Germany and the Netherlands, official publication of the bull in these countries did not take place until the papal nuncio, Jerome Aleander, was given the special assignment to enforce compliance with the Roman Curia's decision and demand. Shortly upon his arrival at the imperial court of Charles V in the Netherlands the bull was published officially and accompanied by a burning of Luther's books in Louvain before the middle of October, 1520. At the instigation of Aleander similar bonfires were lit at Cologne and Mainz. Eck, who accompanied Aleander on his way from Rome to the Netherlands, incited similar actions at Ingolstadt and perhaps at Leipzig and Merseburg. As the threat of burning his books came nearer to Wittenberg, Luther was determined to fight fire with fire.

On December 10, upon Melancthon's announcement, a crowd of students and lovers of evangelical truth gathered at nine o'clock in the morning at the chapel of the Holy Cross and from there proceeded to a place outside the Elster gate in Wittenberg. There Luther cast into the fire volumes of the canon law, the papal decretals, and scholastic philosophy. Then Luther, deeply agitated, stepped from the crowd and consigned a small document to the mounting flames, the papal bull threatening him with excommunication. This was the solemn moment which in a sense marked the irrevocable and formal break with Rome.

Luther was keenly conscious of the meaning of his act. The next day he spoke of it in class before beginning his lecture on the Psalms. To justify this daring deed publicly, he wrote in German

* Cf. Carl Mirbt, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums und des roemischen Katholizismus* (2d ed.; Tübingen and Leipzig, 1901), pp. 183-185.

during the course of the next two weeks the treatise, *Why the Books of the Pope and His Disciples Were Burned by Doctor Martin Luther*. It was published for Luther by Johann Grüenberg. While the translation in this volume is based on the German in WA 7, 161-182, readings of the parallel Latin version have been taken into account.

WHY THE BOOKS OF THE POPE AND HIS DISCIPLES WERE BURNED

BY DOCTOR MARTIN LUTHER

*Let whoever wishes also declare why they have burned
Doctor Luther's books.*

Jesus

God grant grace and peace to all who love Christian truth.

I, Martin Luther, called a doctor of Holy Scripture, an Augustinian of Wittenberg, notify all men that by my will, advice, and help the books of the pope of Rome and some of his disciples were burned on the Monday after Saint Nicholas¹ in the year 1520. If somebody wondering about this should ask, as I indeed foresee, on what ground or mandate I have done it, let this be his answer.

In the first place, it is an ancient traditional practice to burn poisonous evil books, as we read in chapter nineteen of the Acts of the Apostles. There they burned books for five thousand pennies [fifty thousand pieces of silver], according to the account of St. Paul [Acts 19:19].

Secondly, I am, however unworthy, a baptized Christian, in addition a sworn doctor of Holy Scripture, and beyond that a preacher each weekday whose duty it is on account of his name, station, oath, and office, to destroy or at least to ward off false, corrupt, unchristian doctrine. And even though many more who are similarly duty-bound nevertheless do not wish or like to do the same, perhaps as a result of a lack of understanding or frail fear, I would still not be justified in letting someone's example stop

¹ In 1520 the day of St. Nicholas, observed on December 6, fell on a Thursday.

me, if my conscience were sufficiently instructed and my spirit, awakened by God's grace, bold enough.

Thirdly, for all that I still would not have attempted an undertaking of this kind, had I not experienced and observed that the pope and the papal seducers do more than err and lead astray. Even after the many instructions which I gave in vain, they are so completely obdurate and callous in their unchristian error and corruption of the soul that they do not want to be guided or taught. Rather, with closed ears and eyes they blindly damn and burn evangelical teaching in order to confirm and preserve their anti-christian, devilish doctrine.

Fourthly, I also do not believe that they have the command from Pope Leo X, so far as his person is concerned, unless I shall learn differently. I also hope that such books as I burned were not pleasing to him, even though they belonged to his predecessors. And if they pleased him, it is still a matter of indifference to me. I know, too, and have reliable information that the people of Cologne and Louvain who boast they have his Imperial Majesty's permission and command to burn my little books are sparing of the truth, for they have bought their way into such a project from several magistrates with bribes worth many thousand gulden.

