Introduction: Luther's First Reformation Writings

This booklet contains three documents from the very dawn of the Reformation: Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* examining indulgences, his letter to the archbishop of Mainz, Albrecht, dated 31 October 1517 to which he appended a copy of the *Ninety-Five Theses* (both originally written in Latin, the official language of church and university), and his earliest published German sermon on the subject from early 1518: *A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*. To understand these three documents is to understand the academic, ecclesiastical and popular origins of what later historians have come to call the Reformation.

Yet these documents may seem to the casual reader confusing: filled with unexpected and incomprehensible arguments and language and written in styles peculiar to the time. No wonder that one recent lay reader of the *Ninety-Five Theses* exclaimed to this editor, "These don't sound very Lutheran at all!" Indeed, without understanding the theological and ecclesiological backdrop out of which all three of these documents arose, they hardly seem capable of having launched such an important movement within Western Christianity, the ramifications of which still are being felt today.

Part of the problem with understanding these documents is not

only the great distance—theologically and chronologically speaking—between them and us but also the iconographic place reserved for them in our collective memory: An angry (or desperate) young friar, hammer in hand (or, in early depictions, a quill), nailing (or writing) the *95 Theses* on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517. And when, beginning fifty years ago, reputable scholars began to question whether the theses had been posted at all, it seemed to some that the Reformation itself had been called into question. This introduction will help situate these documents within the late-medieval milieu in which Luther grew up and worked and demonstrate why, for a surprising variety of reasons, these three documents really *were* the spark for the firestorm of reform that followed.

Fig. I.1 Luther nailing theses to church door.

What Is an Indulgence?

Most people know that Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses objected to the way in which indulgences were understood in his day. But what is an indulgence? To answer that question, one must begin with a short course in late-medieval understanding of the sacrament of Penance, which in Luther's day was central to Christian piety. Indulgences are inextricably bound to that sacrament. In his Sermon on Indulgences and Grace even Luther felt compelled to explain the basics of Penance to the people.

Late-Medieval Christians understood that all people were born with the full effects of Adam and Eve's "original" sin and thus under the judgment of eternal punishment.[1] While there was some debate over the fate of unbaptized children who died before their baptisms, everyone believed that in baptism a person was moved from a state of sin to a state of grace by the infusion of a habit or disposition of love [Latin: *habitus charitatis*]. The grace of this sacrament thereby made a person acceptable before God by removing the two basic consequences of sin: guilt [Latin: *culpa*] and punishment [Latin: *poena*, from which the word *poenitentia*[2] (penance) is derived].

Baptism was, therefore, a very strong sacrament in that it removed both guilt and punishment, but it could not be repeated. For the person who, after baptism, committed a "mortal sin," that is, a serious, intentional sin that "murders" the soul (and thus puts it back in a state of sin and liable to eternal punishment), God provided, according to medieval theology (based upon a line from St. Jerome [c. 347–420]), a "second plank" after the shipwreck of sin, namely the sacrament of Penance, which could once again bring a person from a state

1. This synopsis of late-medieval theology is based upon Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 2d ed. (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth, 1983).
2. This word and its German equivalent can be translated into English as penitence, [the sacrament of] Penance, or repentance.

of sin into a state of grace. This sacrament had the advantage of being repeatable, but it was not as powerful as baptism. While it also took away the guilt (*culpa*) of sin, it only reduced the punishment (*poena*) from an eternal punishment to a temporal one. A forgiven Christian in a state of grace could then satisfy this remaining temporal punishment, usually by performing the three good works defined by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (prayer, fasting, and almsgiving), from which a myriad of other works were derived. These good works helped to mortify the flesh, restraining its evil impulses while giving honor to God and helping the neighbor.

