

Religious Liberty



Lesson 13

True Protestantism

Diet of Spires



1529

At no former Diet had the attendance, especially on the Catholic side, been so numerous. The Popish princes came first. The little town was all astir as each magnate announced his arrival at its gates, and rode through its streets, followed by an imposing display of armed followers. First in rank was King Ferdinand, who was to preside in the absence of his brother Charles V., and came attended by 300 armed knights. After him came the Dukes of Bavaria with an equally large retinue; then followed the ecclesiastical electors of Mainz and Trèves, and the Bishops of Trent and Hildesheim, each with a troop of horsemen. Their haughty looks, and the boastful greetings they exchanged with one another, proclaimed the confident hopes they cherished of being able to carry matters in the Diet their own way. They had come to bury the Reformation. (James A. Wylie, "The Great Protest," *History of Protestantism*, vol. 1, bk. 9, ch. 15, p. 548)

The last to arrive were the Reformed princes. On the 13th of March came Elector John of Saxony, the most powerful prince of the Empire. His entrance was the most modest of all. There rode by his side none but Melanchthon. Philip of Hesse followed on the 18th of March. With characteristic pomp he passed in with sound of trumpet, followed by a troop of 200 horsemen. It was on the eve of Palm Sunday that the elector, with Melanchthon by his side, entered Spire. On the following day he had public worship in his hotel, and as an evidence that the popular favor for the Word of God had not abated, not fewer than 8,000 attended sermon both forenoon and afternoon. When the deputies of the cities had arrived, the constituent members of the Diet were complete, and the business was opened. (Ibid.)

The Diet was not long left in suspense as to the precise object of the emperor in convoking it, and the legislation which was expected from it. Scarcely had it met when it received the intimation from commissioners that it was the emperor's will and command that the Diet should repeal the Edict of Spires (1526). This was all. The members might dispatch their business in an hour, and return in peace to their homes. (Ibid.)

But let us see how much was included in this short message, and how much the Diet was asked to do—what a revolution it was bidden inaugurate, when it was asked to repeal the edict of 1526. That edict guaranteed the free exercise of their religion to the several States of the Empire till a General Council should meet. It was, as we have already said, the first legal establishment of the Reformation. **Religious freedom**, then, so far as enjoyed in Germany, the Diet was now asked to abolish. But this was not all. The edict of 1526 suspended legally the execution of the Edict of Worms of 1521, which proscribed Luther and condemned the Reformation. Abolish the edict of 1526, and the edict of 1521 would come into operation; **Luther must be put to death; the Reformed opinions must be rooted out of all the countries where they had taken root**; in short, the floodgates of a measureless persecution would be opened in Germany. This was the import of the curt and haughty message with which Charles startled the Diet at its opening. The sending of such a message even was a violation of the constitutional rights of the several States, and an assumption of power which no former emperor had dared to make. The message, if passed into law, would have laid **the rights of conscience**, the **independence of the Diet**, and the **liberties of Germany**, all three in the dust. (Ibid.)