Fifthly, since, then, through their kind of book burning great damage to truth and a false delusion among the plain common people might result, to the destruction of many souls, I have on the prompting of the Spirit (as I hope), in order to strengthen and preserve the same, burned the books of the adversaries in turn, since their improvement is not to be hoped for.

Therefore let no one be impressed by the lofty titles, names, and prestige of the papal estate, of canon law, and by the use of these burned books, which is of long standing. Rather listen and look first at what the pope teaches in his books, what poisonous and frightful doctrines are contained in the holy canon law, and what until the present time we have worshipped instead of the truth, and then judge freely whether I have burned these books justly or unjustly.

- * Articles and Errors in the Canon Law and Papal books on account of which they are rightly to be burned and shunned.

1

The pope and his men are not bound to be subject and obedient to God's commands.

He records this atrocious teaching clearly in the chapter² where he explains the words of St. Peter, who says, "Be subject to every human institution," [I Pet. 2:13] thus: St. Peter did not thereby refer to himself or his successors, but rather to his subjects.

2

It is not a command, but a counsel, of St. Peter, where he teaches that all Christians should be subject to kings [I Pet. 2:13].³

3

The sun symbolizes the papal, the moon the secular power in Christendom.⁴

4

The pope and his see are not bound to be subject to Christian councils and decrees.⁵

5

The pope has in his heart full power over all laws.⁶

² *Solita*, *Decretalium Gregorii IX* i. tit. XXXIII: *De maiestate et obedientia*, cap. 6. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Aemilius Friedberg (Graz, 1955), II, cols. 196-198.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Significasti*, *Decretalium Gregorii IX* i. tit. VI: *De electione et electi potestate*, cap. 4. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, II, cols. 45-50.

⁶ Luther has: *in prologo Sexti*. Cf. *Decretalium Gregorii IX* i. tit. II: *De Constitutionibus*. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, II, cols. 7-16.

6

From this it follows that the pope has the power to break up, change, and establish all councils and all decrees, as he does daily, so that no power or usefulness remains for councils and Christian orders.

7

The pope has the right to demand oath and fealty of the bishops for their pallium.⁷

The saying of Jesus, "You received without pay, give without pay" [Matt. 10:8] is opposed to this.

8

Even if the pope were so wicked that he would lead innumerable people in great masses to the devil, nevertheless, no one would be permitted to punish him for it.⁸

This article alone would be enough cause for burning all the pope's books. What devilish unchristian thing would they not undertake, if they shamelessly hold and teach such frightful things? See there, Christian, what canon law teaches you.

9

Next to God the salvation of all Christendom depends on the pope.⁹

The statement, "I believe in one holy church, etc," is opposed to this. All Christians, then, would have to perish as often as the pope is wicked.

10

No one on earth can judge the pope. Also, no one can

⁷ The pallium is a circular band of white wool with pendants, worn by archbishops over the chasuble, the outer vestments of the celebrant at mass. Luther refers the reader once again to the chapter, *Significasti*. Cf. note 5 above.

⁸ *Decreti Prima Pars*, dist. XL, cap. 6: *Si Papa Suae. Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, col. 146.

⁹ *Ibid.*

judge his decision. Rather, he is supposed to judge all people on earth.¹⁰

This is the main article. In order that it may become deeply imbedded, it is always quoted again and again through many chapters and almost through the whole canon law, so that it indeed appears as though the canon law were devised only in order that the pope could freely do and leave what he wished, to give permission to sin, and to be a hindrance to good. If this article stands, then Christ and his Word are defeated. But if it does not stand, then the whole canon law, together with the pope and see, is defeated.

However, it cannot stand, for St. Peter commands in I Pet. 6 [5:5], "Clothe yourself with humility toward one another." And St. Paul wrote in Rom. 12 [:10], "Outdo one another in showing honor." And Christ often says: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant" [Matt. 20:26-27; 23:11]. In the same way St. Paul chastises St. Peter, Gal. 2 [:11-21], that his actions are not in accord with the gospel. And in Acts 8 [:14] St. Peter was sent out with St. John by the other apostles as a subordinate. Therefore it is not and can not be true that the pope is subject to or to be judged by no one, but he shall be subject to and judged by every man, inasmuch as he wishes to be supreme. And the canon law, because this is its foundation and whole essence, contends in all its parts against the gospel.