Fig. I.2 Medieval Penance. Courtesy of the Richard C. Kessler Reformation Collection, Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

The sacrament of Penance consisted of three parts: contrition (sorrow for sin out of love of God), confession (privately to a priest who granted absolution), and satisfaction (of the remaining temporal punishment through works prescribed by a priest depending on the severity of the sins). In the late Middle Ages, theologians debated many aspects of Penance. Some, such as Gabriel Biel (c. 1425–1495), the author of several textbooks that Martin Luther read as a student, argued that a person could be truly contrite and that, at the moment of bringing forth love of God (and neighbor) through such contrition, was then and there infused with the habit of charity and moved into a state of grace. One then went to the priest for confession and absolution not simply to obtain grace but to have him ascertain whether the contrition was real—just as the Levitical priests of the Old Testament determined whether a person was truly free from leprosy or other diseases or infections of the skin [Leviticus 13]. Other theologians insisted that the power of sin was too strong and that therefore, in a state of sin, a person could only be "attrite," that is sorry for sin out of fear of punishment. Hearing the priest's absolution in confession infused a person with a habit of love, changed a person's attrition into contrition and moved him or her from a state of sin to a state of grace.

So, where do indulgences fit into this framework? In the early history of the church, as Luther himself discovered in the process of preparing his *Ninety-Five Theses*, confessors placed on penitents certain responsibilities to make restitution, so to speak, in the community for the consequences of public, heinous sins that had excluded them from the communion of the church. In the western (Latin-speaking) church, each such sinful act was said to involve (at least) seven years of (ecclesiastical) penance. In time, this punishment was demanded not just for public crimes but also for each and every mortal sin of "thought, word and deed." In the beginning,

"satisfaction" demanded by the church was not equivalent to the mortification of the flesh that God wrought in the believer, but over time they came to be the same. As private confession became more and more the norm in western Christianity (and was the gateway to grace and to receiving the Lord's Supper), the priest then prescribed prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to satisfy this debt.

At the same time, another teaching of the church came into play. Medieval Christians took very seriously the fact that Jesus had said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." It was clear that, with few exceptions, Christians who died in a state of grace but with outstanding temporal punishment did not yet possess such purity of heart. To purify such souls, God had in mercy established a place where the last remnants of sin—especially the temporal punishment for sin that remained to be satisfied—could be purged away. This "place of purgation" [Latin: *purgatorium*; English: *purgatory*] was a place after death where the ransomed soul experienced far worse torments than any on earth for purification but where the only exit, so to speak, was heaven itself and the beatific vision of God. With the exception of two saints (whom Luther mentions in the *Ninety-Five Theses*), no one wanted to spend any more time there than they needed.

So, believers in a state of grace satisfied temporal punishment through such mortifications of the flesh as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. But, what if a person was overwhelmed by such punishment—which could add up to hundreds of thousands of years of punishment on earth and in purgatory? Here, too, there was help from God through the church. In the Middle Ages, it was understood that the church could be "indulgent" with its flock regarding these stiff penalties, lifting them when a person performed certain religious acts, especially acts connected to Mary, the apostles or other saints. (No less a theologian than Thomas Aquinas [1225–1274] had also

argued that taking a monastic vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience was like a second baptism and thus eliminated all previous guilt and punishment for actual sins.)

For the most part this "indulgence" was a limited one. By saying a prayer in a particular chapel dedicated to a saint, by giving money to a particular cause, or by going on a pilgrimage to a particular shrine, a person could, because of the church's indulgence, satisfy more of the temporal punishment than otherwise would be the case. This even applied to attending Mass during the celebration of a specific church's dedication. For example, the collection of relics, assembled by Luther's prince, Elector Frederick III, in the early sixteenth century and housed in the Castle Church had a total indulgence associated with their viewing of over 100,000 years!

Then, as a way of encouraging people to participate in the Crusades to "free" Jerusalem and other holy sites from the "infidels" (i.e., adherents of Islam), Pope Urban II (c. 1042–1099) proclaimed in 1095 that those who participated in a crusade for religious reasons would receive "plenary" (full) indulgence, eliminating *all* satisfaction for all sins committed up until that time. In 1300 Pope Boniface VIII (c. 1230–1303) declared a plenary indulgence for all of those who visited Rome and prayed at the tombs of the apostles. This "Jubilee Indulgence" came to be issued every twenty-five years.