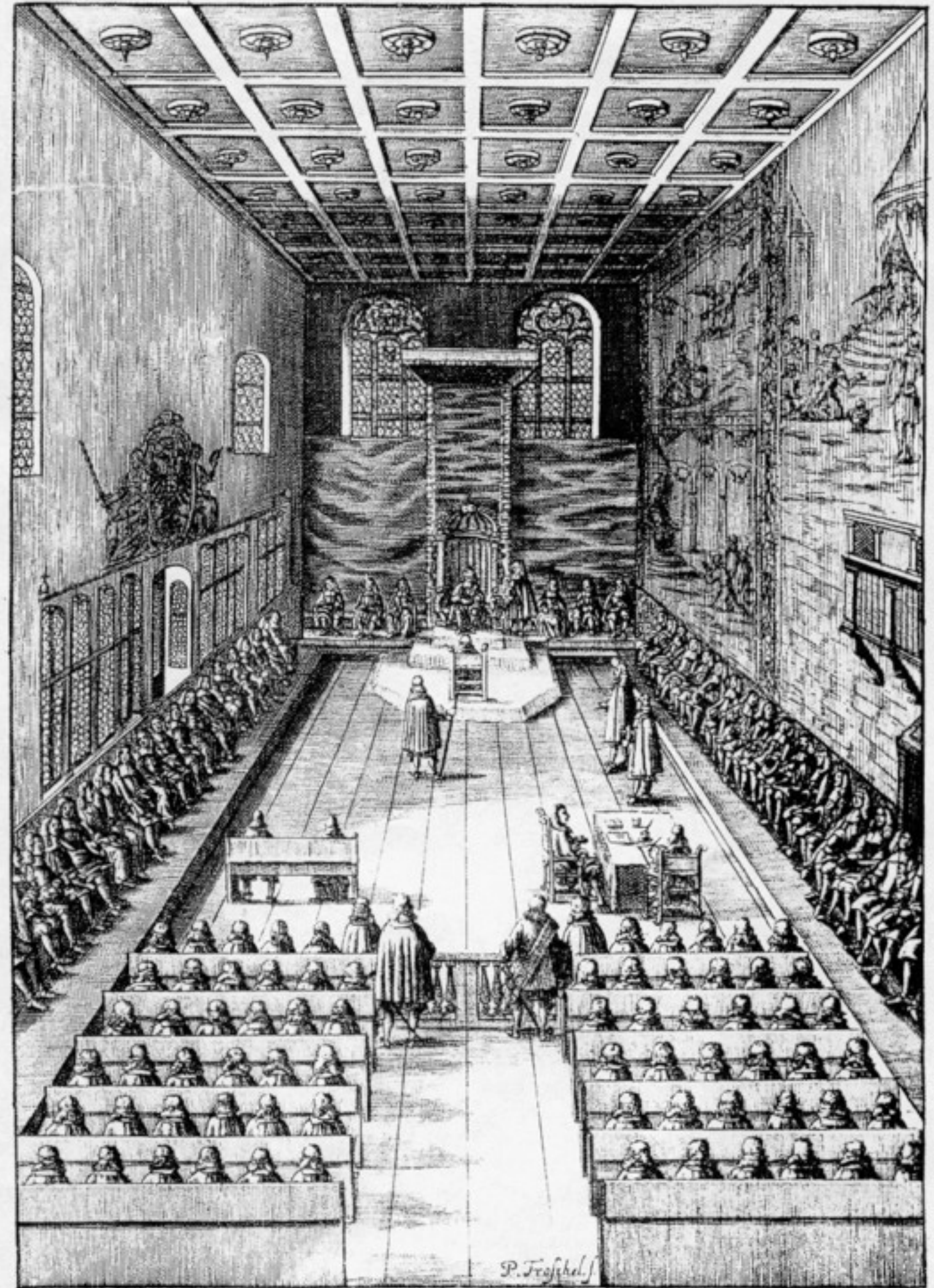
❖ The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, was also Archduke of Austria, King of Spain, Lord of the Netherlands, and other titles.