It is indeed true that the secular power shall not be subject to its inferiors, but Christ reverses and changes that order, saying: "You shall not be as the secular overlords" [Cf. Luke 22:25-26]. And he desires that the leaders of his people should be subject to every man and should allow judgment from them. As he says in Luke 22 [:25-26], "The kings of the gentiles exercise lordship over them. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves." How can he be beneath anyone, if he does not want to let anyone judge him?

If one wants to distort the words of Christ (as some do), namely, that he ought to regard himself as the lowliest in his heart

¹⁰ *Decreti Secunda Pars*, causa IX, ques. III, cap. 17: *Cuncta per mundum nouit ecclesia. Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, col. 611.

and not show it outwardly, then one must also infer that he ought to regard himself in his heart as superior and not show it outwardly. Thus one must either hold both spiritually in the heart or show outwardly, so that Christ's words can stand.

This is the article from which all misfortune has come into all the world. Therefore the canon law is rightly to be destroyed and rejected as a poisonous thing. For from it follows, as it actually has happened, and is evident to everyone, that one can check no evil, can demand no good, and we have to let the gospel and the faith go under before our very eyes.

11

*The Roman see indeed imparts authority and power to all laws, but it is subject to none of them.*¹¹

That is as much as to say that what he wants is right, yet he is bound to keep none of them. Even as Christ says in Matt. 23 [:4] of the Jewish Pharisees, "They bind heavy burdens on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with their finger." Against this St. Paul says in Gal. 6 [5:1], "Stand fast in your freedom and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

12

The rock on which Christ builds his church, Matt. 16 [:18], is called the Roman see,¹² although Christ alone is that very rock, I Cor. 10 [4].

13

The keys are given to St. Peter alone, even though in Matt. 18 [:18] Christ gives them to the whole congregation.

¹¹ *Decreti Secunda Pars*, causa XXV, ques. I. cap. 1: *Confidimus*. See *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, col. 1007. Cf. also ques. I. cap. 16: *Ideo permittente*. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, col. 1010.

¹² Luther's reference is to dist. XIX, *Ita Dominus*. Cf. *Decreti Prima Pars*, dist. XIX, cap. 7. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, col. 62. Cf. also dist. XXI, cap. 2: *In novo testamento*, *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, cols. 69f.; dist. XXI, cap. 3: *Quamvis universae*, *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, col. 70; and dist. XXII, cap. 2: *Sacrosancta Romano*, *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, cols. 73f.

14

*Christ's priesthood was transferred from him to St. Peter.*¹³
Against this David in Psalm 109 [110:4] and Paul in the Epistle to the Hebrews [5:6; 6:20; 7:21-28] say that Christ is a unique, eternal priest whose priesthood would never be transferred.

15

*The pope has the power to make laws for the Christian church.*¹⁴

Against this St. Paul says in Gal. 5 [:13]: "You were called by God to freedom."

16

He interprets the passage, "Whatsoever you shall bind, etc." [Matt. 16:19], to mean that he has the power to burden all Christendom with his wanton laws. Christ intends nothing else thereby than to drive sinners to punishment and penance and not at all to burden the other innocent ones with laws, as the words clearly read.

17

Under threat of excommunication and of committing sin, the pope has commanded not to eat meat, eggs, butter, and other miscellaneous things on certain days.

He has no authority to do this but rather should only admonish people in a friendly manner to heed his advice, leaving each man to act with complete freedom and without pressure.

18

He has forbidden marriage to the whole priesthood.

He thereby increases many sins and scandals without cause, contrary to God's command and Christian freedom.

¹³ *Translatio, Decretalium Gregorii IX i. tit. II: De Constitutionibus*, cap. 8. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, II, col. 8.

¹⁴ *Decreti Secunda Pars* causa XXV, ques. I, cap. 16: *Ideo permittente*. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, col. 1010.

19

Pope Nicholas the third or fourth proposed among the many bad articles in his antichristian decretal that Christ has given to St. Peter and his successors power over the heavenly and earthly kingdom together with the keys.

