

# Introduction to Volume 1

TIMOTHY J. WENGERT

On 31 October 1517 a little-known professor of theology at an out-of-the-way, relatively new university in the town of Wittenberg, Saxony, enclosed a copy of ninety-five statements concerning indulgences in a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, primate of the Catholic churches in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.<sup>1</sup> By 1520 that same professor, an Augustinian friar named Martin Luther, had become the world's first living best-selling author while, at the same time, was threatened with excommunication by Pope Leo X (1475–1521). The documents in this first volume of *The Annotated Luther* contain some of the most important documents from this period, beginning with the 95 *Theses* of 1517 and concluding with the tract *The Freedom of a Christian* from 1520. These writings outline Luther's development from those early days to within six months of his dramatic appearance before the imperial diet meeting in Worms in 1521, where he gave his defense for many of the writings contained in this volume.<sup>a</sup> Whatever other differences between Luther and his opponents emerged in later stages of what came to be called the Reformation, these documents,

1. For the most thorough account of Luther's life during this period, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985).

<sup>a</sup> See *Luther at the Diet of Worms* (1521), in LW 32:101–31.

and others that he wrote during this time, surely provided the initial sparks of that remarkable conflagration within the late medieval Western church.

The *95 Theses* quickly became a central icon for the Reformation and the split between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism: an angry friar nailing theses to a church door in Wittenberg (or, in the earliest depiction [see p. 3], writing on the door with a quill, the end of which tickles the pope's nose in Rome). Yet, their origins had nothing to do with their eventual effect on church unity in the West. Instead, if they were indeed posted, they simply represented an attempt by this obscure Augustinian friar, Martin Luther, to gain clarity on a theological issue using the tools appropriate to a professor of theology: provocative theses, posted on church doors (the equivalent of the university bulletin board) in compliance with university regulations and coupled with an invitation to a university debate. Moreover, sending a copy to his archbishop, Albrecht of Mainz (and also to his immediate bishop, Jerome Scultetus [c. 1460–1522], bishop of Brandenburg), also possibly fell within the realm of what a professor was expected to do—especially when commenting on such a volatile topic as indulgences.

Because of modern uncertainty about whether and on what day the *95 Theses* may have been posted, the second document in this volume is of equal importance. The letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz (1490–1545) not only survives in a Swedish archive but also bears the date of 31 October 1517 (the eve of All Saints' Day)—reason enough that ten years later Luther would remember All Saints' Day as the beginning of the affair. More importantly, the letter reveals both what Luther thought were his most important theological arguments and his pastoral heart, as he appeals for indulgence preachers and his archbishop to consider the effect of such preaching on their flocks. Archbishop Albrecht, suspecting heresy, submitted the theses in December to his theological faculty in Mainz and to the papal court. With this, the *processus inhibitorius* (ban on teaching) commenced, meaning that from December 1517 charges of heresy were being formalized.



Elector Frederick II of Saxony's dream in Schweinitz of Luther writing the 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg and knocking off the pope's crown in Rome, from a 100th anniversary publication of the 95 Theses printed in 1617.

Given what later happened, it is easy to forget just how much of an unknown Luther was. His early attempts at publication were modest: a preface to an incomplete version of the mystical tract *Theologia Deutsch* (*German Theology*) and a German translation and exposition of the seven penitential psalms. Other writings from this time, as well as reprints of these works, occurred only *after* he had become a literary star. Yet, what made him a household name was not so much

the *95 Theses*—published in Latin in Leipzig, Nuremberg, and Basel (and probably Wittenberg)—but the German-language equivalent, the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*, published in place of any translation of the *95 Theses* into German for a German audience. This tract, republished over twenty times in the coming months, spread Luther’s message and fame far and wide. It also lacked any direct reference to the limits of papal authority, an important aspect of the *Theses* themselves. Instead, Luther showed here his ability to communicate directly and plainly to a German-speaking audience (which included not only readers but also illiterate listeners as well), reducing complicated theological concepts, such as penance or indulgences, to their simplest terms. Because Luther was already familiar with the first attacks on his theses from the indulgence preacher Johann Tetzel (c. 1460–1519) and Konrad Wimpina (1460–1531), professor at the University of Frankfurt (Oder), this sermon also provides Luther’s earliest responses to his critics.