King Ferdinand I

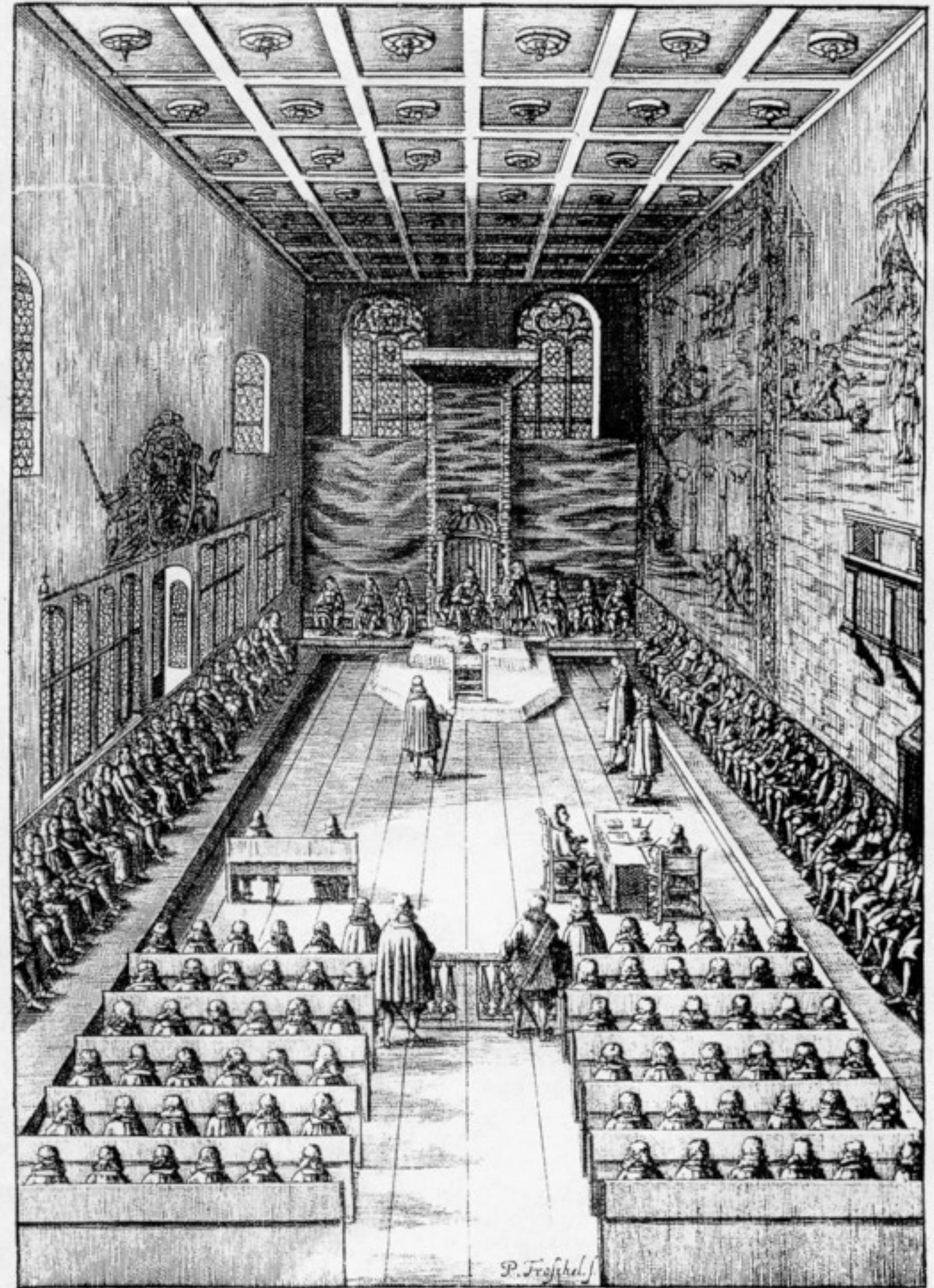


The Diet of Speyer, or the Diet of Spires, was a Diet of the Holy Roman Empire convened in March 1529 in the city of Speyer in present-day Germany.

It was convened for action against the Turks, whose armies were pressing toward Vienna and against the further progress of Protestantism.



This was during the time of Luther in Germany, and of Calvin and Zwingli, and of Huss and Jerome.