It was understood that such plenary indulgences were under the sole purview of the pope as a successor to Peter, under Christ's promise to him in Matt. 16:18–19: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church…. I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." The practice of issuing such indulgences was very popular and, in time, became available not only for going on Crusades or pilgrimages

themselves but also for contributing money to such causes, including the building of churches associated with the apostles.

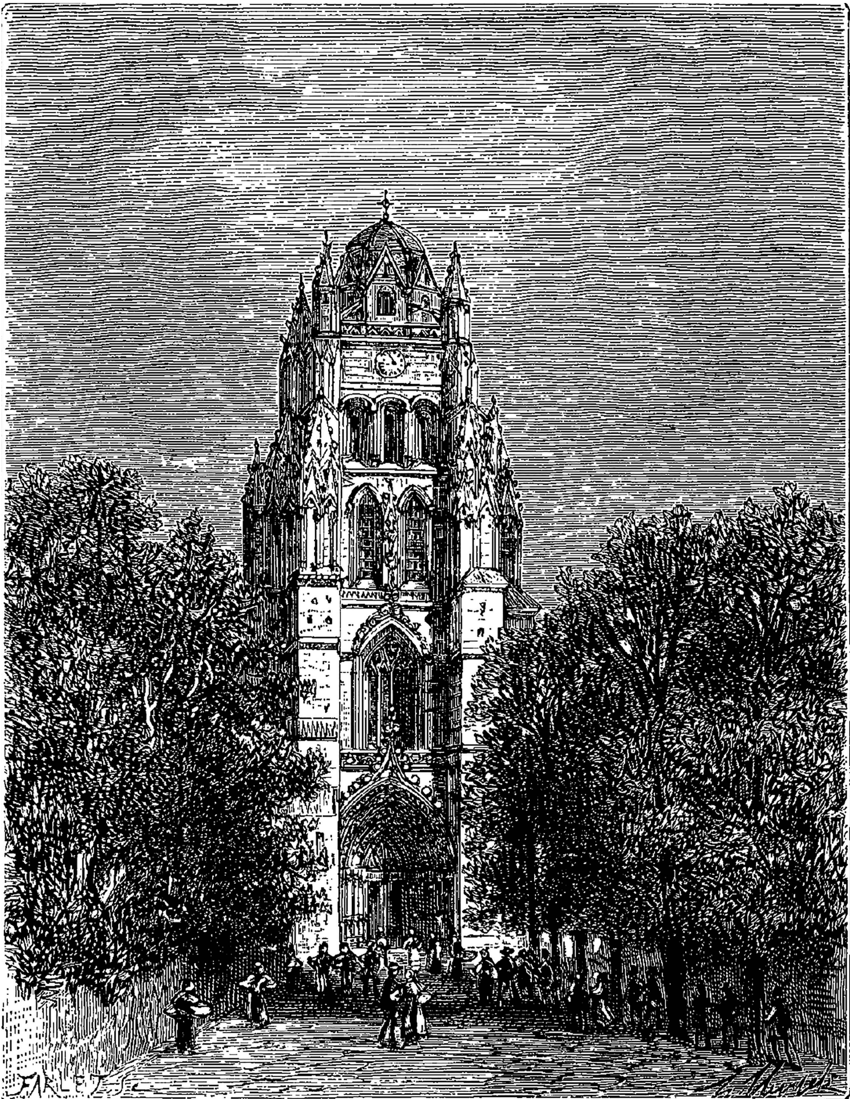

Fig. I.3 St. Peter's Cathedral in Saintes.

