

Sources for and against the Posting of the Ninety-Five Theses

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Well into the 1950s, Philip Melanchthon's notation in his 1546 preface to the second volume of Luther's Latin writings regarding the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* was fully accepted as an unquestionable historical fact.¹ Then in 1959 Hans Volz proposed, on the basis of several discrepancies in Melanchthon's reporting, that the event must have occurred *after* 31 October 1517.² A few years later, Erwin Iserloh, using the same source material for his analysis, completely rejected the notion of any posting of the *Theses* because, outside of Melanchthon's questionable report, there was no reliable source for such an event, least of all from Luther himself.³ His study, appearing just a year before the 450th anniversary of the Reformation, provoked strong reactions. Heinrich Bornkamm and Kurt Aland, for example, both rejected Iserloh's argument.⁴ Since that time most scholars have described the events of October 1517 very carefully, indicating the continued dispute over the historicity of the posting.

Because the image of Martin Luther nailing the *Theses* to the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church has stood for the actual beginning of the Reformation, discussion of this historical event has often been accompanied by emotion. As 2017 approaches, doubts concerning the form in which the *Theses* were publicized may once again end up undermining the significance of these theses on indulgences, just as they did fifty years ago in 1967.⁵ Or, contrariwise, an insistence upon the posting of the *Theses* could arise as much out of commitment to the Reformation's message as out of historically reliable arguments.

Most historians agree that the question of the posting of the *Theses*, measured by its importance for the history of Western Christianity, carries little weight. Whether they were posted or not, the content of the *Theses* and their role in shaping the theological debate that followed their publication determined their significance—completely apart from the psychological effect that the later recounting of their posting may have evoked.

From an historical perspective several questions arise: whether and, if so, when the *Theses* were posted, and when and where they were published. In the following essay, the authors want to present the relevant historical material and then sketch the arguments both for and against the posting of the *Theses*. As their own publications make clear, the authors have different points of view on this issue, yet they share the impression that they are wrestling with an interesting but difficult question, one that could be answered either way.

In the debate over the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, a variety of sources come into play: First, there are second-hand reports regarding the events of 31 October 1517. Second, we have Luther's own reminiscences of the events of 1517 and 1518. Finally, a number of other documents from those years touch on the publication and spread of the *Theses*. After a review of the sources, we each present a brief argument, one in favor of the posting and one against. Finally, we will briefly sketch the events immediately *after* 31 October 1517, where once again most scholars are in agreement.

Melanchthon's Preface from 1546

On 1 June 1546 Philip Melanchthon composed a preface addressed to the reader for the second volume of Luther's Latin works.⁶ In it he mentioned that Luther himself had intended to compose a sketch of his life for his *Opera*, but his death in February of that year had prevented it.⁷ Thus, Melanchthon tried to complete what Luther was unable to do.⁸ Some modern readers have questioned Melanchthon's report, citing their reservations regarding his overall reliability, especially in his relations with Luther. Yet the scholarship has also now made it clear that it is unacceptable to reject this account simply on the grounds that Melanchthon wrote it. The same goes for distorted perceptions about his character and his role at the University of Wittenberg.⁹ The fact that Melanchthon arrived in Wittenberg after 31 October 1517 and thus could not have been an eyewitness does not at once rule out his reliability. Moreover, with Georg Major, who was a choirboy at the Castle Church in 1517, we have an actual eyewitness who mentions the posting of the *Theses* in his correspondence.¹⁰ Even for Major, however, the literary

bases for his comments are not settled, since the passing mention in his letter, despite his possible status as an eyewitness, could still be dependent upon Melanchthon.¹¹ Above all else, his exclusive mention of the Castle Church, like Melanchthon's, does not correspond to the prescribed procedure of that time. According to university statutes such theses for debate are to be posted on the doors of all Wittenberg churches.¹²

One issue involved in sorting through the question has to do with the way in which Lutheran and Roman Catholic historiography and polemic describe the beginning of the Reformation. Another issue is simply that Philip Melanchthon did not pen his report about the posting in an attempt to distort matters. From his own experience he knew that in Wittenberg disputation theses, either for awarding degrees or for *quodlibetal* disputations among the university's professors, were normally posted publicly in accord with university statutes. Thus, when Melanchthon mentioned the posting of the *Theses*, it had—apart from the question of historicity—nothing to do with purposely leading readers astray, as if he were trying with this report to underscore the significance of the *Theses* by mentioning the way they were publicized. Instead, he was simply giving a report about what he assumed was a fact, even if based upon an assumption about the regular procedure for announcing disputations in Wittenberg.

One cause for the continued effect of Melanchthon's report was, next to its placement in the preface to the oft-reprinted second volume of Luther's Latin works, its inclusion in a booklet about Luther's life and death edited by Johannes Pollicarius, a graduate of the University of Wittenberg and later superintendent in Weißenfels.¹³ This widely reprinted book appeared in three different Latin editions between 1547 and 1562, and was printed eight times in all.¹⁴ In 1554, the Frankfurt (Main) pastor, Matthias Ritter, collaborated with the printer David Zöpfel to produce a German translation, which through 1561 was available in two editions and seven printings.¹⁵

To be sure, no one disputes that prior to August 1518 Melanchthon was not in Wittenberg and thus could not have been an eyewitness to the events of the previous year. But he also took great pains to achieve some clarity about the events of Luther's youth. For example, in the preface he describes how he had inquired of Luther's mother

and brother regarding the year, day, and hour of Luther's birth.¹⁶ Helmar Junghans has rightly pointed out that Melanchthon's information regarding the trip to Rome, for another example, was far more accurate than research had previously acknowledged.¹⁷

With his description in the foreword, Melanchthon wanted to disprove the attacks of opponents who claimed that Luther began the Reformation out of selfish motives: either out of greed, or out of an effort to escape his monastic vows, or to further the interests of the Saxon Elector Frederick (whose nephew, John Frederick, was, at the very time Melanchthon was writing, preparing for war against Emperor Charles V and his allies, among them Moritz of Saxony).¹⁸ Melanchthon wanted to show that Luther's rejection of scholastic theology (which he called "the sophistic and barbaric teaching of the monks") and his attempt to place the study of the church fathers, and above them the Bible, at the center of the theological enterprise were in the final analysis motivated by Luther's humanism.¹⁹ On the question of the posting of the *Theses*, the decisive text reads:

While Luther was in the midst of this course of study, venal indulgences were being carried around in this region by [Johann] Tetzel, that impudent Dominican sycophant. Luther, burning for the study of godliness and outraged by Tetzel's ungodly and nefarious sermons, published [*edidit*] propositions concerning indulgences, which are extant in the first volume of his [Latin] works, and publicly posted them at the Church which is next to the Wittenberg castle on the eve of the feast of All Saints in the year 1517.²⁰

Thus, Melanchthon made Tetzel's improper preaching the occasion and reason for the publication of Luther's *Theses*. That he used the word *edidit* most likely indicates that he assumed the existence of a published text. Luther would therefore have posted a copy of the *Theses* on the door of the Castle Church on 31 October 1517 (All Hallows' Eve).

Other Later Reports

Melanchthon himself often furnished letters to friends and acquaintances, with remarks about the day on which he wrote them.

These included references to the day Augustine died, the day on which the ark landed on Mt. Ararat, the day the world was created, or even the day his own father died. Melanchthon structured his world and his time by recalling such events. A calendar assembled by Paul Eber in 1550 often helped him to remember not only saints' days but also biblical and historical events.²¹ At the very least, Eber's calendar reflected the interest of Melanchthon and his circle in world history.