- ❖ The Diet of Spires in 1526 had given each State full liberty in matters of religion . . . (*GC88* 197.3)

- ❖ . . . the emperor summoned a second Diet to convene at Spires in 1529 for the purpose of crushing heresy. The princes were to be induced, by peaceable means if possible, to side against the Reformation; but if these failed, Charles was prepared to resort to the sword. (*GC88* 197.3)

The papists were exultant. They appeared at Spires in great numbers, and openly manifested their hostility toward the reformers and all who favored them. . . . The evangelical princes in attendance at the Diet were forbidden even to have the gospel preached in their dwellings. But the people of Spires thirsted for the Word of God, and, notwithstanding the prohibition, thousands flocked to the services held in the chapel of the Elector of Saxony. (*GC88* 198.1)

This hastened the crisis. And imperial message announced to the Diet that as the resolution granting liberty of conscience had given rise to great disorders, the emperor required that it be annulled. (*GC88* 198.2)

Religious toleration had been legally established, and the evangelical States were resolved to oppose the infringement of their rights. Luther, being still under the ban imposed by the edict of Worms, was not permitted to be present at Spires; but his place was supplied by his co-laborers and the princes whom God had raised up to defend his cause in this emergency. (*GC88* 198.3)

The priests demanded that the States which had accepted the Reformation submit implicitly to Romish jurisdiction. The reformers, on the other hand, claimed the liberty which had previously been granted. They could not consent that Rome should again bring under her control those States that had with so great joy received the Word of God. (*GC88* 199.1)

As a compromise it was finally proposed that where the Reformation had not become established, the edict of Worms should be rigorously enforced; and that in the evangelical States, where there would be danger of revolt, no new reform should be introduced, there should be no preaching upon disputed points, the celebration of the mass should not be opposed, and no Roman Catholic should be permitted to embrace Lutheranism. This measure passed the Diet, to the great satisfaction of the popish priests and prelates. (*GC88* 199.2)

As the evangelical party met for consultation, one looked to another in blank dismay. From one to another passed the inquiry, “What is to be done?” Mighty issues for the world were at stake. “Should the chiefs of the Reformation submit, and accept the edict? How easily might the reformers at this crisis, which was truly a tremendous one, have argued themselves into a wrong course! How many plausible pretexts and fair reasons might they have found for submission! The Lutheran princes were **guaranteed the free exercise of their religion.** (*GC88* 199.4)

The same boon was **extended to all those of their subjects** who, prior to the passing of the measure, had embraced the reformed views. Ought not this to content them? How many perils would submission avoid! On what unknown hazards and conflicts would opposition launch them! Who knows what opportunities the future may bring? Let us **embrace peace**; let us **seize the olive-branch** Rome holds out, and close the wounds of Germany. With arguments like these might the reformers have justified their adoption of a course which would have assuredly issued in no long time in the overthrow of their cause. (*GC88* 199.4)

“Happily they looked at the principle on which this arrangement was based, and they acted in faith. What was that principle?—**It was the right of Rome to coerce conscience and forbid free inquiry.** But were not themselves and their Protestant subjects to enjoy religious freedom?—Yes, as a **favor**, specially stipulated for in the arrangement, but not as a **right**. As to all outside that arrangement, the great principle of authority was to rule; conscience was out of court, Rome was infallible judge, and must be obeyed. The acceptance of the proposed arrangement would have been a virtual admission that religious liberty ought to be confined to reformed Saxony; and as to all the rest of Christendom, free inquiry and the profession of the reformed faith were crimes, and must be visited with the dungeon and the stake. (*GC88* 200.1)

Could they consent to localize religious liberty? to have it proclaimed that the Reformation had made its last convert, had subjugated its last acre? and that wherever Rome bore sway at this hour, there her dominion was to be perpetuated? Could the reformers have pleaded that they were innocent of the blood of those hundreds and thousands who, in pursuance of this arrangement, would have to yield up their lives in popish lands? This would have been to betray at that supreme hour, the cause of the gospel, and the liberties of Christendom.” Rather would they sacrifice their dominions, their titles, and their own lives. (*GC88* 200.1)

“Let us reject this decree,” said the princes. “In matters of conscience the majority has no power.” The deputies declared that Germany was indebted to the decree of toleration for the peace which she enjoyed, and that its abolition would fill the empire with troubles and divisions. “The Diet is incompetent,” said they, “to do more than preserve religious liberty until a council meets.” To protect liberty of conscience is the duty of the State, and this is the limit of its authority in matters of religion. **Every secular government that attempts to regulate or enforce religious observances by civil authority is sacrificing the very principle for which the evangelical Christians so nobly struggled. (GC88 201.1)**

