1

Luther's Life and Work

Most likely Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483. Luther's colleague Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) was among those who late made efforts to date his birth to 1484, since it was believed that a conjunction of planets in that year pointed to the beginning of an important new religious development. It is certain, however, that Luther was born in Eisleben, a small village on the edge of the Harz Mountains, near the geographic center of present-day Germany. It is also certain that the day after his birth he was baptized in the parish church of St. Peter and Paul and given the name of the patron of that day, Martin of Tours (316–397). He remained only a few months in Eisleben, where his family had moved from the village of Möhra, before they finally settled in nearby Mansfeld.

Childhood and Education

Luther always stressed that he had humble origins: "I am the son of peasants. My great grandfather, grandfather and father were all simple farmers."[1] But this was far from being true. The family from

which his father, Hans Luder, came was one of the well-to-do rural families in Möhra.[2] In the area around Möhra there was some copper mining in which the Luder family was involved. But the grade of the ore was rather poor, so Hans Luder moved to Eisenach where he continued to mine, and then to Mansfeld. In Eisenach Hans Luder married Margarethe Lindemann. This marriage of a peasant with the daughter of a prosperous citizen was not a violation of the social stratification that prevailed in the late Middle Ages, but was quite intentional, since some members of the Lüdemann family were also miners It was most likely on suggestion of the Lüdemann family that Hans Luder moved to the county of Mansfeld in 1483. When he arrived there he was not without means, and became overseer and a co-owner of a copper mine, and after some years of several more. In 1491 Martin Luther's father was numbered among the "four lords" of Mansfeld who represented the citizens and worked with the city council. In contrast to his ancestors, therefore, he had achieved a considerable level of success. Hence one should not conclude that Luther grew up in poverty when he said of his parents in 1533, "In his youth my father was a poor miner. My mother carried all her wood on her back. It was in this way that they brought us up."[3] This was far from the truth. Prior to 1500 Martin established a lifelong friendship with two sons of the most prosperous overseers of smelters.[4] They were members of the same social group.

However, his parents were naturally very frugal. Only in this way were they able to achieve such prosperity. Their upbringing of their children, which Luther experienced as oldest or perhaps second

1. Luther, "Tischrede," no. 6250 (undated), in *WA TR* 5:558.13–14.
2. Cf. for the following "Die Familie Luder in Möhra und Mansfeld," in *Fundsache Luther. Archäologen auf den Spuren des Reformators*, ed. Harald Meller (Stuttgart: Konrad Theiss, 2008), 78–85.
3. Luther, "Table Talk," no. 2888a (1533), in *LW* 54:178.
4. So Andreas Stahl, "Neue Erkenntnisse zur Biographie Martin Luthers," in Meller, *Fundsache Luther,* 91.

oldest son, was equally strict. For the father it was clear that the son should achieve an even higher standard of living than the parents. And to achieve this he needed a good education. Therefore between 1491 and 1501 Luther attended consecutively the Latin schools in Mansfeld, Magdeburg, and Eisenach. He had no good memories of the school in Mansfeld, which he compared to a "prison" and "hell" and where he learned very little, despite the many whippings and his fear of the teachers.[5] The school in Magdeburg, on the other hand, appears not to have been as bad. One learned there the Latin of the medieval period and Christian hymns. If the students were caught speaking German while school was in session they were beaten. Shortly before Easter 1497, Luther's father decided to send his son along with a friend to Magdeburg, since a school was run there by the Brothers of the Common Life, which enjoyed a good reputation. However, this school did not particularly impress Luther, either.