To some extent, the official theology supporting the granting of these plenary indulgences lagged behind the practice. First in a papal

decree proclaiming a jubilee year in 1350 and dated 27 January 1343, Pope Clement VI (1291–1352) attached indulgences to a "treasury of merits" accumulated by Christ and the saints. This reinforced the notion that any reduction in penalty for sin had to be satisfied by an appropriate amount of merit available in this heavenly treasure and released by the one who held the keys, namely, the successor to Peter. In 1476 Pope Sixtus IV (1414–1484), when proclaiming a plenary indulgence to help rebuild the cathedral church of St. Peter in Saintes, France, declared for the first time that plenary indulgences were also valid for souls in purgatory. Thus, one could now purchase an indulgence not only for one's own soul but also for one's dear, departed loved ones already suffering in purgatory. Whether this meant that the pope had direct authority over souls in purgatory or could only beg God on their behalf was still a matter of debate, as one of Luther's theses indicates.

Luther's Early Experience with Indulgences

This was the religious world into which Luther was born in 1483.[3] His father, Hans Ludher (c. 1459–1530),[4] of peasant stock, was a miner and, later, mine owner, but his mother Margarete's (c. 1460–1531) family, Lindemann, included well-to-do citizens of Eisenach (where a relative had been mayor). In part to advance their economic and social standing, the family sent young Martin to school. By 1501 he entered the University of Erfurt and within four years had received both the Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees, which left him poised to enter the law faculty and achieve his parent's dream of having a lawyer in the family. Instead, as Luther later

3. There are many fine biographies of Luther's life. The standard, however, is the three-volume work of Martin Brecht. The first volume, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521*, trans. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), is the basis of this account.
4. In 1518, Martin changed the spelling of his name to Luther as a theological play on the Greek word, *eleutherius*, which means "the free one."

recounted, a close encounter with lightning from a thunderstorm as he was walking back to the university from his home in 1505 led him to call out to the patron saint of miners, “Help, St. Anne, I will become a monk!” He promptly sold his law books (recently purchased for him by his father), gave the money to the poor, and entered the cloister of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt to become a friar in that mendicant (begging) order. By 1507 he was ordained a priest and in subsequent years he continued his education but now in theology, so that in 1512 he received a doctorate, though not at the well-established University of Erfurt but at the fledgling University of Wittenberg (founded only ten years earlier in 1502). As successor there to Johann von Staupitz (c. 1460–1524), who was also the head of the Augustinian Order in Germany and Luther’s father confessor, Luther continued his mentor’s practice of lecturing on the Bible, holding courses on the Psalms (1513–1515), Romans (1515–1516), Galatians (1516–1517), and Hebrews (1517–1518). Having already earlier been named by von Staupitz as preacher for his Augustinian brothers in Wittenberg, in 1514 he became assistant pastor and preacher at St. Mary’s, Wittenberg’s city church. He also was administrator for several Augustinian cloisters in the area.

Luther’s experience with indulgences was broader than most people imagine. While still a student at Erfurt, Luther probably heard the indulgence preaching of Raimund Peraudi (1435–1505). In 1476 Peraudi was the dean of the cathedral chapter in Saintes and commissioner for the very indulgence that Sixtus IV had proclaimed for his church, a decree that for the first time allowed the faithful to purchase plenary indulgences for the souls of the dead. Peraudi went to Rome in 1480 and quickly became papal commissioner (preacher) for indulgences and papal legate to Germany. Thus, from 1502–1504, Peraudi preached a plenary indulgence throughout Germany, with the money being set aside to support a crusade against the Turks.[5]

Among other places, Peraudi was in Erfurt on 29 October 1502, at which time Luther was a student there. This means that in all likelihood Luther personally experienced the preaching of one of the most popular indulgence preachers in Germany. On 17 January 1503, Peraudi rededicated the Castle Church in Wittenberg as the All Saints' Foundation (where some of its canons also functioned as professors at the University), bringing papal approval to the new university, and he proclaimed an indulgence of 200 days to everyone who attended Mass on the anniversary of that dedication.

Fig. I.4 Wittenberg.