Everyone well knows how Christ fled from the earthly kingdom [John 6:15] and that all priests have the keys, even though they are not all emperors of heavenly and earthly kingdoms.

20

He holds to be true and fosters the great unchristian lie that Emperor Constantine has given him Rome, land, empire, and power on earth.¹⁵

Against this Christ says, Matt. 6 [:19], "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth;" likewise, "You cannot serve God and mammon" [Matt. 6:24].

21

He boasts he is the heir of the Roman empire,¹⁶ although everyone well knows that the spiritual and secular realms do not get along well with each other.

And St. Paul enjoins that a bishop should serve the word of God [Cf. Titus 1:9].

22

He teaches that it is right for a Christian to defend himself against force with force.

This is contrary to and above what Christ says in Matt. 5 [:40]: "If anyone take your coat, let him have your cloak as well."

¹⁵ Luther gives no reference here to canon law, but cf. *Decreti Prima Pars*, dist. XCVI, cap. 13: *Constantinus imperator*; and cap. 14: *Constantinus imperator quarta*. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, I, col. 342.

¹⁶ *Pastoralis, Clementinarum* ii. tit. XI: *De sententia et re iudicata*, cap. 2. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, II, cols. 1151-1153.

23

Subjects can be disobedient to their overlords and the pope can depose the kings, as he writes in many places and has often done, against and above God.

24

He claims to have the power to dissolve all oaths, alliances, and obligations arranged between the higher and lower estates.

This is against and above God, who ordered every man to keep faith with the other [Zech. 8:16].

25

The pope has the power to dissolve and alter vows made to God.¹⁷

That is also against and above God.

26

Whoever delays fulfilling his vow upon the command of the pope is not guilty of breaking the vow.¹⁸

That is as much as to say, "the pope is above God."

27

No one who is married is able to serve God, even though Abraham and many saints have been married and God himself established marriage without a doubt.

Thus the Antichrist again rises above God.

28

He makes his useless laws equal to the gospels and to Holy Scripture, as he repeatedly indicates in the decretal.

¹⁷ *De peregrinationis quoque votis, Decretalium Gregorii IX* iii. tit. XXXIV: *De voto et voti redemptione*, cap. 1. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, II, col. 589.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, cap. 5: *Non est voti*. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, II, col. 590.

The pope has the power to interpret and to teach Holy Scripture according to his will and allows no one to interpret it otherwise than he wants.

He thereby puts himself above God's word, dismembers and destroys it, as St. Paul says in I Cor. 14 [:30], the superior should yield to the revelation of the inferior.

The pope does not derive authentic existence, strength, and dignity from Scripture, but Scripture from him, which is one of the main articles.

Therefore, as a true Antichrist he deserves to have Christ from heaven itself destroy him together with his government, as Paul predicted [II Thess. 1:7-10].

These and similar articles which are without number—all of them aim at exalting the pope above God and man. Everyone, even God and the angels, is subject to him, while he is subject to no one, so that even his disciples say he is an extraordinary creature, being neither God nor man (perhaps the devil himself). So now the saying of Paul is fulfilled, "the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship . . . by the activity of Satan," and so on [II Thess. 2:3-12]. When he calls him a man of lawlessness and a son of perdition, he does not mean his person alone, for that would cause little damage, but rather that his government is nothing else than sin and perdition and that he will rule only to lead all the world to sin and hell. It can readily be observed, then, and is clear from such articles that nothing except sin and perdition have come into the world through the pope, and more keeps coming daily.

Those very men who observe canon law, although in out-of-the-way places, have confessed that it smells of nothing but greed and power. That is true indeed, and whoever does not want to lie must admit it. For if you want to know in a few words what the canon law contains, then listen. It is, to put it briefly, the following:

The pope is a god on earth over everything heavenly, earthly, spiritual, and secular, and all is his own. No one is permitted to say to him: "What are you doing?"

That is the abomination and stench of which Christ speaks in Matt. 24 [:15]: "So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel [Dan. 9:27; 12:11], standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)," etc. And St. Paul writes: "He will take his seat in the temple of God (that is, in Christendom), proclaiming himself to be God" [Cf. II Thess. 2:4].