Placed upon this background, it is not surprising that in some letters dated 31 October Melanchthon mentioned the posting of the *Theses*. Nevertheless, such remarks occur only *after* the reference to the posting in the preface to Luther's *Opera*; thus, they have no independent weight regarding the record of the events of this day in earlier years.²² First in 1552 we find two letters, one to Sebastian Glaser and one to the counts von Henneberg, that mention the posting.²³ In letters written on the same day in 1553 to Albrecht Hardenberg and in 1554 to David Chytraeus, however, there is no mention at all.²⁴ Letters from 1555 to Georg Buchholzer in Berlin and Paul Eber in Wittenberg again contain expanded references.²⁵ Although his correspondence in 1556 and 1557 makes no mention of the posting,²⁶ in 1558 Melanchthon reminded the Elector August that he was writing on the day the *Theses* were published.²⁷ Finally, in 1559 Melanchthon composed a short note to Johannes Strigel in which he also highlighted the meaning of the day.²⁸ A day later, he held a lecture on All Saints' Day, in which he once again discussed the meaning of this day.²⁹ He here narrowed the reference of the time of the posting to the Vespers preaching service and mentioned both the posting and printing of the *Theses*.³⁰

Recently another notice concerning Luther's posting of the *Theses* has attracted serious attention among researchers. Georg Rörer, one of Luther's closest coworkers who took down countless lectures and sermons of Luther, put a note in a 1540 copy of the New Testament used in common with Luther for revisions of the Bible:

In the year of our Lord 1517, on the eve of All Saints' . . . [theses] about indulgences . . . were posted on the doors of the churches in Wittenberg by Dr. Martin Luther.³¹

Later, Rörer wrote down a further note, more likely influenced by Melancthon's account:

In the 1517th year after the birth of Christ, on the eve of the Feast of All Saints, M[artin] L[uther], d[ector] of theology, published propositions about the sale of indulgences, affixing them to the doors of the church next to the castle in Wittenberg.³²

The mention of churches and doors (both in the plural) reveals Rörer's assumption that Luther was following the university statutes of 1508, which directed that theses be posted on the doors of all of Wittenberg's churches as an invitation to public debate.

A still earlier witness of the events comes from 1528 and mentions no posting of the *Theses*. In his *Chronicle of Christianity from 1511 to 1521*, Christoph Scheurl mentioned an epistolary invitation to the debate and made it clear that Luther's opponents were the ones who pushed him into publishing the *Theses*. Scheurl connected this opposition to "his previously defended 95 *Conclusions*" and implied that the printing took place first after the disputation and thus also following Luther's invitation to the debate.³³ Besides, Scheurl also reported that the *Theses* "were often copied and sent all over Germany as the latest news," which may point to a distribution of manuscript copies long after 31 October 1517.³⁴

Luther's Later Comments

Luther's own account in the preface to the first volume of his Latin works is far simpler.

Hence, when in the year 1517 indulgences were sold (I mean to say promoted) in these regions for most shameful gain—I was then a preacher, a young (so to speak) doctor of theology—I began to dissuade the people, urging that they not listen to the clamors of the indulgence hawkers and that they had better things to do. In these matters it seemed to me that the pope would be my patron, in whom I at that time put my trust, given that in his decrees [from canon law] he clearly condemned immoderation by the *quaestors* (which is what he called indulgence preachers). Soon afterwards I wrote two letters, one to Albrecht the archbishop of Mainz, who received half of the money from the indulgences (the other half going to the pope, something I did not know at the

time), the other to the ordinary [bishop] (as they call them) Jerome the bishop of Brandenburg. I begged them to stop the impudence and blasphemy of the quaestors, but the poor little brother was despised. Despised, I published [*edidi*] a single page for disputation and, at the same time, a German sermon about indulgences and a bit later the *Explanations*, in which, [to preserve] the honor of the pope, I made the point that indulgences should indeed not be condemned but that works of love should be preferred to them.³⁵

Luther's comments make clear that his criticism of Tetzel was the result of a longer effort to oppose abuses connected to the sale of indulgences.³⁶ In addition, one here discovers that Luther wrote two letters—one to Albrecht archbishop of Mainz (dated 31 October 1517)³⁷ and one to Jerome Scultetus, bishop of Brandenburg—neither of which has survived.³⁸ Moreover, Luther mentions that he published (*edidi*) the single-leaf printing of the disputation (*scedula Disputationis*) “at the same time” (*simul*) that the bishops spurned him. Again at the same time Luther published his German *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*.³⁹

On another occasion Luther, looking back at the distant events of 1517, offers additional information. In 1541 he attacked Duke Heinrich von Braunschweig's polemic regarding the origins of the “Lutheran uproar” (*Lutherischen Lermens*).⁴⁰ Luther included an accounting of his confrontation with Tetzel and the sale of the Peter's indulgence.

It happened, in the year 1517, that a preaching monk [i.e., Dominican] called Johann Tetzel, a great ranter, made his appearance. . . . This same Tetzel now went around with indulgences, selling grace for money as dearly or as cheaply as he could, to the best of his ability. At the time I was a preacher here in the [Augustinian] cloister and a newly minted doctor, fervent and passionate about Holy Scripture.

Now, when many people from Wittenberg went to Jüterbog and Zerbst for indulgences, and I . . . did not know what indulgences were, as in fact no one knew, I began to preach very gently that one could probably do something better and more reliable than purchasing indulgences. Already beforehand, I had preached such a sermon here in the Castle [Church] against indulgences and had thus earned the disfavor of Duke Frederick because he was very fond of his All Saints foundation. Now I—to point out the true cause of the “Lutheran uproar”—let everything take its course. Meanwhile I heard what

dreadful and abominable articles Tetzel was preaching . . . He did an abominable amount of this, and it was all for the sake of money. I did not know at the time who would get the money. In this connection a booklet [the *Summary Instruction*] appeared, magnificently ornamented with the coat of arms of the bishop of Magdeburg, in which the quaestors were commanded to preach certain articles. It became quite evident that Bishop Albrecht had hired this Tetzel because he was a great ranter . . . and sent this great money-grabber into the region. . . . Then I wrote a letter with the *Theses* to [Albrecht] the bishop of Magdeburg, admonishing and beseeching him to stop Tetzel and prevent this stupid thing from being preached, lest it might give rise to some unpleasantness. This was the proper thing for him to do as archbishop. I can still lay my hands on [a copy of] that letter; but I never received an answer. I also wrote about the same thing to the bishop of Brandenburg [Scultetus] as the ordinary; in him I had a very gracious bishop. He answered that I was attacking the church's authority and would get myself in trouble. He advised me to drop the matter.⁴¹ I can well imagine that they both thought the pope would be much too powerful for me, a miserable beggar. So my theses against Tetzel's articles, which you can now see in print [in the following pages of volume one of Luther's *Opera*], were published. They went throughout the whole of Germany inside two weeks, for the whole world complained about indulgences, and particularly about Tetzel's articles [in the *Summary Instruction*] . . . This is the first, real, and fundamental beginning of the "Lutheran uproar," which the [arch]bishop of Mainz, not Duke Frederick, began with that money-grabber or pickpocket, Tetzel . . .⁴²

Neither report mentions that the *Theses* were posted on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. Moreover, Luther references a publication that apparently first took place *after* 31 October, the day on which Luther sent letters to Albrecht of Mainz and Jerome Scultetus. His point, especially in the reply to Heinrich von Braunschweig, was above all else to prove that it was neither he nor his prince but the archbishop of Mainz who had instigated the conflict out of greed. Luther himself, following proper procedures, sent the *Theses* to the responsible bishops.

Finally, mention must also be made of the earliest comment from Luther's pen, from 1527 and thus only ten years after the events, in a letter to Nicholas von Amsdorf.⁴³ Here, too, Luther does not mention a posting of the *Theses*, but his note does make the meaning of the event clear—albeit here connected not to 31 October but to 1 November 1517. To be sure, one gains from this note no clarity on

the external course of events, but it is nevertheless quite evident that Luther dated the entire struggle with the late-medieval church to All Saints' Day 1517.

In addition, Luther mentioned these events from time to time in his *Table Talk*, which must, however, be used with great care as not completely reliable.⁴⁴ In the beginning of August of 1540, according to Luther's reckoning twenty-two years (but actually twenty) after his condemnation in Rome, the Reformer described the events as follows. Tetzel preached in Jüterbog because the Elector had banned him from Saxon lands. People from Wittenberg who traveled there to procure an indulgence reported back to Wittenberg about the wild claims made concerning this indulgence. These exaggerations by Tetzel moved Luther to warn people about indulgences. "At home he [Luther] debated with himself, read books, consulted with [professors of] law but saw that nothing was wholesome, nothing certain in indulgences. Therefore, he wrote his positions down in 'When Our Lord and Master . . .' [the initial words of the first thesis]. He did not do this to attack the pope but to counter the blasphemous cries of the ranters."⁴⁵ At about the same time, Luther also talked about the positive reception of his *Theses* even by some of the people who prevented a public hearing for him. Thus, he mentioned some abbot who demanded that Bishop Scultetus quell the protest, "but the bishop sent an abbot [Valentine?] to me, who came and conferred with me, but there was nothing to it. They were all afraid."⁴⁶

In an undated table talk, Luther reported about the extreme exaggerations of Tetzel and then continued:

These extravagant tales moved me, so that I set myself against them not for the sake of some honor or gain [some accounts add: but for the sake of vindicating Christ's glory...]. First, I threw myself on the ground and prayed to God that he would stand by me. I did not yet see the papal abominations but only the crass abuses. Thus, I first wrote as a supplicant to the bishops of Brandenburg and Mainz, that only if they tolerated this evil would I write against it. The bishops sent my writing to Tetzel who, after reading them several times, is said to have shouted to his servant, "Veit, if this is published and spread throughout Germany, the devil will shit on us!" Then the bishops, as I had requested, sent back my writings. The abbot [Valentine] from Lehnin demanded my silence

even though they themselves did not wish to be silent, and so they irritated me into writing.⁴⁷

On 2 February 1538, Luther made some comments about his scholastic training and the difficult beginnings of the Reformation movement. “Oh how hard it went at first! When we were going to Kemberg after All Saints’ Day, 1517, when I first proposed to write against the crass errors of indulgences, Dr. Jerome Schurf opposed me. ‘You want to write against the pope? What do you think you’re doing? No one will allow it!’ I replied, ‘And if they have to allow it?’”⁴⁸ A year later, in March 1539, Luther explained: “At the beginning of the gospel, I took steps only very gradually against that completely impudent Tetzl. Jerome, the bishop of Brandenburg, esteemed me highly, and I also exhorted him, as the ordinary of the diocese, to look into the matter, and I sent him a handwritten copy of my *Explanations* [of the *Theses*] before I published them. But no one was willing to restrain that barking Tetzl, but instead presumed to defend him.”⁴⁹

Luther’s Early Correspondence

Apart from the letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz dated 31 October 1517, in which Luther enclosed a copy of his *Theses*, there are also other writings from this time period that contain interesting details. To be sure, these letters are not always very easy to date precisely. In two cases, the uncertainty is so great that they cannot be included in this discussion.⁵⁰

A letter to Christoph Scheurl, dated 3 November 1517, mentioned, without any reference to the *Theses*, the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* from 4 September 1517.⁵¹ On the day after Luther’s thirty-fifth birthday in early November, he wrote to Johannes Lang, his fellow Augustinian in Erfurt, and sent him a second copy of the theses (either handwritten or printed), which he here named *paradoxa* [paradoxes].⁵² Whatever Luther may have intended with his letter to Archbishop Albrecht, here is certain documentation that two weeks after sending them to Albrecht he also sent them to a friend—which matches the invitation in the first lines of the

Theses: that those who are absent should discuss them with him by letter.³³

Still more important is a hard-to-date letter to the bishop of Brandenburg, which the Weimar edition of Luther's works assumes was written on 13 February 1518.³⁴ Luther enclosed a copy of the *Explanations* and discussed the intentions that had guided him in composing the *Theses*.³⁵ He began with mention of "new and never-before-heard-of dogmas concerning apostolic indulgences" that had captivated both the learned and simple folk. He himself was invited "through many letters and conversations" to discuss this new doctrine. Regarding this issue he did not at first take a clear position, but when he "was pressed by sharp warnings including endangering the reverence due the papacy" he asked himself: "What else could I do?"³⁶ In the face of such strong objections, he wanted to support neither the one side nor the other, but decided "in the meantime," before the Holy Church had reached at decision, "to hold a disputation about the matter." "Therefore, I sent out the disputation, inviting and asking all people publicly, but also privately (as you [O bishop] know) the most learned that they express their opinions by letter."³⁷ In Scripture and the church fathers, to say nothing of canon law, he could find no convincing arguments for this new dogma. Instead, he only discovered a few non-authoritative canonists and scholastic theologians who supported these new teachings.

Following a short justification for having connected questions of papal authority to the promulgation of indulgences in his disputation, Luther continued with his report of the events. "Therefore after I had called all into the arena, not a single person showed up. From this I saw that my disputations wandered more widely than I had wanted and that here and there they were received not as proposing matters for dispute but as making assertions." For this reason, Luther continued, "I have been forced, against my childish and ignorant hope and intent, to distribute [them] among the people [in the German *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*] and to publish before the world clarifications and proofs of [the *Theses* in the *Explanations*]." It appeared proper to him first to present these proofs to Bishop Jerome, as the ordinary with responsibilities for the University

of Wittenberg. Luther closed his letter with renewed assurances that he wanted to discuss the matter and not present definitive pronouncements.

On 15 February 1518 Luther wrote to Spalatin that the entire church including even his opponents had to agree that alms and assistance for the neighbor were better than indulgences. At the same time he announced that he intended to publish proofs for his *Theses*, by which he clearly meant his *Explanations*. To be sure, as far as he himself was concerned he was more than ready to refrain from attacks on his opponents in sermons or publications, but he was deeply saddened that the Saxon court had received criticism as a result, since some of his critics charged him with having “been induced” into this matter “by him [Elector Frederick] out of jealousy over the Archbishop of Magdeburg.”⁵⁸

Other interesting comments connected to the question of the publication of the *Theses* and the role of the bishop of Brandenburg regarding the publication of the *Explanations* come in a letter to Christoph Scheurl, dated 4 March 1518. On 5 January 1518, Scheurl had written Ulrich von Dinstedt about having received the “Martinian theses” (*Conclusiones Martinianae*) and mentioned that “our people” were of the opinion that they should be translated into German.⁵⁹ In a second letter, this time from 8 January 1518 to Caspar Güttel, Scheurl identified “our people” as Willibald Pirckheimer, A. Tucher and Wenzeslaus Linck, and he added, “C[aspar] Nuzel has translated it.”⁶⁰ Luther mentioned this in his letter to Scheurl in March, in which he thanked him that he had sent him “my positions in Latin and German.”⁶¹ But primarily he answered Scheurl’s complaint that Luther had not sent him the *Theses* immediately.

It was not my idea or intent to publish them but first to confer about these [*Theses*] with a few who lived with us or in the vicinity, so that by the judgment of many people, if condemned they would be destroyed or if approved they would be published. And now they have been printed and copied so often, and completely beyond my wildest expectations, that I now regret bearing this offspring, not because I do not favor that the truth be known broadly [*vulgo*]—indeed, I sought this alone—but because this is not a suitable mode [of writing] for instructing the wider public [*vulgus*].⁶²

As in the earlier letters, Luther emphasized his openness for discussing certain points and expressed his convictions that many people secretly supported his point of view. He also revealed that he had already prepared certain proofs (the *Explanations*), but he had refrained from publishing them because he was still waiting for the opinion of the bishop of Brandenburg.⁶³ He hoped to find the time to publish a German tract (the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*), “so that I might quell those completely vague ‘*Positions*.’”⁶⁴ He would send this work to Scheurl as soon as it was finished.⁶⁵

The first published account by Luther regarding the events surrounding the *Theses* appeared in the foreword to the *Explanations*. It was addressed to Pope Leo X and was composed at the same time as a second foreword to Johann von Staupitz, which bears the date of 30 May 1518. Luther criticized the misleading sermons of the indulgence sellers, whose extravagant promises even went beyond canon law. Then he complained that books published in connection with the Peter’s indulgence (above all, the *Summary Instruction*) only made matters worse. Without naming names, Luther made clear that he held Tetzel to be the absolutely worst apologist for indulgences.⁶⁶ Luther himself, in youthful zeal, began by admonishing the magnates of the church (*magnates Ecclesiarum*).

In this matter, I was accepted by some, ridiculed by others, and seemed strange to still others. . . . Then, when I could do nothing else, it seemed that even the gentlest step would be resisted by them, that is, to call their dogmas into doubt and disputation. Therefore I published a single sheet of [theses for] disputation, inviting only the more learned, if they wanted to discuss with me, as it ought to be manifest even to my adversaries from the preface of this very debate.⁶⁷

Luther placed his own cautious approach to the matter over against the charge of reckless rebellion, and reminded Leo about the right of a theology professor to hold disputations at the university on contested matters—and not only on comparatively unimportant things like papal indulgences but also on truly important matters, such as God’s forgiveness. Luther depicted the fact that the theses then spread among all teachers, far beyond the immediate regional boundaries, as a small miracle that took even him by surprise.