After only a year Martin was brought back to Mansfeld and from there was sent to Eisenach, where several relatives of the family lived. Martin was enrolled there in the community school of St. George. Additionally, he sang in the boys' choir and collected contributions for it from the residents of the town, as did the other boys. It was through this activity that he came into contact with the Schalbe family and their active religious life. This family had given significant bequests to the small Franciscan monastery at the foot of the Wartburg castle. Luther had the opportunity to eat regularly with the family. In this connection, one must also mention the Cotta family, who were related to the Schalbes. Both families were well off and were represented in the city council. Through the Cotta family Luther learned to appreciate good music and was exposed to a good family life, which he still spoke of years later. Another significant

5. Cf. Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: Der Mann und das Werk* (Munich: List, 1982), 42; and Luther, *In epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas Commentarius* (1535), in *WA* 40 I:531.24–25.

influence on Luther during this period was the vicar at St. Mary's, Johannes Braun, who was to become a fatherly friend to him long beyond his stay in Eisenach. The years he spent in Eisenach were the happiest of his youth and in 1530 he still referred to it as his "dear city."[6] It was here that the shy boy was transformed into a happy young man. After three years, that is, at age eighteen, it was time for him to begin university studies. Only two cities were considered: Leipzig, which was geographically closer, and Erfurt, which was more progressive. Luther's father decided upon Erfurt, since he did not want to save money by sending his son to the wrong place.

Erfurt was at the time one of the three or four largest cities in Germany. It lay at the intersection of major transportation routes and its economy was booming. In 1483 the cathedral in Erfurt received a new organ, which was one of the most famous in Germany and was comparable to that of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Twelve different religious orders influenced the life of the church in Erfurt, and there was a great veneration of relics to be found there. Erfurt therefore proudly called itself "little Rome." It had well over ten thousand residents and was the largest city that Luther ever lived in for any length of time.

In the summer semester of 1501, Luther began his basic studies in the arts at the University of Erfurt. The program consisted of the so-called trivium of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, required for the bachelor's degree, and the quadrivium of arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music, required for the master of arts degree. The core of the trivium was dialectic, that is, logic, while the quadrivium focused mostly on mathematics. This study normally lasted four years and was characterized by rigorous memorization and recitation,

6. Luther, *Eine Predigt, wie man Kinder zu Schulen halten solle*, in *WA* 30 II:576.13.

which means that today's "academic freedom" did not exist at that time.

Luther lived in a student dormitory that enjoyed a good reputation despite the fact that it was known commonly at the *Biertasche* ("beer bag"). Residents were required to rise at 4 a.m. and to be in bed by 8 p.m. The clothing was uniform and the meals prescribed. Within the academic program itself one had to complete a certain plan of studies, at the end of which the master's examination was taken. Even regular attendance of worship services was required. Nevertheless, Luther, like the other students, managed to enjoy himself and did not neglect his social life. One of his fellow students, the humanist Crotus Rubeanus (ca. 1480–ca. 1545), later said of Luther, "You were once the musician and learned philosopher of our company."[7] Luther, however, did not waste his time and completed the trivium with his bachelor's examinations in the autumn of 1502. Afterward he devoted himself to the scientific, metaphysical, and ethical writings of Aristotle and studied the disciplines of the quadrivium. On January 7, 1505, the earliest possible date, he took the master's examinations and was second best of seventeen successful candidates. Luther recalled later with pleasure the graduation festivities with all the accompanying academic ceremonies. Luther's father was of course greatly pleased with the good performance of his son and addressed him thereafter with the respectful and formal German *Ihr* rather than the informal *Du*. Although Luther later distanced himself somewhat from the value of a university education, he continued to take pleasure in the Latin classics.

After the completion of his master's degree Luther was required to teach for two years in the faculty of arts. He was also allowed to use this time to study in one of the three higher faculties of medicine,

7. Cited in Otto Scheel, *Martin Luther: Vom Katholizismus zur Reformation,* vol. 1 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1917), 296, n. 66, from a letter written in Bamberg in April 1520.

theology, or law. Erfurt was not at all known for medicine, and theology didn't fit into the plans of Luther's father. Hence only law remained—an option that also held the promise of a successful career either at a princely court or in the mining industry. Luther's father had even already found a bride for his son from an affluent family and had bought his legal books for him. Thus Luther began lecturing on April 24, 1505 and started his study of law on May 20. A month later he returned to Mansfeld and remained there for a week with his parents.

