

LutherFacts #15



In his life, Martin Luther often confronted powerful forces arrayed against him. Some of these encounters seem hard to imagine. For example, in 1521, as Pope Leo X was reviewing what to do about Luther's 95 Theses, he issued a proclamation calling Henry VIII of England "Defender of the Faith." He did this because the King had recently published a religious tract attacking Luther's position on indulgences. Looking back over the centuries, the scene is hard to imagine. The King of England, a man feared throughout his realm and Europe, is engaging a German-born monk-turned-professor over a religious matter. And who would one expect to win such an uneven match? The result was far different than many might have expected. First, Luther simply dismissed the King's claims as invalid. Then one year later, he stood before the Diet of Worms to declare "I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience." Luther, not the King, proved to be the powerful one. While initially remaining faithful to the Pope, Henry soon found himself challenging Leo over his need to marry Anne Boleyn, a dispute that eventually led in 1529 to Henry breaking with Rome and, after becoming head of the Church of England, allowing fundamental reforms similar to what Luther had pursued in Germany. In the end, Luther won his fight with an individual overwhelmingly more powerful than himself. Yet in a contest of wills, he prevailed. For this effort, he helped broaden the wider Protestant Reformation.