They [the *Theses*] were published only among our own and for our own. Then, once they were published—what seems to me unbelievable—they became known to everyone. For they were simply [theses for] disputation, not doctrine or dogma, and, as is customary, more obscure and enigmatic.⁶⁸

Assessing the Ninety-Five Theses in Context

Despite all disagreement, most researchers agree on the following. Already in early 1517 Luther had in his possession the *Summary Instruction*, which he occasionally referred to as “Tetzel’s articles.” It is also certain that Luther always gave as a basis for his own intervention the exaggerations of the indulgence preachers, above all, Tetzel. To be sure, it is also clear that beginning in 1517 he was already expressing his own uncertainties regarding the distribution of indulgences, especially in connection with the Elector Frederick’s All Saints’ Foundation and its relics.⁶⁹ Thus, already before 31 October 1517, Luther clearly intended to criticize the misuse of indulgences. It is for this reason that he began an intense examination of ecclesiastical sources, especially canon law, in order to understand what exactly was involved with indulgences. Most certain and most important is the fact that in his letter to Albrecht, dated 31 October, he included either a hand-written or a printed copy of the *Theses*, an indication that he had probably written them shortly before that time.

It is also clear that with the *Theses* Martin Luther had something specific in mind. As Bernd Moeller has shown, the *Theses* cannot be loosed from their moorings in a “Wittenberg offensive,” in which Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt was also as much involved as Luther himself. Already six months earlier, Karlstadt had presented theses that he wanted discussed not simply in the customary style of local academic debate but to which he also invited guests from a greater distance.⁷⁰ This reveals a self-conscious desire among the Wittenberg theologians to develop a theology that went far beyond the borders of Saxony. Luther continued this approach in terms of both form and content. Thus, the content of the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* of 4 September 1517 revealed his harsh criticisms of the normal way of doing academic theology. Formally, Luther

showed this broader approach with the *Theses* themselves, when he expressly invited those absent to respond by letter.⁷¹ Nevertheless, Luther's motives, his movements at the University of Wittenberg, and his own study of indulgences before 31 October do not decisively determine one way or the other whether the *Theses* were posted.

The Position that the Theses Were Posted

On 31 October 1517 Martin Luther wrote a letter to the Archbishop Albrecht in which he complained about the way the "Peter's Indulgence" was being preached. He appended the *Ninety-Five Theses* to that letter. At about the same time, perhaps in the first half of October, he had already made contact with ecclesiastical leaders (*magnates*) and also wrote (on 31 October or earlier) to the bishop of Brandenburg. At Vespers on the Eve of All Saints' Day, anticipating the public reading of the list of the Elector's relics and their exhibition at the Castle Church the next day and the crowds that such an event would draw, Luther posted a copy of the *Theses* on the door of the Castle Church and perhaps the other church doors in Wittenberg, following the general rules of the university for academic disputations. These could have been printed or handwritten copies, as with those he sent to the church leaders.⁷²

According to the notation in his 1518 letter to Bishop Scultetus—that he intended to "ask all publicly"—one could easily conclude that Luther intended to invite the larger, Latin-reading Wittenberg public to an official disputation, which one normally did by posting theses. That not all details from the various sources completely match this argument (or the counter-argument that follows) can easily be chalked up to faulty memories, slight exaggerations, or the context in which these later reminiscences were made. That Luther remembered the Feast of All Saints ten years later as the beginning point of the entire affair (given that the eve of a festival is included in such remarks) certainly points to events including but not limited to sending a letter to Archbishop Albrecht. All of this evidence points to the reliability of Melancthon's report: On 31 October 1517 the *Ninety-Five Theses* were posted on the Castle Church door.

Melanchthon's report puts the higher burden of proof on those who would dismiss it.

The Position that the Theses Were Not Posted

Here one must begin with the fact that in the same letter to Bishop Jerome Scultetus, Luther spoke about receiving written opinions of his *Theses* from those whom he had asked privately (*privatim*). This indicates that, whatever else may have happened, Luther was not making a customary invitation to an academic debate. This would have been expected for any posting of theses in the normal manner, after which a disputation would need to be held within a week, for which there is absolutely no evidence. In this connection, the letter to Johannes Lang, dated 11 November 1517, stands as a witness to Luther's private mailing to scholars, a "posting" of another kind.⁷³

Regarding a private distribution to two bishops, a late-medieval man did not require a printing press. The next year Luther obviously had written out the far more expansive *Explanations* by hand (*mea manu scripta*) and had sent them to Jerome Scultetus.⁷⁴ Anyone who could do that could certainly copy by hand a few exemplars of the *Theses*. Moreover, this makes Luther's own comment about the *Theses* far more plausible. He would at this time have not yet published the *Theses* in print (*ederem*—I would have published [at a later time]) but rather have sent them simply as "private letters" (*privatis litteris*).⁷⁵

The clearly later accounts of Rörer, Major, and Melanchthon can easily be explained as a conviction formed in the 1540s, that a posting of the *Theses* took place, but they do not have enough weight to correct Luther's actual comments, especially when Melanchthon and, following him, Major focused their anecdotes about what happened on the Castle Church door alone, despite clear statements in the university statutes requiring postings on all the church doors. This became a narrative tradition so weighty that even the very earliest witness, Georg Rörer, followed them in his later notes. If one weighs all the evidence, the report nearest the actual events of 31 October 1517, namely, that of Martin Luther himself, is most

persuasive and leads to the simple conclusion: the *Theses* were not posted.

The Subsequent Distribution of the Theses

Concerning the events *after* 31 October 1517, scholars come much closer to unanimity. Already on 2 November Luther spoke with the law professor, Jerome Schurff, about the questions that were bothering him, as the two of them traveled to nearby Kemberg, and on 11 November Luther sent a copy to his fellow Augustinian Johannes Lang. Perhaps he also sent copies to the bishop of Merseburg. In any case, according to a comment made on 27 November 1517 by Cäsar Pflug to Duke Georg von Sachsen, the bishop reported that “the *Conclusiones* of the Augustinian friar from Wittenberg were posted in many locations.”⁷⁶

By this time they could have been available in printed form. In any case, Luther himself or a compatriot could have seen to a printing of the *Theses* in Wittenberg or Leipzig. By the end of the year copies were reprinted in Nuremberg and Basel. While Christoph Scheurl and his companions in Nuremberg saw to a translation into German, which they may have then distributed in at very least hand-written but possibly printed form, Luther had qualms about translating the *Theses* into German and instead published the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* in early 1518. This much more understandable German text spread throughout the entire Holy Roman Empire north of the Alps, undergoing more than twenty reprints.

Given the fact that the *Theses*, as an invitation to debate, had been written in a very terse style, Luther also felt forced to write a defense, the *Explanations*, which he composed in February 1518 and sent to Bishop Jerome for his assessment.⁷⁷ He wrote two forewords and sent handwritten copies to von Staupitz and, beyond that, to Pope Leo X. In August 1518 he began sending printed copies to his supporters. His correspondence in 1518, especially the letters to the bishop of Brandenburg and Pope Leo, already echo typical characteristics of his view of the events. He stressed that he wanted to criticize Tetzels wrong-headed preaching, for it transgressed the regulations in canon law. Finally, it was the *Summary Instruction* that

sparked his further development. The Saxon court had nothing to do with the origin of the *Theses*. He wrote the *Theses* not with the intention of proclaiming doctrine but only to alert church leaders to the lack of clarity in the teaching on indulgences. The most important thing that concerned Luther was to show that he was ready to be corrected and that he only wanted to be true to his responsibility as a theological teacher and son of the church. By referring to the *Theses* as *propositiones*, *paradoxa* or *disputationes* he made clear throughout his life that he had presented them in order to kick off a discussion about the essential meaning of indulgences and to put an end to the terrible exaggerations by Tetzel and others.

Conclusion

When one sets aside emotion and the iconography connected with this debate, it becomes clear that there are equally good arguments for and against the posting of the *Theses*. Such insoluble matters are anything but uncommon in historical scholarship. It is precisely at this level that we should leave the debate over the posting: as a historically interesting, but in the final analysis unresolvable question. Both sides in the debate need to refrain from heaping confessional agendas on top of the historical issue. Whether or not the *Theses* were posted, the Reformation loses none of its historical importance. What was and remains decisive is the Reformation's proposal to the church catholic, a proclamation of the gospel that continues to challenge and influence Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic Christians to this day.