During his return journey on July 2nd, a very severe thunderstorm surprised him a few hours outside of Erfurt, near the small town of Stotternheim. A bolt of lightning struck very near to him and the jolt threw him to the ground. In panic and fear of death he cried out, "Help me Saint Anne! I will become a monk!"[8] For Luther the study of law was thereby over. Luther was well familiar with St. Anne, the "grandmother" of Jesus, who was one of the most venerated saints of the late Middle Ages and the patron saint of miners. Just why Luther made good on his vow we may never precisely understand. One has here only hints, such as the fact that from the very beginning he was never particularly enthusiastic about the study of law, that he was very shaken by the sudden death of a close friend in 1505, or that he had already had positive experiences with the theological writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and William Occam (ca. 1285–1349). The theory that the psychological confrontation with his father played a role is likely unfounded since this conflict arose in earnest only after Luther's decision to become a monk. Still there might be some truth to the idea that a disagreement with his father contributed to his decision. Luther was twenty-two years old and therefore old enough to get married. His father, who planned the

8. Luther, "Tischrede," no. 4707 (1539), in *WA TR* 4:440.9–10.

career of his son, had perhaps summoned him to Mansfeld to inform him that a suitable bride had been found. Years later he remembered in a letter to his father, "Your intention was even to tie me down through an honorable and rich marriage."[9] But all of this is conjecture.

Speaking in 1539, Luther said,

> Afterward I regretted having made the vow and many tried to dissuade me from it. I remained by my vow, however, and invited many good friends on the day of Alexius (July 16) to a farewell party since on the next day they would bring me to the monastery. As they sought to prevent me, however, I said: "Today you see me but never again!" Then they accompanied me with tears in their eyes. My father was very angry because of the vow but I remained firm in my decision and never considered leaving the monastery.[10]

A serious conflict arose between Luther and his father, who had an entirely different life in mind for his son. He wrote him an angry letter in which he once again addressed him with the informal *Du*. In some ways Hans Luder was more "modern" in his thinking than his son. He was the modern success-oriented person for whom the family's upward movement in society was more important than the greatest religious sacrifice that one could bring to God. Although he gladly welcomed priests and members of religious orders into his home, he did not feel obligated to them. Once, as a priest sought to convince him to give a special donation to the church, he answered, "I have many children. I will leave it to them since they need it more."[11] The son, on the other hand, saw the religious life as a goal worthy of striving for, even though monasticism had already lost

9. Martin Luther, in his dedicatory letter to his father (Nov. 21, 1521) of his writing on monastic vows, in *WA* 8:573.24.
10. Martin Luther, *WA TR* 4:440.11–17.
11. According to Martin Luther, commenting on Matt. 21:12, *Matth. 18–24 in Predigten ausgelegt (1537–40),* in *WA* 47:379.9–10.

much of its former prestige and had become increasingly the object of disdain and ridicule.

Luther went against all reason and the warnings of his friends and father and, choosing the way out of the world, entered the monastery. In Erfurt alone he had the choice between six different monasteries. From among these Luther decided to enter the monastery of the Augustinian Eremites. The monastery operated a theological school and belonged to the reform-minded branch of this order of mendicants. This means that the rules of monastic life were taken there especially seriously and were strictly observed. Of all his books, Luther took with him into the monastery only the works of the Latin poets Plautus and Virgil.

After about six weeks Luther began his novitiate. He was assigned a cell, clothed in the monastic garb, had his head tonsured so that only a small circle of hair remained, and had to apply himself to physical labor. This included not only the cleaning of the monastery but also begging for donations from the residents of the city, which was customary at that time. The life of the Augustinian Eremite was strictly regulated. Luther, for instance, had to walk with his head bowed and his eyes directed toward the ground and was only allowed to drink something during meal times. Of course he was also given a Latin Bible, the text of which he soon learned so well that he could find immediately any reference.