If the *Sermon* catapulted Luther to celebrity, a document written nearly simultaneously caused barely a ripple at the time but has in the last one hundred years become synonymous with Luther’s theology. At a gathering of German Augustinian friars, meeting in Heidelberg in 1518, Luther defended another set of theological and philosophical theses, in what has become known as the *Heidelberg Disputation*. While the theses themselves were reprinted immediately (copies from Paris and Leiden survive), the explanations to the theological theses were not published until 1530, with a fuller form first appearing in 1545 in the first volume of Luther’s Latin works. (Another portion of these explanations first saw the light of day in 1703, and the explanations to the philosophical theses, not included here, were not published until 1979.) Nevertheless, these terse antithetical statements outline such quintessential, Luther-esque teachings as the distinction between law and gospel, the bondage of the will, justification by faith not works, and, most celebrated today, the theology of the cross. Of course, these themes hardly disappeared from Luther’s later thought, and many of them also appear in Luther’s *Explanations of the 95*

*Theses*, written at the same time but published in the summer of 1518.<sup>b</sup>

Six months later, in October 1518, Luther appeared in Augsburg before the papal legate, Tommaso de Vio (Cardinal Cajetan [1469–1534]). By this time, Luther's *Theses* had become a full-blown case in Rome. The papal court theologian, Sylvester Prierias (Sylvester Mazzolini [c. 1456–1523]), because of his official position as Master of the Sacred Palace and with some reservations, had just published a thoroughgoing refutation, accusing Luther of attacking papal authority. As more of Luther's publications, especially the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* and his *Explanations of the 95 Theses*, became available, the authorities in Rome grew more concerned and deputized Cajetan, already in Augsburg for an imperial diet,<sup>2</sup> to bring Luther to Rome for trial. Through the intervention of Luther's prince, Elector Frederick of Saxony (1463–1525), Cajetan agreed instead to meet with Luther and explain Rome's case against him. Luther's account of this encounter, which lasted from 12 to 14 October, one of the few if only face-to-face meetings between Luther and a direct representative of the pope, forms a crucial source for measuring the growing gap between Luther's theology and his opponents' appraisal of it. Two issues particularly—the authority of the pope and the certainty of forgiveness—came up for debate but resulted in little or no movement on either side. Fearing arrest, Luther left hastily for Wittenberg, but not before having a direct appeal to Pope Leo X posted on the door of the Augsburg Cathedral.<sup>c</sup>

In 1519, the tensions between Luther and his opponents increased—fueled in part by the Leipzig Debate of that summer, where Johann Eck (1486–1543) faced off against both Luther's colleague Andreas Bodenstein from Karlstadt (1486–1541) and Luther himself.<sup>3</sup> But Luther also pursued both his exegetical interests, with the publication of his first commentary on Galatians,<sup>d</sup> and his pastoral goals,

<sup>b</sup> LW 31:77–252.

<sup>c</sup> WA 2:27–33.

<sup>d</sup> LW 27:151–410.

2. An assembly of imperial leaders of the Holy Roman Empire (secular and clerical), convoked by the emperor, which concerned itself with legislation, taxation, and military defense, as well as the airing of grievances, especially against the papacy, in the form of *gravamina*.

3. LW 31:307–25. It seems that the disputants were still treating this as a university debate, somewhat separate from Luther's case in Rome.



A view of sixteenth-century Augsburg, Germany

publishing popular sermons in German on, among other things, confession, penance, marriage, Christ's passion, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, dying, the Lord's Supper, baptism, and usury.<sup>e</sup> Luther viewed three of these—on penance, the Supper, and baptism—as a series; indeed, they contain many of the arguments that he would include in the one important Latin tract of 1520 not included in this volume but scheduled for inclusion in volume 3: *The*

<sup>e</sup> In addition to the four sermons in this volume, see *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (LW 43:15–81); *On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession* (LW 43:83–93); *A Sermon on Preparing to Die*

*Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.<sup>f</sup> Along with the sermon on Christ's passion, which later became a part of his oft-republished *Church Postil* (German: *Kirchenpostil*—interpretation of the appointed Sunday Gospels and Epistles),<sup>g</sup> these four sermons show Luther's deep pastoral concern for proper instruction of the German-speaking public and his ability to wed word and sacrament in his theology.