The papists determined to put down what they termed daring obstinacy. They began by endeavoring to cause **divisions** among the supporters of the Reformation, and to **intimidate** all who had not openly declared in its favor. The representatives of the free cities were at last summoned before the Diet, and **required to declare** whether they would accede to the terms of the proposition. They pleaded for delay, but in vain. When brought to the test, nearly one-half their number sided with the reformers. Those who thus refused to sacrifice liberty of conscience and the right of individual judgment well knew that their position marked them for future criticism, condemnation, and persecution. Said one of the delegates, “We must either deny the Word of God or—be burned.” (*GC88* 201.2)

King Ferdinand, the emperor's representative at the Diet, saw that the decree would cause serious divisions unless the princes could be induced to accept and sustain it. He therefore tried the art of **persuasion**, well knowing that to employ force with such men would only render them the more determined. He **begged them** to accept the decree, assuring them that such an act would be highly gratifying to the emperor. But these faithful men acknowledged an authority above that of earthly rulers, and they answered calmly, "We will obey the emperor in everything that may contribute to maintain peace and the honor of God." (*GC88* 201.3)

In the presence of the Diet, the king at last announced that the decree was about to be published as an imperial edict, and that the only course remaining for the elector and his friends was to **submit to the majority**.

Having thus spoken, he withdrew from the assembly, giving the reformers no opportunity for deliberation or reply. In vain they sent messengers entreating him to return. To their remonstrances he answered only, “It is a settled affair; **submission** is all that remains.”

(GC88 202.1)

The imperial party were convinced that the Christian princes would adhere to the Holy Scriptures as superior to human doctrines and requirements; and they knew that wherever this principle was accepted, the papacy would eventually be overthrown. But, like thousands since their time, looking only “at the things which are seen,” they flattered themselves that the cause of the emperor and the pope was strong, and that of the reformers weak. Had the reformers depended upon human aid alone, they would have been as powerless as the papists supposed. But though weak in numbers, and at variance with Rome, they had their strength. They appealed from the decision of the Diet to the Scriptures of truth, and from the emperor of Germany to the King of Heaven and earth. (*GC88* 202.2)

The Document

They resolved upon this step. A declaration was drawn up to that effect, and this was the famous Protest that henceforward gave the name of Protestant to the renovated Church. The elector and his allies, having returned to the common hall of The diet, thus addressed the assembled states: — (J. H. Merle d'Aubigué, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 520, 521; book 13, chapter 6)

“Dear Lords, Cousins, Uncles, and Friends ! Having repaired to this diet at the summons of his majesty, and for the common good of the empire and of Christendom, we have heard and learnt that the decisions of the last diet concerning our holy Christian faith are to be repealed, and that it is proposed to substitute for them certain restrictive and onerous resolutions. (Ibid.)

“King Ferdinand and the other imperial commissioners, by affixing their seals to the last Recess of Spires, had promised, however, in the name of the emperor, to carry out sincerely and inviolably all that it contained, and to permit nothing that was contrary to it. In like manner, also, you and we, electors, princes, prelates, lords, and deputies of the empire, bound ourselves to maintain always and with our whole might every article of that decree. (Ibid.)

“We cannot therefore consent to its repeal:—

“Firstly, because we believe that his imperial majesty (as well as you and we), is called upon to maintain firmly what has been unanimously and solemnly resolved.

“Secondly, because it concerns the glory of God and the salvation of our souls, and that in such matters we ought to have regard, above all, to the commandments of God, who is King of kings and Lord of lords ; each of us rendering him account for himself, without caring the least in the world about majority or minority. (Ibid.)

“We form no judgment on that which concerns you, most dear lords ; and we are content to pray God daily that he will bring us all to unity of faith, in truth, charity, and holiness through Jesus Christ, our throne of grace and our only mediator.