Luther fulfilled the requirements of his novitiate to the full satisfaction of his superiors. After the first year it was unanimously decided that he be allowed to make his profession. Shortly thereafter he was informed that he was to become a priest. In preparation for this office he had to learn the detailed explanations of the canon of the Mass by the Tübingen theology professor Gabriel Biel (1410–1495). Biel, the last important representative of Occamism, influenced him greatly.[12] On April 4, 1507 Luther was consecrated a priest in the

cathedral of Erfurt. On May 2nd he celebrated his first Mass in the monastery church, to which he invited his father at the suggestion of his superiors. Surprisingly, Hans Luder accepted the invitation and appeared in Erfurt in the company of twenty friends on horseback, most likely with the intention of impressing the monks. He also donated twenty gulden to the monastery kitchen to pay for the guests. This was quite a large amount, since a university professor at Wittenberg only received eighty gulden a year as salary.[13] At the reception following the Mass a conversation took place between Luther and his father that revealed that the older Luther still disagreed with his son's decision. He reminded him of the honor that a son owes his parents and argued in regard to the "appearance" at Stotternheim, "Just so it wasn't a phantom you saw!"[14]

Martin, however, remained firm in his commitment. He studied next the general curriculum of his order and then theology at the University of Erfurt. In autumn of 1508 he was suddenly sent to Wittenberg to teach moral philosophy on the faculty of arts there. The University of Wittenberg was founded in 1502 by the elector Frederick the Wise (1463–1525). The town itself, as Luther commented in 1532, lay on the edge of civilization: if one would go only a short step farther, one would be in the midst of barbarism. Luther was not especially happy about his new assignment and was glad that after a short year there he was allowed to return to Erfurt. In the fall of 1509 he had completed his theological studies, earning him the rank of a *sententiarius*, which meant that he was now qualified to interpret the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (ca. 1100–1160), the most important theological textbook of the Middle Ages. Before he could

12. William Occam maintained that God's will is the cause of all things and its own rule. He also claimed that universal ideas have no foundation in reality but only individual things exist.
13. According to Helmar Junghans, "Neue Erkenntnisse und neue Fragen zu Martin Luthers Leben und Umwelt," in Meller, *Fundsache Luther,* 144.
14. Luther, "Table Talk," no. 3556a (1537), in *LW* 54:234.

hold his first lecture, however, he was called back to Wittenberg. It was therefore in Wittenberg that he lectured on the *Sentences* until 1510.

In the meantime a conflict had developed within his order between the rigorists and those advocating a more conventional praxis. On account of this conflict, the superior of the German rigorist Augustinian community, Johann von Staupitz (ca. 1465–1524), sent Luther to Rome together with an Augustinian monk from Nuremberg in order to have the problem settled there. This was the longest journey that Luther had ever undertaken or would ever undertake and the only one that would take him into a foreign country. The journey in general left a great impression upon him, especially what he saw in Italy. He did not see Rome through the eyes of a tourist but came with the intention of taking full advantage of the city's treasure of relics and storehouse of grace. It was only later that the worldliness of the priests and the opulence of the cardinals' palaces left a negative impression on him. In 1510, however, he was very much impressed by the treasures of relics and the many holy sites. He took his assignment seriously and celebrated Mass in all the important churches of the city.

Shortly after his return from Rome Luther was transferred once again to Wittenberg, probably in September 1511. Von Staupitz had so much to do with the administration of the Augustinian Order that he needed to give up his position as professor of biblical interpretation. In order that the order would not lose this position, he wanted Luther to study toward a theological doctorate, which Luther very much opposed with many different arguments, among them his ill health and his inadequacy. But the will of von Staupitz, his superior, prevailed. Luther started his studies leading to a doctor of theology, and his graduation ceremony soon took place on October 18 and 19, 1512. In his doctoral oath Luther not only committed

himself to obedience to the church but also to theological truth, which latter commitment he often referred to in the following years. Frederick the Wise was so interested in seeing his new university expand that on instigation of von Staupitz he paid the academic fees of fifty gulden, required for the doctoral degree, for the theologian of the mendicant order.