By 1520, what had begun as a university debate threatened to divide the Western church. Luther's appeal to Pope Leo resulted in the pope's restatement of the very approach to indulgences that Luther had questioned. His consequent appeals to a general council of the church<sup>h</sup> were viewed in Rome, especially by supporters of papal supremacy in all matters of doctrine, as *prima facie* evidence of heresy. Moreover, Luther's opponent in Leipzig, Johann Eck, journeyed to Rome to assist in the preparation of an official bull of excommunication. Meanwhile, Luther himself continued to address charges against him and to provide new fuel for the fire by writing on other church teachings and practice, for which he provided interpretations based on the central premises of his theology. Thus, early in 1520 another interpretation of the Ten Commandments, the *Treatise on Good Works*, appeared in German. It insisted that the commandments embraced all Christians, both attacking the popular medieval notion that those under a vow (monks, nuns, friars, and bishops) were subject to a higher law that included the so-called evangelical counsels of Christ and insisting that the commandments are all fulfilled through faith alone.

(LW 43:95–115); *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage* (LW 44:3–14); *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (LW 31:293–306); *Eine kurze Unterweisung wie man beichten soll* (*A Short Instruction on How One Should Confess*, WA 2:57–65); *Kleiner Sermon von dem Wucher* (*A Short Sermon on Usury*, WA 6:1–8, cf. *Trade and Usury* [1524], 6:231–310); and, from 1518, *Decem praecepta Wittenbergensi praedicata populo* (*The Ten Commandments Preached to the People of Wittenberg*, WA 1:394–521).

<sup>f</sup> LW 36:3–126.

<sup>g</sup> John Lenker, ed., *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols. (Reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

<sup>h</sup> WA 2:34–40 (1518); WA 7:74–90 (1520).



The title page of *Exsurge Domini*, the papal bull threatening Luther with excommunication, promulgated in Rome in 1520.

As hopes for a settlement of the conflict dimmed, Luther appealed in his German *Address to the Christian Nobility* for the Christian nobility of the empire to take action. This tract, imitating the style of official imperial *gravamina* (grievances) against Rome, called upon the princes to exercise their authority as Christians to correct abuses in the church and society. This early foray into the political realm demonstrated how Luther now imagined a political scene in which the pope no longer held sway over both church and empire.

Then, in late August 1520, a final attempt was made to prevent Luther's condemnation in Rome. Another papal legate, Karl von Miltitz (c. 1490–1529), persuaded the leaders of Luther's Augustinian order in Germany, Johann von Staupitz (c. 1460–1524) and Wenzeslaus Linck (1483–1547), to convince Luther to write an appeal to Leo X as a demonstration of Luther's respect for and obedience to the pope. At the same time, Luther penned a tract that summarized the heart of his teaching, titled *The Freedom of a Christian*, published in both German and Latin versions and prefaced (at least in all the Latin and some German versions) by the letter to Leo. As

these were appearing, however, the official bull of excommunication, *Exsurge Domini*, was being posted throughout German lands, giving Luther sixty days to recant. Instead, on 10 December 1520 Luther burned the bull (and a copy of canon law) outside the Elster Gate in Wittenberg in protest.<sup>4</sup>

4. See *Why the Books of the Pope and His Disciples Were Burned by Doctor Martin Luther* (1520), in LW 31:379–95; and *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles Condemned by the Most Recent Bull of Leo X* (1521), in LW 32:3–99. Canon law is a term designating various published collections of church law, the earliest coming from the twelfth century.

## THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE REFORMATION

Over the past century in Luther research, particular attention has been paid to Luther's early lectures and marginal notations in an attempt to reconstruct the development of his theology and, often, to search for his Reformation "breakthrough."<sup>i</sup> In fact, however, Luther's contemporaries knew nothing about this earliest work and learned of him and his ideas only through what he published beginning in 1517. Thus, the tracts, sermons, and theses contained in this volume reflect best the first impressions of Luther's theology gained not only by his initial readers but also readers down through the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

These documents display a Luther grounded in late medieval theology and its peculiar issues, trained in the latest techniques of Renaissance, humanist method, and, most especially, showing sensitivity toward the pastoral consequences for theological positions. Luther was trained at the University of Erfurt in late medieval Nominalism.<sup>6</sup> In preparation for his ordination, he worked through Gabriel Biel's (c. 1420–1495) tome on the sacrament and doubtless used Biel's commentary on the *Sentences* during his own lectures on the same in 1509.<sup>7</sup> Luther's writings reflect a deep familiarity with this tradition, by far the most dominant in late medieval central Europe, especially in the *95 Theses*, the

<sup>i</sup> See, among others, Karl Holl, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre in Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Frage der Heilsgewißheit," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1: *Luther* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1921), 91–130; Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970); Helmar Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 1984); Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). Even the Roman Catholic scholar, Heinrich Denifle, *Luther and Lutherdom from Original Sources*, trans. Raymond Volz (Somerset, Ohio: Torch Press, 1917), used the newly discovered Romans lectures of 1515–1516 extensively.