“But in what concerns ourselves, adhesion to your resolution (and let every honest man be judge !) would be acting against our conscience, condemning a doctrine that we maintain to be christian, and pronouncing that it ought to be abolished in our states, if we could do so without trouble. (Ibid.)

“This would be to deny our Lord Jesus Christ, to reject his holy Word, and thus give him just reason to deny us in turn before his Father, as he has threatened.

“What ! we ratify this edict ! We assert that when Almighty God calls a man to His knowledge, this man cannot however receive the knowledge of God ! Oh ! of what deadly backsliding should we not thus become the accomplices, not only among our own subjects, but also among yours ! (Ibid.)

“We protest by these presents, before God, our only Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, and Saviour, and who will one day be our Judge, as well as before all men and all creatures, that we, for us and our people, neither consent nor adhere in any manner whatever to the proposed decree in anything that is contrary to God, to his Word, to our right conscience, or to the salvation of our souls.... **We cannot assert that when Almighty God calls a man to his knowledge, he dare not embrace that divine knowledge....**” (*GC88* 202.4)

“For this reason we reject the yoke that is imposed on us. And although it is universally known that in our states the holy sacrament of the body and blood of our Lord is becomingly administered, we cannot adhere to what the edict proposes against the sacramentarians, seeing that the imperial edict did not speak of them, that they have not been heard, and that we cannot resolve upon such important points before the next council. (d’Aubigné, Ibid.)

“Moreover” — and this is the essential part of the protest — “as the new edict declares that the ministers shall preach the Gospel, explaining it according to the writings accepted by the holy Christian Church ; we think that, for this regulation to have any value, we should first agree on what is meant by the true and holy Church. Now, seeing that there is great diversity of opinion in this respect ; that there is no sure doctrine but such as is conformable to the Word of God ; (Ibid.)

that the Lord forbids the teaching of any other doctrine ; that each text of the Holy Scriptures ought to be explained by other and clearer texts ; and that this holy book is in all things necessary for the Christian, easy of understanding, and calculated to scatter the darkness : we are resolved, with the grace of God, to maintain the pure and exclusive preaching of his only Word, such as it is contained in the biblical books of the Old and New Testament, without adding any thing thereto that may be contrary to it. This Word is the only truth ; it is the sure rule of all doctrine and of all life, and can never fail or deceive us. He who builds on this foundation shall stand against all the powers of hell, whilst all the human vanities that are set up against it shall fall before the face of God. (Ibid.)

“For these reasons, most dear lords, uncles, cousins, and friends, we earnestly entreat you to weigh carefully our grievances and our motives. If you do not yield to our request, we **PROTEST** by these presents, before God, our only Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, and Saviour, and who will one day be our judge, as well as before all men and all creatures, that we, for us and for our people, neither consent nor adhere in any manner whatsoever to the proposed decree, in any thing that is contrary to God, to his holy Word, to our right conscience, to the salvation of our souls, and to the last decree of Spires. (Ibid.)

“At the same time we are in expectation that his imperial majesty will behave towards us like a Christian prince who loves God above all things ; and we declare ourselves ready to pay unto him, as well as unto you, gracious lords, all the affection and obedience that are our just and legitimate duty.”

Thus, in presence of the diet, spoke out those courageous men whom Christendom will henceforward denominate **THE PROTESTANTS**.

They had barely finished when they announced their intention of quitting Spires on the morrow. (Ibid.)

This protest and declaration produced a deep impression. The diet was rudely interrupted and broken into two hostile parties,— thus precluding war. The majority became the prey of the liveliest fears. As for the Protestants, relying *jure humano* [by human right], upon the edict of Spires, and, *jure divino* [by divine right], upon the Bible, they were full of courage and firmness. (Ibid.)

The principles contained in this celebrated protest of the 19th April 1529, constitute the very essence of Protestantism. Now this protest opposes two abuses of man in matters of faith : the first is the intrusion of the civil magistrate, and the second the arbitrary authority of the Church. Instead of these abuses, Protestantism sets the power of conscience above the magistrate ; and the authority of the Word of God above the visible church. In the first place, it rejects the civil power in divine things, and says with the prophets and apostles: (Ibid.)