NOTES

1. Abbreviations: Bds.: Heinrich Bindseil, ed. *Philippi Melancthonis epistolae, iudicia, consilia, testimonia aliorumque ad eum epistolae quae in corpore reformatorum desiderantur* (Halle: Schwetschke, 1874); CR: *Corpus Reformatorum: Philippi Melancthonis opera quae supersunt omnia*, Karl Bretschneider and Heinrich Bindseil, eds., 28 vols. (Halle: A. Schwetschke & Sons, 1834-1860); LW: *Luther's Works* [American edition], 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86); MBW: *Melancthon's Briefwechsel: Kritische und kommentierte Gesamtausgabe: Regesten*, ed. Heinz Scheible, 12+ vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977-); VD 16: *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 16. Jahrhunderts*, 24 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1969-2000); WA: *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993); WA Bi: *Luthers Werke:*

Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Bibel, 12 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1906–61); WA Br: *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–1985); WA TR: *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–21).

2. Hans Volz, *Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag und dessen Vorgeschichte* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1959).

3. Erwin Iserloh, *Luther zwischen Reform und Reformation* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1966). English: *The Theses Were Not Posted: Luther between Reform and Reformation*, trans. Jared Wicks (Boston: Beacon, 1968).

4. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Thesen und Thesenanschlag Luthers* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967); Kurt Aland, ed., *Martin Luthers 95 Thesen* (Hamburg: Furcher, 1965), English: *Martin Luther's 95 Theses with the Pertinent Documents from the History of the Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967).

5. A basic review of the entire topic from different points of view is now available in Joachim Ott and Martin Treu, eds., *Luthers Thesenanschlag – Faktum oder Fiktion* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), especially Reinhard Brandt, “Reformator ohne Hammer”: Zur öffentlichen Aufmerksamkeit für die Bestreitung des Thesenanschlags,” pp. 127–40. For new translations of and introductions to three of the most important documents from 1517–1518 (the 95 Theses, the 31 October 1517 letter to Archbishop Albrecht and the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*), see *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 1: *The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 1–65.

6. MBW 4277 (CR 6: 155–70, with 20: 430–35). For a (flawed) English translation, see Franz Posset, *The Real Luther: A Friar at Erfurt and Wittenberg* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 151–69.

7. CR 6: 155: “Spem nobis fecerat Reverendus vir Martinus Lutherus, et curriculum se vitae suae, et certaminum occasiones in praefatione huius partis suorum monumentorum narraturum esse, quod fecisset, nisi priusquam officinae typographicae hoc volumen absolverunt, Autor ex hac mortali vita ad aeternam Dei et Ecclesiae coelestis consuetudinem evocatus esset.”

8. See Luther’s 1545 preface to the first volume of the Latin works in LW 34: 323–38 (WA 54: 176–87), in which Luther describes his early career and his Reformation discovery based upon Romans 1:17. For a critical interpretation, which also mentions the beginning of the Indulgence controversy but without mentioning the question of the posting of the *Theses*, see Volker Leppin, “‘Omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit’: Zur Aufnahme mystischer Traditionen in Luthers erster Ablaßthese,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 93 (2002): 7–25.

9. See especially Heinz Scheible, “Luther and Melanchthon,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1990): 317–339, and Timothy J. Wengert, “Melanchthon and Luther/Luther and Melanchthon,” *Luther-Jahrbuch* 66 (1999): 55–88, now in Wengert’s *Philip Melanchthon, Speaker of the Reformation: Wittenberg’s Other Reformer* (Burlington/Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), no. X.

10. Timothy J. Wengert, “Georg Major: An ‘Eyewitness’ to the Posting of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses,” in: *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, 93–97. The dating of the *Historia* to 1549 in the article needs correcting: the foreword appeared in 1546 and the *Historia* was first published in 1547.

11. *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg*, part 1: 1502–1611, ed. Walter Friedensburg (Magdeburg, 1926), 33: “promociones similiter et disputationes intinet valvis ecclesiarum feria praecedenti, specivocando promotoris, promovendi, predisentis et respondentis.”

12. See, in view of Major’s report from 1553, Volker Leppin, “Die Monumentalisierung Luthers: Warum vom Thesenanschlag erzählt wurde – und was davon zu erzählen ist,”

in: *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, 69–92, especially 80–82. This same critique regarding a recognizable dependence on Melanchthon's depiction of events also applies to any report from 1546 or 1547.

13. *Historia de vita et actis reverendiss. Viri D. Mart. Lutheri, uerae Theologiae Doctoris, bona fide conscripta a Philippo Melanthon* (Erfurt: Sturmer, 1548). See below for the influence of Paul Eber.

14. See VD 16: M 3416 – M 3423. For later reprints (in 1598, 1614, 1700, 1741, 1746, 1818, 1819, 1841 and 1846), see CR 20: 434–35. See also Timothy J. Wengert, “The First Biography of Martin Luther” (forthcoming).

15. See VD 16: M 3424 – M 3430. German translations also appeared in 1564, 1813 and 1846. A Swedish translation was published in 1701, French in 1549, 1562 and 1810 and English in 1561 and 1817. See CR 20: 434–35.

16. CR 6: 156.

17. Helmar Junghans, “Martin Luther, kirchliche Magnaten und Thesenanschlag: Zur Vorgeschichte von Luthers Widmungsbrief zu den *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* an Papst Leo X,” in: *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, 33–46. Junghans clearly proves in this essay that with the term *Magnates Ecclesiarum*, to whom according to Luther's own testimony he in the first instance addressed his protest against indulgences (WA 1: 528, 19f.), Luther was not talking about bishops (pp. 38–40) and also that the word *privatim* in no way must necessarily mean epistolary contact and that as a result he also could have meant conversations with other representatives of the churches (34). Nevertheless, this educated philological argument becomes moot since the passage that Junghans interprets is not Luther's only comment on this matter. In a letter to Frederick the Wise he expressly says that he contacted Albrecht, archbishop of Mainz, and Jerome Schultz (aka Scultetus), bishop of Brandenburg, “*privatis litteris*,” in private letters (WA Br 1: 245, 359–63). The letters and the contacts with the bishops in question were firmly fixed in Luther's memory. In this regard, however, the term is not found in Luther's writings prior to 31 October 1517.

18. The same interests also shaped Luther's own descriptions of the events from 1517. See below.

19. *Barbarica et sophistica doctrina Monachorum*, CR 6: 160–61. With this, Melanchthon wanted to emphasize Luther's use of Erasmus for Latin and Greek as well as Luther's own knowledge of Greek and Hebrew.

20. CR 6: 161–62. “In hoc cursu cum esset Lutherus, circumferuntur venales indulgentiae in his regionibus a Tecelio Dominicano impudentissimo sycophanta, cuius impiis et nefariis concionibus irritatus Lutherus, studio pietatis ardens, edidit Propositiones de Indulgentiis, quae in primo Tomo monumentorum ipsius extant, et has publice Templo quod arci Witebergensi contiguum est, affixit pridie festi omnium Sanctorum anno 1517.” Melanchthon then continued with his attack on Tetzel, whom he blamed for having begun the altercations (p. 162): “Hi furores Tecelii et eius satellitum imponunt necessitatem Luthero de rebus iisdem copiosius disserendi, et tuendae veritatis.” He emphasized that Luther in no way was trying to change any rites in the church: “Quare falso eum calumniantur, qui a plausibili causa exorsum dicunt, ut postea mutaret Rem publicam, et vel sibi vel aliis potentiam quaereret.”

21. For 31 October, Eber noted in the *Calendarium historicum* (Wittenberg: Georg Rhau, 1550), 368 (following the capitalization in the original): “HOC DIE PVBLICE PROPOSITA, ET FORIBUS TEMPLI AD ARCEM WVITEBERGENSEM AFFIXA EST PRIMA DISPVTATIO DOCTORIS MARTINI LVTHERI CONTRA INDVLGENTIAS impudentiſſimis mendacijs ornatas et uenditatas a TECZELIO Monacho,

qua edita, paulatim doctrina coelestis de poenitentia & de remissione peccatorum fide accipienda propter filium Dei Dominum nostrum IESVM CHRISTVM, repurgata & illustrata est, & postea lux reddita est multis alijs quoque articulis doctrinae necessariae in Ecclesia Dei, Anno Christi 1517.” Eber remarked in this context that John Hus was burned at the stake one hundred years earlier (in 1415) and had prophesied that a hundred years later retribution would take place. See Luther’s own account of this “prophecy” in *WA TR* 1: 214 (no. 488).

22. For letters that do not mention the posting, see MBW 238 (1522); 348–351 (1524); 507 (1526); 719, 723 (1528); 1197 (1531); 1654 (1535); 4055 (1545) and 4951 (1547).