As a friar and preacher in Wittenberg, Luther also dutifully instructed his flock in the benefits of indulgences. An account from 1518 of his meeting with the papal legate Cardinal Cajetan (Tommaso de Vio [1469–1534]) in Augsburg includes this admission. "I once believed that the merits of Christ were actually given me through indulgences, and, proceeding in this foolish notion, I taught and preached to the

5. This information comes from the article, "Raimund(us) Peraudi (Péraud)," in the *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 21 (2003): 117 (accessed on line on 7 August 2014: http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/sfz104237.html) and from Johannes Schneider, *Die kirchliche und politische Wirksamkeit des Legaten Raimund Peraudi (1486–1505) unter Benutzung ungedruckter Quellen* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1882), 117–19.

people that, since indulgences were such valuable things, they should not fail to treasure them, and should not consider them cheap or contemptible."[6] Even though in the lecture hall he was beginning to question the theology behind indulgences, in the early days of his preaching ministry at St. Mary's, Luther did not seem to have had serious questions about them.

By early 1517, however, things had changed. First, it seems that Luther was invited by the Elector to preach at the Castle Church on the vigil of the anniversary of its dedication, that is, on 16 January 1517.[7] As he recounted in 1541, beyond gentle comments questioning indulgences to his flock at St. Mary's: "I had also preached before at the castle in the same way against indulgences and had thus gained the disfavor of Duke Frederick because he was very fond of his religious foundation."[8] Two versions of this very sermon have been preserved. Based upon the appointed gospel for church dedications, the story of Zachaeus (Luke 19:1–10—"I'm going to your house"), Luther first pointed out that celebrating church dedications without dedicating one's heart to God was useless. As if that were not pointed enough, he then began questioning indulgences—at the very celebration of a special 200-day indulgence for that church's dedication. No wonder the Elector Frederick was angry!

There was also a second motivation for Luther to express doubts about indulgences. In late 1515, Pope Leo X (1475–1521) had authorized the preaching of another plenary indulgence in German-speaking lands, this time for the expressed purpose of raising funds to

6. Martin Luther, *Proceedings at Augsburg* (1518), trans. Suzanne Hequet, in vol. 1 of *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).
7. See Timothy J. Wengert, "Martin Luther's Preaching an Indulgence in January 1517," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 29 (2015): 62–75. The two versions of the sermon indicate that he preached either on the eve of or the day of that dedication.
8. Martin Luther, *Against Hanswurst* (1541), LW 41: 232.

Fig. I.5 Leo X.

rebuild St. Peter's in Rome. The results of this rebuilding are still to be seen in St. Peter's today. Money raised was also to help Albrecht von Brandenburg, the newly named Archbishop of Mainz (1491–1545), pay off his debt for purchasing his archiepiscopal office and for being given permission to hold more than one bishopric—but Luther

knew nothing about these arrangements in 1517. The archbishop had settled on the Dominican Johann Tetzel (1465–1519) as chief commissioner for preaching this indulgence, but the latter ran into difficulty almost immediately. For one thing, the Elector of Saxony, who controlled large portions of both Thuringia and Saxony, forbade sales in his territories so as to prevent a gold drain and to maintain people's interest in his own burgeoning collection of relics in Wittenberg. For another, sales in those places where Tetzel was permitted to preach were slow. In early 1517, Tetzel preached in regions close to Saxon lands but controlled by friendly rulers: in January 1517 in Eisleben, controlled by the counts of Mansfeld (Luther's birthplace seventy miles southwest of Wittenberg); in March in Halle, directly ruled by the archbishop of Mainz himself (fifty miles to the southwest); then in Zerbst in the principality of Anhalt (twenty-five miles due west); and finally on Good Friday (10 April) in Jüterbog, ruled by the bishop of Magdeburg (who was none other than Albrecht of Mainz and only twenty-five miles north).

What did Luther say? This sermon is important because it demonstrates both just how uncertain Luther had become about the traditional arguments surrounding indulgences and what his chief concern was. For example, he wondered where Scripture speaks about private confession and asked "the noble jurists" (experts in church law) for advice in this matter. He seemed to prefer a two-fold division of penance into sign and reality rather than the three-fold division used in scholastic theology. He admitted that the pope's intention in issuing an indulgence was correct and even said that "the trumpeters" [i.e., indulgence preachers like Tetzel] were correct in some respects, and yet "some things are said or understood less correctly."