From Augustinian Professor to Reformer of the Church

After the completion of his doctorate Luther was appointed professor of biblical exegesis on the theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg, a position that he held until his death. Despite his academic career Luther found no rest in his spiritual life. He sensed the wrath of God more keenly than most others of his time. Even the study of the Bible did not help him in this regard, for there he read only of the righteousness of God. How could he, however, as a person turned in upon himself, stand up before divine righteousness? The church answered that this was done in that one obtained the grace of God through the sacraments. But the most important sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, was of no help to him here since the preconditions of its worthy reception were humility and repentance. Luther was never certain whether he was repentant enough and whether he had confessed everything that he ought, regardless of how frequently he confessed—and he often went to confession several times a day. Hence he was unable to experience the peace that the sacraments were supposed to bring. Even good works were of no help to him. He recognized clearly the egoism that was concealed within the performance of good works. One did not perform such works freely or out of gratitude toward God, but rather in order to win God's favor. Even the figure of Christ brought no peace to him, since he had learned to know him as judge but not as savior. This is no surprise. When one enters today the sacristy of St. Mary's

in Wittenberg, the parish church in which Luther usually preached, one sees a stone plaque worn by the elements hanging on the wall and depicting Christ with "a sharp, two-edged sword" issuing from his mouth (Rev. 1:16). The faithful encountered Christ as the stern judge.

Luther, however, was not left alone in his doubt and spiritual turmoil. Von Staupitz took Luther under his arm. In Luther's struggles von Staupitz saw something useful, for without them he surmised Luther would probably have become a proud and perhaps even arrogant academician. As Luther continually brought the problem of his sinfulness before his confessor, however, von Staupitz admonished him that he had never committed any "real" sins and that he should not bother Christ with trivia. He also helped him positively with his problems by explaining that genuine repentance begins with the love of righteousness and of God, and that that which scholastic theology views as the last stage of repentance, namely God's love, is really its beginning. Repentance does not lead to a righteous and loving God but rather proceeds from this God. Similarly, von Staupitz sought to explain to him how he should think of the question of predestination. One must begin by contemplating the wounds of Christ, inflicted upon him for our sake, and not with the question of whether one has been elected or rejected. With this starting point the debate about predestination can be positively settled. In 1520, von Staupitz gave up his office as superior general of the Augustinian order and went to Salzburg to become the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of St. Peter. In later years Luther continued to express his gratefulness to von Staupitz, but also regretted that this man who had been so influential upon him remained with his pre-Reformation faith and labeled Luther's followers as heretics.

The decisive breakthrough that lead to Luther's Reformation-oriented thought came in the so-called tower experience, in which it became clear to Luther through his reading of Rom. 1:17 that the righteousness of God is not that righteousness with which God judges us, but that which he attributes to us and that carries weight before him. Luther often stressed, however, that he did not receive his theology through some moment of enlightenment but had to work on it throughout his life. The real turning point for the Reformation, however, is without doubt to be attributed to the year 1518, for it was then that Luther came to the conclusion that the word of God alone is the only means of grace and that it can only be accepted through faith. The related fourfold *alone*, namely, "Scripture alone," "grace alone," "faith alone," and "Christ alone" (*sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*) is essentially the key insight behind the Reformation. In 1518, therefore, the Reformation had reached a point of no turning back.

In 1513 Luther held his first lectures in biblical exegesis over the Psalms. He sought to make them comprehensible by relating them to Christ. After he completed his lectures on the Psalms in 1515 he came to his second major lecture series in 1515–1516, over Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Already here his Reformation insight can be seen when, for example, he says, "For the righteousness of God is the cause of salvation. And here again, by the righteousness of God we must not understand the righteousness by which He is righteous in Himself but the righteousness by which we are made righteous by God. This happens through faith in the Gospel."[15] Following his lectures on the Epistle to the Romans, Luther held lectures on the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Hebrews.

15. Luther in his *Lectures on Romans*, in *LW* 25:151, in his comments on Rom. 1:17.

Theologically Luther was influenced during this period by the mysticism of the Middle Ages, for instance by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who was highly respected within his order, or by the *Theologia Deutsch* (German theology), an anonymous mystical writing of the fifteenth century that Luther edited twice for publication and for which he wrote a foreword in 1518. He also valued the insights of Johannes Tauler, the fourteenth-century Dominican mystic.

Within his order Luther gained increasing recognition. In the autumn of 1511 he was made preacher of his monastery and in 1514 was additionally called to be preacher at St. Mary's, the parish church of Wittenberg. In 1512 he was made vice prior of his monastery and dean of its general program of studies. Finally, in 1515 he was named district supervisor of the ten or eleven monasteries of his order in Saxony.