Now the fact that no one or few people have been permitted to speak out to the pope about his abomination is not amazing, for it has been announced that he will have all those burned who oppose him and that he will have the consent of all the kings and princes. If the seduction of the Antichrist were so gross that everyone could notice it, or so trifling that the kings and big-wigs would not be most distinguished men in it, then the prophets and apostles would have cried out and written so much and so earnestly in vain.

When Christ was on earth, many people who heard his word and saw his work spoke against those who did not want to let him be Christ: "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?" [John 7:31]. Even now that mumbling goes on in similar fashion: "Even if the Antichrist appears, what greater evil can he do than the pope's rule has done and does daily?" For it is simply inconceivable that if his government were from God, he should allow so much corruption and sin to come out of it and let the evil spirit rule in it so powerfully. Yet we do not believe it until we are lost, and we all too slowly recognize the Antichrist.

Likewise from the beginning of all creatures the greatest evil has always come from the best, for in the highest choir of angels, where God had worked most mightily, Lucifer sinned and did great harm. In paradise, the greatest sin and harm occurred in the first, best man. According to Gen. 6 [:4] the giants and tyrants came from none other than the holy children of God. And Christ, the Son of God, was crucified nowhere else than in the holy city of Jerusalem where he had been honored most of all and where he had done many miracles, and by none other than the princes and chief priests and the most learned and holy. And Judas also had to com-

promise not simply a humble station in life, but the position of an apostle. Thus God has also blessed no city on earth with so much grace and so many saints as Rome and did more for her than for any other. Therefore she, too, like Jerusalem, in gratitude to God, must do the greatest harm and give the world the true and most destructive Antichrist who does more harm than the good which Christ has done before. That is the way it happens. And it must all transpire in the name and under the pretext of Christ and of God, so that no one believes it until Christ himself comes and enlightens such darkness with the light of his advent, as St. Paul says [II Thess. 2:8; I Cor. 4:5].

These articles must suffice this time. If, however, someone is the pope's ally and is itching to undertake to protect and defend the same, then I shall indeed paint them more clearly for him and bring up much more of the same sort. These articles are to be only the beginning of dealing seriously with matters pertaining to the pope, because until now I have only toyed and played with them. I have begun it in God's name. I hope the time has come for the cause to move forward in his name without me. Hereby I also wish to embrace all the articles as Christian and true which were damned and burned in the last bull by the nuncio of Antichrist now come from Rome and on the other hand to charge just as many articles of the pope with being anticristian and unchristian as the number of my articles which have been condemned.¹⁹ If they are allowed to burn my articles, in which there is more gospel and more of the true substance of Holy Scripture (which I can say truthfully without boasting, and prove also) than in all the pope's books, then I am justified much more in burning their unchristian law books in which there is nothing good. But even if there were some good in them, as I must acknowledge of the decretal, nevertheless everything is so distorted as to do harm and strengthen the pope in his antichristian rule. In addition, none of it is observed with very much diligence except to retain what is evil and harmful in it.

I am willing to let everyone have his own opinion. I am moved

¹⁹ The papal bull *Exsurge Domine* was signed by the papal chancery on June 15, 1520 and brought north by Aleander, papal nuncio. Cf. also p. 381.

most by the fact that the pope has never once refuted with Scripture or reason anyone who has spoken, written, or acted against him, but has at all times suppressed, exiled, burned, or otherwise strangled him with force and bans, through kings, and other partisans, or with deceit and false words, of which I shall convince him from history. Nor has he ever been willing to submit to a court of justice or judgment, but at all times bawled that he was above Scripture, judgment, and authority.

Now it is always true that truth and righteousness do not shun judgment, yes, love nothing more than light and judgment, gladly permit themselves to be examined and tried. The apostles in Acts 4 [:19] granted the right of judgment to their enemies and said: "Whether it is right to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge." So certain was the truth. But the pope wants to blind everyone's eyes, let no one judge, but alone judge everyone. That is how uncertain and fearful he is for his cause and affairs. This dealing in the darkness and shying away from the light has the effect that, if the pope were nothing but a pure angel, I still could not believe anything that came from him. Every man rightly hates dark dealings and loves the light. Amen.

In all this I offer to give an account in the presence of every man.

Samson, Judges 15 [:11]:

"As they did to me, so have I done to them."