23. MBW 6624 (CR 7: 1121–22; here 1122): “Pridie Calend. Novemb. Quo primum ante annos 35 Lutherus edidit Propositiones de indulgentiis”; MBW 6625 (CR 7, 1120–21), addressed to the counts Wilhelm and Georg Ernst von Henneberg (1121): “Datum Torga am Abend omnium sanctorum, daran vor 35 Jahrn der Ehrnwürdige Herr Martinus Lutherus die propositiones von den Indulgentiis erstlich angeschlagen hat.”

24. MBW 7013 (CR 8: 167–68) and MBW 7322 (CR 8: 168–69).

25. MBW 7617 (CR 8: 594): “Pridie Calend. Novembris. quo die primum Lutherus, anno 1517, proposuit propositiones, quibus imposturae indulgentiarum taxantur, et doctrina de poenitentia renovata est. In hoc spacio 38 annorum, quae spectaculae exempli irae et misericordiae vidimus? Quae utinam sic intueremur, ut accenderetur in nobis cura conservandae verae doctrinae, et veris officiis Deum celebrandi.” MBW 7618 (CR 8, 594–95): “Die, quo Lutherus primum edidit propositiones quibus taxantur imposturae indulgentiarum, et repurgata est doctrina *περὶ μετανοίας καὶ ἀφέσεως ἀμαρτιῶν ἢ καταλλαγῆς*. Utinam Deus semper Ecclesiam in nostris familiis et in his regionibus colligat.”

26. See MBW 8011 (CR 9: 413) and MBW 8410–8412 (C 9: 357–59).

27. MBW 8765 (Bds. 434–35): “Datum zu Pretsch Anno 1558. Die vltimo octobris vff welchen tag vor 41 Jarn Erstlich die propositiones de Indulgentijs ausgegangen sind, welche der anfang gewesen sind der Erklarung christlicher lehr.”

28. MBW 9115 (CR 9: 956): “Pridie Cal. Novemb. quo die Luther. Disputationem *περὶ μετανοίας* primum edidit, quae fuit *πρώτη σύρραξις* emendationis doctrinae.”

29. CR 25: 777: “Dies omnium sanctorum incidit in Calendas Novembris; Ultimus autem dies Octobris, id est, profestum omnium sanctorum, est dies ille, quo primum propositae sunt propositiones D. Lutheri de indulgentiis, quae fuerunt initium emendationis doctrinae. Et hoc anno 1557 [the date is erroneous since Melanchthon was in Heidelberg that year], erunt anni completi 41 [i.e., 1558], quando ista certamina Ecclesiarum coeperunt: videlicet ab initio isto affixarum propositionum, et editionum illarum. Fuerunt affixae templo Arcis ad vespertinam concionem. Eius templi appellatio fuit Omnium sanctorum; quia erat dedicatum omnibus Sanctis. Et fuit tunc magna istius festi celebritas. Fuerunt illo tempore magnae et multae imposturae indulgentiarum; et tamen ex illa futili in quo postea magnae res agitatae sunt, et adhuc agitantur. Mementote ergo hunc diem, et simul cogitate de rebus ipsis.”

30. See the discussion of the meaning of *vesperae*, on the Eve of All Saints’ Day, in Bornkamm, *Theses*, 21–23. Bornkamm appears not to have known about this report in Melanchthon’s later writings.

31. “Anno do[m]ini 1517 in profesto o[mn]i[u]m Sanctoru[m], p. . . Wite[m]berge in valuis temploru[m] propositae sunt . . . de Indulgentiis, a D[octore] Mart[in]o Luth[ero].” See Martin Treu, “Urkunde und Reflexion: Wiederentdeckung eines Belegs für Luthers Thesenanschlag,” in: *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, 59–67. Underneath is a notice about Melanchthon’s

arrival in Wittenberg: “Anno 1518/ Postridie Bartholomei circa hora 10//Phil. Mel.// Primu[m] venit//Wittebergae.”

32. WA Bi 11/2: CXLI: “Anno a Natali Christi 1517 pridie festi omnium Sanctorum propositiones de indulgentiis venalibus edidit M. L. Theologiae D. affixas foribus templi, quod arci Wittembergensi contiguum est.” See Treu, “Urkunde,” and Leppin, “Monumentalisierung,” in: *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, 59 and 85, respectively.

33. See “Christoph Scheurl’s *Geschichtsbuch der Christenheit von 1511 bis 1521*,” in: *Jahrbücher des deutschen Reichs und der deutschen Kirche im Zeitalter der Reformation 1* (1872): 1-179, here 123: “Doctor Luther ist von seinen widertailen nit allein sein hiuor disputirte 95. Conclusion im truck ausgin Zulassen, sunder auch der Resoluciones Bapsten Leon am tag Trinitatis Zuzeschicken.” See also Leppin, *Monumentalisierung*, in *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, 88.

34. “Scheurl’s *Geschichtsbuch*,” 112: “vhiultig vmbgeschriben vnd in teutschelant fur neue Zeitung hin vnd wider geschickt.”

35. WA 54: 180, 5-20 (cf. LW 34: 329-30, altered): “Igitur cum anno MDXVII. indulgentiae in his regionibus venderentur (promulgarentur volui dicere) turpissimo quaestu, ego tum eram concionator, iuuenis (ut dicitur) Doctor Theologiae, et coepi dissuadere populis, et eos dehortari, ne indulgentiariorum clamoribus aurem praerberent, habere eos meliora quae facerent, et in iis certus mihi videbar, me habiturum patronum papam, cuius fiducia tunc fortiter nitebar, qui in suis decretis clarissime damnat quaestorum (ita vocat indulgentiariorum praedicatores) immodestiam. Mox scripsi epistolas duas, alteram ad Moguntinensem archiepiscopum Albertum, qui dimidium pecuniae ex indulgentiis habebat, alterum dimidium papa, id quod tunc nesciebam, alteram ad ordinarium (ut vocant) loci, episcopum Brandenburgensem Hieronymum, rogans, ut compescerent quaestorum impudentiam et blasphemiam, sed pauperculus frater contemnebatur. Ego contemptus edidi Disputationis scedulam simul et germanicam concionem de indulgentiis, paulo post etiam Resoluciones, in quibus pro honore papae hoc agebam, ut indulgentiae non damnarentur quidem, sed bona opera caritatis illis praeferrentur.”

36. See the description of Luther’s earlier positions at the university and from the pulpit in Junghans, “Kirchliche Magnaten,” in: *Thesenanschlag*, 36-38. Luther made comments in a similar vein in *Wider Hans Wörst* and in WA TR 5: 76, 13-16 (no. 5346, dated in the summer of 1540).

37. WA Br 1: 108-15 (LW 48:43-49).

38. See the remark about a letter which was to warn the bishops about Tetzel, mentioned in WA TR 6: 238 (no. 6861).

39. It is worth noting that the 95 *Theses* were apparently not published in German before Luther’s death. The German-speaking public learned about Luther’s attacks on Tetzel’s indulgence preaching from the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*. See WA 1: 239-46, now translated in *The Roots of Reform*, 57-65 (note 5 above). It was clearly published around 17 February 1518 and printed twenty-one times between 1518 and 1520. Tetzel, who attacked the 95 *Theses* in January 1518, also wrote against this *Sermon*.

40. Duke Heinrich von Braunschweig, *Egrünte, beständige, erheblich, warhafftige, göttliche, christliche Fürsten und Adel liebende Duplicae* (Wolfenbüttel: Henning Rüdem, 1541; accessed on line 18 June 2012 at: http://dfg-viewer.de/show/?set%5Bimage%5D=1&set%5Bzoom%5D=default&set%5Bdebug%5D=0&set%5Bdouble%5D=0&set%5Bmets%5D=http%3A%2F%2Fdaten.digital-sammlungen.de%2F~db%2Fmets%2Fbsb00021594_mets.xml). On p. A 8v he claimed that Luther called Elector John Frederick “Hans Wurst,”

although Luther had clearly never done this anywhere (see WA 51: 538, 21). In addition, on p.T 1r Heinrich accused Elector Frederick the Wise of having begun the Reformation at precisely the time when the election of a successor to the deceased archbishop Ernst of Magdeburg and Halberstadt was decided against his wishes (namely in favor of Albrecht von Brandenburg), the son and brother, respectively, of the Electors Johann Cicero and Joachim I of Brandenburg.