Luther took all these various responsibilities very seriously. The reform of the universities was also important to him. Thus, he wrote in the spring of 1517 to Johann Lang in Erfurt, his fellow Augustinian and friend,

> Our theology and St. Augustine are progressing well, and with God's help rule at our University. Aristotle is gradually falling from his throne, and his final doom is only a matter of time. It is amazing how the lectures on the Sentences are disdained. Indeed no one can expect to have any students if he does not want to teach this theology, that is, lecture on the Bible or on St. Augustine or another teacher of ecclesiastical eminence.[16]

In the matter of university reform Luther was supported by the private secretary and court preacher of Elector Frederick the Wise, George Burkhardt (1484–1545), who, because he came from the town of Spalt near Nuremberg, named himself *Spalatin*. Especially

16. Luther, "Letter to John Lang. Wittenberg, May 18, 1517" in *LW* 48:41–42.

significant is the fact that Spalatin won the elector over to Luther's side. Through his efforts toward university reform and through Spalatin, Luther also came into contact with humanism, which he especially valued because of its emphasis upon the biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew.

In his September 1517 disputation "On Scholastic Theology," Luther parted ways decisively with Aristotle. Of greater historical importance, however, is October 31, 1517, the day before All Saints, on which Luther tacked his famous 95 theses to the north door of the castle church in Wittenberg. This church door was, so to speak, the bulletin board of the university on which notices were normally placed. Luther, who likely wrote out his theses by hand, challenged learned persons from Wittenberg and other locations to an academic debate over the value of indulgences. Those who could not come were asked to respond in writing.

On the same day Luther sent a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, in which he asked him to admonish Tetzel to stop preaching indulgences and to revoke his own instructions concerning indulgences. Along with the letter, Luther included a copy of his 95 theses so that Albrecht could see how dubious was his belief in indulgences, which traditionally belonged to the sacrament of penance. Since the eleventh century the so-called works of penance were initiated immediately following the spoken absolution and were understood as a means to reduce temporal punishment, including the punishments of purgatory. Theologically, indulgences were explained to be efficacious on the basis of the excess good works of Christ and the saints who had done more than was necessary for their own salvation. The church, as the administrator of this treasure, understood itself as being able to distribute these excess merits among the penitent faithful.

The income from the sale of letters of indulgence, that is, the certificates that verified that a specific number of years of penance in purgatory had been canceled, was increasingly applied to cultural and social projects. Hence the elector Frederick made use of indulgence money to support his university and to build a bridge over the River Elbe. What Albrecht of Mainz had in mind, however, was particularly questionable from a moral point of view. He was not only archbishop of Magdeburg and administrator of the bishopric of Halberstadt, but he had also become the archbishop of Mainz, thereby gaining the title and status of an elector and a cardinal. Such amassing of multiple offices, however, was forbidden by ecclesiastical law. For this reason Albrecht had to acquire the appropriate dispensation from Pope Leo X (1475–1521, pope: 1513–21) and pay the normal fees required to hold these additional positions. Since he was not able to raise from his own resources the enormous sum of money required for the deal—in today's money it would be one million US dollars—he borrowed the money from the rich merchant family of the Fuggers in Augsburg. In order to be able to pay back this money the pope allowed him to sell indulgences in his own territories. Half of the money raised was to be used for the building of St. Peter's in Rome; however, because Pope Leo X was himself continuously in financial difficulty, a portion of this money came to him personally. The other half was immediately collected, as it came in, by a representative of the Fuggers and went toward paying off the debt of the Archbishop.