5. Luther's earliest lectures on the Bible (Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews), delivered from 1513 to 1518, were not published until the end of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. In fact, of the documents in this volume, all but the *Address to Christian Nobility*, which was never translated into Latin, and the *Treatise on Good Works* are contained in the first two volumes of Luther's Latin works, published in Wittenberg in 1545 and 1546. The *Address* and *Treatise* were printed in the first volume of Luther's German works published in Jena in 1555.

6. Nominalism or the *via moderna* (modern way), the name for the second major philosophical and theological school of medieval Scholasticism and associated with William of Occam (c. 1287–1347), argued (against the "Realists" or *via antiqua*, associated with Thomas Aquinas [1225–1274]) that each entity was associated with its own individual essence. Thus, categories that grouped things together were simply "names" (Latin: *nomina*) and not realities in themselves. Thinkers like Occam or, later, Gabriel Biel, also held to an understanding of justification before God that depended far more on meritorious works performed by individuals and given reward out of the goodness of God's heart.

7. The *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (c. 1096–1160) were a collation of sayings of the church fathers structured into four books. To receive the doctorate in theology, late medieval candidates had to lecture on this book. As a result, we have commentaries on the *Sentences* by

Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308), William of Occam, and Gabriel Biel, among others. Luther's marginal notes in his copy of the *Sentences* are printed in WA 9:28–94.

*Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* and the *Heidelberg Disputation*, where he directly attacks several aspects of medieval Scholasticism and its dependence on Aristotelian philosophy. For example, in the Heidelberg Disputation Luther attacks the common slogan, “To those who do what is in them, God will not deny grace,” replacing it with a far stricter, Augustinian approach to the bondage of the will. For Luther, grace can never be earned but only bestowed as pure gift.

Luther's common cause with Renaissance humanism also appears in several aspects of his work from this period. Both the *95 Theses* and *The Freedom of a Christian* demonstrate his familiarity with and use of a variety of rhetorical techniques and organizational patterns. The first four theses of the *95 Theses* demonstrate a close reading of Erasmus of Rotterdam's (1466–1536) *Annotations on the New Testament*, published the preceding year. His early publication on the penitential psalms showed his indebtedness to the first great Christian Hebraist of the Renaissance, Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522). Even Luther's employment of a variety of literary genres—from theses to sermons to *gravamina* to persuasive tracts—shows a sensitivity held in common with many of his contemporaries. His willingness to return to the early sources (*ad fontes!*) and to attribute to them higher authority than to later, especially Scholastic, arguments is a further mark of humanism's influence and is especially pronounced in the *Proceedings at Augsburg*. What Luther discovered in the Scriptures and the church fathers, however, was not the Christian moral philosophy that a thinker like Erasmus found there but, quite to the contrary, a single-minded trust in God's creative and redeeming Word. This afforded Luther a certain freedom of argumentation that allowed him to reject much of late medieval theology in favor of what he understood as the central message of Scripture, witnessed to not only by the early church but also by later thinkers (such as Bernard of Clairvaux [1090–1153], Johannes Tauler [c. 1300–1361], and the anonymous *German Theology*).

But running through all of these works from this period was also Luther's particular pastoral passion. His complaints about bad preaching and the effect on the listeners find clear expression in the *95 Theses*, the *Address to Christian Nobility*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*. His sermons from 1519 offer Luther's own counterpoint, as he attempted to wean his hearers away from much of late medieval theology and piety and to express what he viewed as a radically biblical perspective of the Christian life and faith. The same pastoral perspective dominated his *Treatise on Good Works*, where he reframes the Christian life of all the baptized under the Ten Commandments and within faith in God's mercy. In all the tracts from 1520, Luther worked to erase the late medieval distinction between secular Christians (who in a "state of grace" may fulfill the commandments) and Christians under a vow (who in a "state of perfection" may fulfill also the counsels of Christ, especially vowing perpetual poverty, chastity, and obedience to their superiors). Faith in the gospel of God's unconditional mercy frees Christians to love their neighbor in all of life's callings—a love that includes special care for and concern about the poor, a note already struck in the *95 Theses* and reiterated throughout Luther's career, but here especially in the *Treatise on Good Works*, the *Address to Christian Nobility*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*.