41. See a similar set of reminiscences in WA TR 2: 479 (no. 2474, from early 1532) and WA TR 6: 238–39 (no. 6861).

42. WA 51: 538, 23 – 539, 13; 539, 32–36; 540, 8–9 & 15–28; 541, 21–23, 25: “Es geschach im Jar, da man .17. schreib, das ein Prediger Münch, mit namen Johannes Detzel, ein grosser Clamant ... Der selbige Detzel füret nu das Ablas umb her, und verkaufft gnade umbs Gelt, so thewr oder wol viel er aus allen krefften vermocht. Zu der zeit war ich Prediger allhie im Kloster und ein junger Doctor, newlich aus der Esse komen, hitzig und lüstig in der heiligen Schrifft. Als nu viel Volcks von Wittemberg lieff dem Ablas nach gen Jütterbock und Zerbest etc. Und ich ... nicht wuste, was das Ablas were, wie es denn kein mensch nicht wuste, fieng ich seuberlich an zu predigen, man köndte wol bessers thun, das gewisser were weder Ablas lösen. Solche predigt hatte ich auch zuvor gethan hie auffm Schloss, wider das Ablas, Und bey Hertzog Friderich damit schlechte gnade verdienet, Denn er sein Stiff auch seer lieb hatte. Nu, das ich zur rechten ursachen des Lutherisschen Lermens kome, lies ich alles also gehen, wie es gieng. In des kömpt für mich, Wie der Detzel hette geprediget gewlich schreckliche Artickel ... Und des dings treib er gewlich viel, und war alles umbs geld zu thun. Ich wuste aber zu der zeit nicht, wem solch gelt solte. Da gieng ein Büchlin aus, gar herrlich unter des Bisschoffs zu Magdeburg wapen, darin solcher Artickel etliche den Questorn geboten würden zupredigen. Da kams erfur, das Bisschoff Albrecht diesen Detzel gedinget hatte, weil er ein grosser Clamant war ... [der Bisschoff] schickt diesen grossen Beuteldrescher in die Lender ... Da schrieb ich einen brief mit den Propositionibus an den Bisschoff zu Magdeburg, vermanet und bat, Er wolte dem Detzel einhalt thun und solch ungeschickt ding zu predigen wehren, Es möchte ein unlust draus entstehen, Solchs gebürte jm als einem Ertzbisschoffe. Den selben brief kan ich noch auff legen. Aber mir ward kein antwort. Des gleichen schrieb ich auch dem Bisschoff zu Brandenburg, als Ordinario, An dem ich seer einen gnedigen Bisschoff hatte. Darauff er mir antwortet, Ich griffe der Kirchen gewalt an, und würde mir selbs mühe machen, Er riete mir, ich liesse davon. Ich kann wol dencken, das sie alle beide gedacht haben, Der Bapst würde mir solchem elenden Bettler viel zu mechtig sein. Also giengen meine Propositiones aus wider des Detzels Artickel, wie man im gedrückten wol sehen mag. Die selbigen lieffen schier in vierzehen tagen durch gantz Deuschland. Denn alle welt klagt uber das Ablas, sonderlich uber Detzels Artickel ... Dis ist der erste, rechte, grundliche anfang des Lutherischen Lermens, den nicht Hertzog Fridreich, sondern der Bisschoff zu Meintz durch seinen Beuteldrescher oder Beutelschneider Detzel ... angefangen hat.”

43. WA Br 4: 275, 25–27: “Wittembergae, die Omnium Sanctorum, anno decimo Indulgentiarum conculcatarum, quarum memoria hac hora bibimus utrinque consolati, 1527” (“Wittenberg, on the Day of All Saints, ten years after trampling indulgences underfoot, in memory of which at this hour we have drunk encouraged on both sides”). Whether one thinks only of the letter to the archbishop of Mainz or the everyday matter of an invitation to a disputation, it appears that the formulation, that the indulgences were “trampled underfoot” (*conculcatarum*), was as much exaggerated as the description of the toast.

44. For the source-critical problems with these texts, see now Katharina Bärenfänger, Volker Leppin and Stefan Michel, eds., *Martin Luthers Tischreden: Neue Forschungen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). The state of this source is, on the one hand, compromised by Luther's own imprecise memory and, on the other, by the note-takers, who on their part were not always precise and who, as is particularly evident in Johannes Aurifaber, often consciously rewrote large portions of the texts according to their own agendas.

45. WA TR 5: 77 (no. 5349, dated around 7 August 1540): "domi disputat (d.h. Luther) secum, pervolvit libros, consulit iureconsultos, sed videt nihil sani, nihil firmi inesse indulgentiis. Quare facit positiones: Dominus et Magister noster etc. Non hoc egit, ut papam adoriretur, sed ut obviam iret blasphemis vocibus clamatorum."

46. WA TR 5: 74 (no. 5343; summer, 1540): "...sed episcopus misit ad me abbatem. Qui venit et contulit mecum, sed nihil erat. Sie furchten sich alle."

47. WA TR 5: 657-58 (no. 6431): "Ista portenta me movebant, ut me opponerem, non propter aliquem honorem aut quaestum. Primo in terram prostratus orabam Deum, ut mihi adesset. Nondum vidi tantas papae abominationes, sed tantum crassos abusos. Ideo primum supplex scribebam ad episcopum Brandeburgensem et Moguntinum, nisi hoc malum tollerent, me contra scripturum. Episcopi miserunt meum scriptum Tetzelio; quo semel atque iterum relecto dicitur ad ministrum clamasse: Veit, wirdt das offenbar werden vnd in Teutzschland kommen, so wirdt vns der Teuffel bescheißen! Tunc episcopi, ut petiveram, remittebant mihi scripta mea. Abbas de Lehnin imperabat mihi silentium, sed ipsi nolebant tacere meque irritabant ad scribendum."

48. WA TR 3: 564 (no. 3722; cf. LW 54: 264): "Wie gar schwerlich ging es erstlich an, do wir anno 17. post Omnium Sanctorum gegen Kemberg zugen, ubi ego primo proposueram scribere contra crassos errores indulgentiarum! Et Doctor Hieronymus Schurff restitit mihi: Vultis scribere contra papam? Was wolt ir machen? Man wirdts nicht leiden! Ego dixi: Wen mans must leiden?" Aurifaber translates the Latin "proposueram scribere" with "Und da ich mir furgenommen hatte, zu schreiben." (and since I had decided to write).

49. WA TR 4: 316-17 (no. 4446, dated 25 March 1539; cf. LW 54: 341-42): "Initio euangelii sensim processi contra Tetzeliū impudentissimū, et Hieronymus, episcopus Brandenburgensis, me dilexit; ego quoque illum exhortabar ut ordinarium loci, das er in diese sache wolde sehen, misique ei resolutiones mea manu scriptas, antequam divulgarem. Sed nemo Tetzeliū latrantem voluit compescere, sed defendere praesumebant."

50. WA Br 1: 117-19 (no. 50), normally dated November 1517 but now dated January 1518 by Martin Brecht in his *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation*, trans. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 203, n. 5 (p. 508), and WA Br 1: 119-20 (no. 51; LW 48: 49-52), now dated according to WA Br 13: 11 to the summer of 1518. In the first, addressed to Georg Spalatin, Luther is concerned about the effect of *positiones nostrae* ["our positions"] on Elector Frederick—a concern that first appears for certain in a letter from February 1518.

51. WA Br 1: 115-16.

52. WA Br 1: 121-23, here 121: "Ecce alia denuo Paradoxa [the first were clearly his *Theses against Scholastic Theology* from 4 September 1517; cf. LW 31: 3-16] mitto, Reverendissime Pater mi in Christo. Quod si etiam in his tui theologi offendentur et dixerint (sicut passim de me omnes loquuntur) me nimis temere superbeque praecipitare iudicium damnare que alienas sententias, respondeo per te et has literas. Primum mihi vehementer placere maturam eorum modestiam cunctantemque diu gravitatem, si eam in opere exhiberent sicut in me reprehendunt levitatem et praecipitem temeritatem."

53. WA 1: 233, 7.

54. WA Br 1: 135-41. The suggestion by the editor of the Weimar edition to change the date handed down in the printed versions (*Sabbatho Exaudi* or *Sabbatho post Exaudi*; 15 or 22 May 1518) into *Sabbatho LX/post LX* (i.e., Sexagesima Sunday; 6 or 13 February) is unnecessarily complicated. The problem can be solved far more easily. Hermann Grotefend, *Taschenbuch der Zeitrechnung*, 12 ed. (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1982), 52, notes that “*Exaudi*” can also designate Ash Wednesday (where the first words of the prayer over the ashes at the beginning of the worship is “*exaudi nos Domine*”). In 1518, Ash Wednesday fell on 17 February, with the following Saturday (= *Sabbathum*) coming on 20 February. If one prefers with Brecht to use the later date, then this letter must concern a proposed earlier version of the foreword to the *Explanations of the 95 Theses*, which was finally replaced by a letter addressed to Pope Leo X (WA 1: 527-29). This seems highly unlikely.