Albrecht was able to acquire the services of Johann Tetzel (ca. 1465–1519), an experienced indulgence preacher, for this work. Tetzel, a Dominican friar, had already been active in such work for more than a decade. Tetzel was not modest with his promises and boasted that he has already brought salvation to more souls with his indulgences than had St. Peter with his preaching. Frederick the Wise forbid Tetzel from setting a foot on his territory because

he didn't want the money of his subjects to flow into other lands. Tetzel, however, set up his tent precisely on the border of electoral Saxony so that many residents of Wittenberg were able to purchase indulgences from him. With their letters of indulgence in hand, they then came to Luther asking him for absolution on the basis of their certificates, without it being obvious that there was any real repentance of sins. Luther did not protest against the indulgences until he saw Albrecht's letter that promised the full forgiveness of all sins through the purchase of the indulgences. It was not necessary to show remorse or to confess any article of faith; one could even purchase indulgences for the dead.

As a responsible teacher of the church Luther felt obligated to intervene. This was then the occasion for the formulation of the 95 theses. In his first thesis, he explained what repentance actually ought to be, namely, not a onetime act but a life-long attitude toward God. Luther additionally contended that penance cannot be limited to that of a sacramental kind. Also, the pope is not able to forgive sins, but rather only to declare that they have been forgiven by God. Of course, it was the furthest thing from Luther's mind to attack the pope, since he believed at the time that the pope would do the right thing if he were just aware of what was actually taking place, a belief he continued to hold for some time. Because the anticipated disputation never took place and Archbishop Albrecht didn't show any sign of response, Luther sent copies of the theses to several influential persons. To his great surprise the theses immediately appeared in printed form and were spread rapidly over all of Germany, "as if the angels themselves were the messengers," as Friedrich Myconius, a contemporary of Luther, wrote.[17] In gratitude

17. Friedrich Myconius, *Geschichte der Reformation [1517–1542],* ed. Otto Clemen (Leipzig: Voigtländer's Quellenbücher, 1914), 22.

for the theses, the great artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) even sent Luther a collection of wood engravings and copper etchings.

Tetzel, however, was convinced that the heretic Luther would be burnt within three weeks and his ashes sent to heaven in a bathing cap. To Luther's disappointment, a professor of theology from the University of Ingolstadt, Johann Eck (1486–1543), attacked him and characterized Luther as a heretic and a Hussite. In order to produce something more useful on the topic for the German people than his Latin theses, in 1518 Luther wrote his "Sermon on Indulgences and Grace." Within only a few months, more than twenty thousand copies of the sermon were printed in twenty editions—an amount unheard of at that time.

From the Heidelberg Disputation to the Diet of Worms

In the same year of 1518, a disputation was held at the general assembly of the Augustinians in Heidelberg that Luther, as a district supervisor, was obligated to attend. In the meantime Albrecht had already informed the Roman Curia—the administrative apparatus of the Holy See and the central governing body through which the Roman pontiff conducts the business of the Church—of Luther's activity, and the Dominicans had also denounced him in Rome. The journey to Heidelberg was therefore not without danger. The Augustinians, however, stood by their fellow member and gave him the honor of presiding over the disputation. He used this opportunity to portray his theology of the cross as opposed to a theology of glory.

In Rome the desire was to quiet this "monastic squabble" with Luther as quickly and discretely as possible by summoning him to Rome. Even Tetzel had been brought forward against Luther and laid out his position in 106 theses on the occasion of his licentiate examination. Here he defended his jingle: "As soon as the coin in the offering box rings the soul out of purgatory springs."[18] Although

the Dominicans promoted Tetzel to a doctorate in Rome, the Roman authorities recognized that he went too far. The papal diplomat Karl von Miltitz (ca. 1490–1529) gave Tetzel a dressing down by threatening to bring charges against him in Rome because of his immoral lifestyle and his questionable financial practices. For Tetzel this was such a severe blow that he retreated to his cell in the Dominican monastery in Leipzig, where he died a broken man in 1519. Luther nevertheless felt sympathy for Tetzel, and wrote him a consoling letter before the latter's death in which he encouraged him "to be of good cheer and not to fear my memory . . . [and not to become] a victim of his conscience and of the pope's indignation."[19] We see here, as in other instances, that Luther was always at heart a pastor, even to people with whom he seriously disagreed with theologically.