We must obey God rather than man. In presence of the crown of Charles the Fifth, it uplifts the crown of Jesus Christ: But it goes farther : it lays down the principle, that all human teaching should be subordinate to the oracles of God. (J. H. Merle D'Aubigué, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 520, 521; book 13, chapter 6)

One of the noblest testimonies ever uttered for the Reformation, was the Protest offered by the Christian princes of Germany at the **Diet of Spires in 1529**. The courage, faith, and firmness of those men of God, gained for succeeding ages liberty of thought and of conscience. Their Protest gave to the reformed church the name of Protestant; its principles are the very essence of Protestantism. (*GC88* 197.1)

- ❖ Elector John of Saxony
- ❖ Margrave George of Brandenburg
- ❖ Dukes Ernest and Francis of Braunschweig-Luneburg
- ❖ Landgrave Philip of Hesse
- ❖ Prince Wolfgang of Anhalt
- ❖ Representatives of fourteen imperial cities
- ❖ Their motto was “The Word of God abideth forever.”

A deep impression was made upon the Diet. The majority were filled with amazement and alarm at the boldness of the protesters. The future appeared to them stormy and uncertain. Dissension, strife, and bloodshed seemed inevitable. But the reformers, assured of the justice of their cause, and relying upon the arm of Omnipotence, were full of courage and firmness. (*GC88* 203.1)

The Protest denied the right of civil rulers to legislate in matters between the soul and God, and declared with prophets and apostles, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” It rejected also the arbitrary power of the church, and set forth the unerring principle that all human teaching should be in subjection to the oracles of God. The protesters had thrown off the yoke of man's supremacy, and had exalted Christ as supreme in the church, and his Word in the pulpit. (*GC88* 203)

The power of conscience was set above the State, and the authority of the Holy Scriptures above the visible church. The crown of Christ was uplifted above the pope's tiara and the emperor's diadem. The protesters had moreover affirmed their right to freely utter their convictions of truth. They would not only believe and obey, but teach what the Word of God presents, and they denied the right of priest or magistrate to interfere. The Protest of Spires was a solemn witness against religious intolerance, and an assertion of the right of all men to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences.

(GC88 203)

The declaration had been made. It was written in the memory of thousands, and registered in the books of Heaven, where no effort of man could erase it. All evangelical Germany adopted the Protest as the expression of its faith. Everywhere men beheld in this declaration the promise of a new and better era. Said one of the princes to the Protestants of Spire, “May the Almighty, who has given you grace to confess energetically, freely, and fearlessly; preserve you in that Christian firmness until the day of eternity.” (*GC88* 204.1)

The reformed princes had determined upon having a statement of their views in systematic form, with the evidence from the Scriptures, to present before the Diet; and the task of its preparation was committed to Luther, Melancthon, and their associates. This Confession was accepted by the Protestants as an exposition of their faith, and they assembled to affix their names to the important document. It was a solemn and trying time. The reformers were solicitous that their cause should not be confounded with political questions; they felt that the Reformation should exercise no other influence than that which proceeds from the Word of God. As the Christian princes advanced to sign the Confession, Melancthon interposed, saying, “It is for the theologians and ministers to propose these things, while the authority of the mighty ones of earth is to be reserved for other matters.”

(GC88 206.2)

“God forbid,” replied John of Saxony, “that you should exclude me. I am resolved to do my duty, without being troubled about my crown. I desire to confess the Lord. My electoral hat and robes are not so precious to me as the cross of Jesus Christ.” Having thus spoken he wrote down his name. Said another of the princes as he took the pen, “If the honor of my Lord Jesus Christ requires it, I am ready to leave my goods and life behind me.” “Rather would I renounce my subjects and my States, rather would I quit the country of my fathers, staff in hand,” he continued, “than to receive any other doctrine than is contained in this Confession.” Such was the faith and daring of those men of God. (*GC88* 206.2)