The elector Frederick arranged that Luther not have to travel to Rome but that he receive a hearing at the conclusion of the Diet of Augsburg in 1518 before the papal legate Cardinal Cajetan (1469–1534). As a Dominican it was clear to Cajetan what his decision would be. He was nevertheless friendly to Luther but could not persuade him to back down from his position. Upon the advice of friends Luther finally fled Augsburg by night through a small gate in the city wall and made his way by horseback to Coburg, the southernmost point of electoral Saxony. In the meantime, Rome sought to find other means by which the matter could be laid to rest. Karl von Miltitz was to convince the elector to exert his influence upon Luther. If he was successful Elector Frederick was to receive the golden rose of the pope and his two illegitimate children would be declared legitimate. When he was unable to achieve anything, Miltitz sought to negotiate with Luther. It was even relayed to the elector

18. Cited in Nikolaus Paulus, *Johann Tetzel, der Ablaßprediger* (Mainz: Franz Kirchheim, 1899), 139.
19. Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" (1545), in *LW* 34:335–36.

that someone from his inner circle, with the hint that Luther was intended, would be named to cardinal. Luther, however, would not budge. He would only promise not to write anything further, on the condition that his opponents also remain quiet. The silence on the side of Luther's opponents, however, did not last long, and so Luther also once again took up the pen. In 1519 he authored no less than forty-two writings, ranging from sermons to an exposition of the Lord's Prayer and the first volume of his commentary on the Psalms.

In the same year the well-known disputation with Johann Eck took place in Leipzig, in which Luther's collaborator Andreas Carlstadt (1486–1541) initially argued Luther's position. Eck saw himself as the victor inasmuch as he was able to bring Luther to concede that even councils could err. Afterward it was felt that other universities should decide who was right. The Sorbonne University in Paris demanded so much money for such a verdict that even Duke George of Saxony (1471–1539), in whose territory Leipzig was located, could not consider to pay it, and Erfurt did not wish to venture an opinion. Many humanists came to the aid of Luther, but the theologians of the Universities of Cologne and Louvain declared Luther a heretic. This, however, did not particularly trouble Luther, since these same faculties has already condemned the humanist Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) for seeking to rescue the Hebrew language and its literature from being completely forgotten.

In 1520 Luther's most significant Reformation writings appeared: *Of Good Works, To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Even Duke George of Saxony, an outspoken opponent of the Reformation, wrote to Rome concerning Luther's *To the Christian Nobility* that "although not everything in this book is wrong it is not necessary that it come to the light of day since it is not necessary that a scandal arises. . . . If everyone remains quiet then eventually

even the stones will speak."[20] In this writing Luther characterized the so-called Donation of Constantine as a forgery. This document, which presumably dates back to around 800, claims that the emperor Constantine, upon his conversion to the Christian faith, ceded the Western half of his empire to Pope Sylvester I (pope: 314–335) and thereafter took up residence in Constantinople, present-day Istanbul. Luther contended that the pope could never be the successor of the Roman emperor. The pope should not exercise secular authority, but rather be the most learned among Bible scholars and should concern himself with such things that have to do with faith and the holy life of the Christian. Luther went on to say that the entire church, however, was in need of reform. This must begin with the mendicant monks and extend to the priests and holders of ecclesiastical offices, many of whom, for instance, had a bad conscience because of their failure to observe celibacy. The priesthood of all believers was also stressed, as was the need for every Christian to be able to affirm and defend the faith. As one saw from the Council of Nicea, councils were not called by the pope but by the emperor. This should once more become the case. In regard to the Mass Luther held it to be necessary that the laity once again have access to the cup and that the idea of transubstantiation, the view that bread and wine are physically changed into the body and blood of Christ, could not be an object of faith since the sacrament of the Eucharist is itself a mystery. Finally, the Mass could not be a good work or a sacrifice since the Last Supper of Jesus was not a sacrifice.

In the meantime Rome continued to actively seek ways of silencing Luther. Von Miltitz sought to persuade the elector Frederick to extradite Luther. He was even threatened with the

20. Duke George in a letter of October 1520 to "Dr. Johannes Hennigh, dean of Meißen, currently in Rome," (No. 175), in *Akten und Briefe zur Religionspolitik Herzog Georgs von Sachsen*, vol. 1: 1517–1524, ed. Felician Geß (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1905), 139.