The appointed time came to appear before the emperor. Charles V., seated upon his throne, surrounded by the electors and the princes, gave audience to the Protestant reformers. The confession of their faith was read. In that august assembly the truths of the gospel were clearly set forth, and the errors of the papal church were pointed out. Well has that day been pronounced “the greatest day of the Reformation, and one of the most glorious in the history of Christianity and of the world.” (*GC88* 207.1)

From the secret place of prayer came the power that shook the world in the Great Reformation. There, with holy calmness, the servants of the Lord set their feet upon the rock of his promises. During the struggle at Augsburg, Luther did not fail to devote three hours each day to prayer; and these were taken from that portion of the day most favorable to study.

In the privacy of his chamber he was heard to pour out his soul before God in words full of adoration, fear, and hope, as if speaking to a friend.

“I know that thou art our Father and our God,” he said, “and that thou wilt scatter the persecutors of thy children; for thou art thyself endangered with us. All this matter is thine, and it is only by thy constraint that we have put our hands to it. Defend us, then, O Father!”

(GC88 210.1)

To Melancthon, who was crushed under the burden of anxiety and fear, he wrote: “Grace and peace in Christ! In Christ, I say, and not in the world, Amen! I hate with exceeding hatred those extreme cares which consume you. If the cause is unjust, abandon it; if the cause is just, why should we belie the promises of Him who commands us to sleep without fear?” “Christ will not be wanting to the work of justice and truth. He lives, he reigns; what fear, then, can we have?” (*GC88* 210.1)

- ❖ 1526—First Diet of Spires
- ❖ 1529—Second Diet of Spires
- ❖ 1607—Establishment of Jamestown
- ❖ 1620—Arrival of Pilgrims
- ❖ 1634—Settlement of Maryland
- ❖ 1636—Rhode Island
- ❖ 1903—Minority Report to the General Conference Session, Oakland, CA
- ❖ 1980—General Conference Session, Dallas, TX

Report of the Minority of the Committee on Plans and Constitution

H. W. Cottrell

The minority of your Committee on Plans and Constitution beg leave to submit that the Constitution proposed by the majority of the Committee appears to us to be so subversive of the principles of organization given to us at the General Conferences of 1897 and 1901 that we can not possibly subscribe to it.

The proposed new Constitution reverses the reformatory steps that were taken, and the principles which were given and adopted as the principles of reorganization, in the General Conferences of 1897 and 1901, and embodied in the present Constitution; and this before that Constitution or the organization according to it, has ever had adequate trial.

We therefore recommend that the Constitution of 1901 be given a fair trial before it be annihilated.

Signed,

E. J. Waggoner,

David Paulson,

Percy T. Magan. (*GCB* April 10, 1903, p. 147)

The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall. (*Ed 57.3*)

❖ J. S. Washburn—1955

❖ C. S. Longacre—1958

❖ B. G. Wilkinson—1968

Apostate Protestantism has accepted the false sabbath instituted by the Roman Catholic Church. They have cradled this child of the papacy. Very soon all who refuse to worship this idol will be forbidden to buy or sell. The advisability of enacting such a law is now being discussed. But the people of God will enter into no controversy with the world over this matter. They will simply take God's Word for their guide and maintain their allegiance to Him whose commandments they keep. They will obey the words of Jehovah recorded in the thirty-first chapter of Exodus, verses twelve to eighteen . . . (*19LtMs*, Ms 110, 1904, par. 59)

The **Protestants of the United States** will be foremost in stretching their hands across the gulf to grasp the hand of spiritualism; they will reach over the abyss to clasp hands with the Roman power; and under the influence of this threefold union, this country will follow in the steps of Rome in trampling on the rights of conscience. (*GC 588.1*)

The appeal to men's reason aroused them from their passive submission to papal dogmas. Wycliffe now taught the **distinctive doctrines of Protestantism**,—salvation through faith in Christ, and the sole infallibility of the Scriptures. (*GC88* 88.4)