55. See WA Br 1: 135-41. Luther also mentioned this in WA TR 4: 316-17 (no. 4446). See above, n. 48.

56. WA Br 1: 138, 4-10. The comments are referring to the *Instructio summaria*, which proclaimed on its very first page that whoever did not support the “Peter’s Indulgence” could only receive pardon from the pope, the archbishop or their representatives. This explains, in part, why Albrecht immediately sent the *Theses* on to his university and to the papal court in Rome.

57. WA Br 1: 138, 17-19: “*de tanta re disputare*”. “*Itaque emisi disputationem, invitans et rogans publice omnes, privatim vero, ut nosti* [WA Br 13: 12 reads: *novi*: “the most learned that I knew”], *quosque doctissimos, ut vel per literas suam sententiam aperirent*.” This underscores the importance of the introduction to the *Theses* and strengthens the notion that this “exordium” was most probably part of the text from the very beginning. This is also reflected in the introductory remarks by the theologians of the University of Mainz in their official response to the *Theses* from 17 December 1517: “...nonnullas conclusiones seu positiones per quondam sacrae theologiae magistrum ... in insigni universali gymnasio Wittenburgensi scolastice et publice disputatas per vestram paternitatem reverendissimam ad nos datas...”

58. WA Br 1: 141-47, here 146, 82-83: “*tanquam inductus ab eo* [i.e., Frederick the Wise] *ad Invidiam Archiepiscopi Magdurgensis*.” One finds the same concern in a letter to Spalatin dated 22 February 1518 (WA Br 1: 149-51; LW 48: 56-60).

59. WA Br 1: 152 (no. 3). Franz von Soden and J. K. F. Knaake, eds., *Christoph Scheurl's Briefbuch: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Reformation und ihrer Zeit*, vol. 2: *Briefe von 1517-1540* (Potsdam: Gropius, 1872; accessed on line: www.mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn/resolver.pl?urn=urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10403895-4), 42: “*Conclusiones Martinianas grato animo accepi, quas nostri traduxere et in pretio habent*.” Kurt Aland, *Martin Luther's 95 Theses*, 112, misunderstands the meaning. Scheurl was hardly talking about something that was common knowledge. Instead, he was thanking Dienststedt and making clear that “our people” held the 95 *Theses* worthy of translation. For the expression “*in pretium habere*” (incorrectly translated in Aland), see Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v.

60. *Briefbuch*, 2: 43. “*Conclusiones de indulgentiis admirantur ac in pretio habent* Pirkhamer, A. Tucher et Wenceslaus [Link], C. Nuzel traduxit...”

61. WA Br 1: 152, 6. Although there is no doubt that the Latin edition mentioned involved a printed copy, it is not completely clear whether Scheurl sent Luther an printed version of Nützel’s German translation or a handwritten copy for Luther’s approval prior to publication. In any case, no copy of a German translation from this time has survived.

62. WA Br 1: 152, 5-13: “*non fuit consilium neque votum eas evulgari, sed cum paucis apud et circum nos habitantibus primum super ipsis conferri, ut sic multorum iudicio*

vel damnatae abolerentur vel probatae ederentur. At nunc longe ultra spem toties excuduntur et transferuntur, ut me poeniteat huius foeturae, non quod veritatem non faveam cognitam fieri vulgo, imo id unice quaerebam, sed quod ille modus non est idoneus, quo vulgus erudiatur." Luther made a similar remark to Jodocus Truttffetter in a letter from 9 May 1518 (WA Br 1: 169–72, especially 170: 41–45).

63. The abbot from Lehnin had given this advice, but the bishop could not find anything false in the *Explanations*. He disapproved publication of the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* and hoped that Luther would keep silent. Unfortunately the letter to Spalatin containing this information is not dated. WA Br 1: 161–62 suggests it was written in the first half of March 1518.

64. WA Br 1: 152, 22: "ut opprimam Positiones illas vagantissimas."

65. A reprint of this *Sermon* appeared in Nuremberg in 1518, published by Jobst Gutknecht. It was one of over twenty such reprints.

66. WATR 3: 656 (no. 3846) and 5: 535 (no. 6201) also point to Tetzel's self-promotion.

67. WA 1: 528, 20–26: "Hic ab aliis acceptabar, aliis ridiculum, allis aliud videbar. . . . Tandem, cum nihil possem aliud, visum est saltem leniuscule illis reluctari, id est eorum dogmata in dubium et disputationem vocare. Itaque schedulam disputatoriam edidi, invitans tantum doctores, siqui vellent mecum disceptare, sicut manifestum esse etiam adversariis oportet ex praefatione eiusdem disceptationis."

68. WA 1: 528, 38 – 529, 2: "apud nostros et propter nostros tantum sunt editae, et sic editae, ut mihi incredibile sit, eas ab omnibus intelligi: disputationes enim sunt, non doctrinae, non dogmata, obscurius pro more et enygmaticos." This outlines Luther's intention at the time he published the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*.

69. Lothar Vogel, "Zwischen Universität und Seelsorge: Martin Luthers Beweggründe im Ablassstreit," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 118 (2007): 187–212, points out that criticism of indulgences is best explained as arising out of Luther's academic development and that, thus, his pastoral concerns ought not be overemphasized. For Luther's earliest criticism of indulgences (from January 1517 before the electoral court), see most recently Timothy J. Wengert, "Martin Luther's Preaching an Indulgence in January 1517," *Lutheran Quarterly* 29 (2015): 62–75.

70. Bernd Moeller, "Thesenanschläge," in: *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, 17.

71. WA 1: 233, 5–7: "Quare petit, ut qui non possunt verbis presentes nobiscum disceptare agant id literis absentes."

72. Given that Luther had entrée to the Grunenberg press, which was located in the basement of the Augustinian Cloister, he could without difficulty had some copies printed, just as he had done with the *Theses against Scholastic Theology* from September, which he also sent to friends and acquaintances and for which an original copy has survived.

73. WA Br 1: 121–23 (no. 52).

74. WA TR 4: 317, 1 (no. 4446). See also WA Br 1: 135–41 (no. 58).

75. See WA Br 1: 245, 362.

76. WA 51: 540, n. 13. "... die conclusiones, die der Augustinermönch zu Wittenberg gemacht, an vil ortern angeslagen wurden." In early new High German, the word "anschlagen" can simply mean "made known." See Alfred Götze, ed., *Frühneuhochdeutsches Glossar*, 5th ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1956), s.v. Martin Brecht's assumption (*Martin Luther*, 205) that the bishop himself wanted to post them seems to read too much into the report.

77. See WA Br 1: 164–65 (no. 70). To be sure, the dating by the editor to 4 April is questionable, given that Luther could also have preached three days in a row on Pentecost (23 May).

Ninety-five Theses, propositions for debate concerned with the question of indulgences, written in Latin and possibly posted by Martin Luther on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. The event came to be considered the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions. Select Citation Style. MLA APA Chicago Manual of Style. The Ninety-Five Theses was written by Martin Luther. The thesis questioned the practices and power of the Roman Catholic Church (at that time, the Catholic church was too involved in politics and sold the right to confess sins). I believe the theses eventually started to become the foundation of Protestant Reformation, MrZieleniewo MrZieleniewo. Here's how to complete that sentence: The 95 Theses, written by MARTIN LUTHER, question the CHURCH'S USE OF INDULGENCES. This document was largely responsible for starting the PROTESTANT Reformation. Details: The official title of Luther's document, which he put forth on October 31, 1517, as theses for debate, was: Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences. The Ninety-Five Theses. The Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences. Posted: October 31, 1517 The Eve of All Saints Day. Castle Church Wittenberg, Germany. For oral debate on November 1, 1517. Out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following theses will be publicly discussed at Wittenberg under the chairmanship of the reverend father, Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and regularly appointed Lecturer on these subjects at that place. He requests that those who cannot be present to debate orally with us will do so by letter. In the Na... The Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences were written by Martin Luther and posted on the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg. Martin Luther's actions created a chain reaction that led to almost a century-and-a-half of fighting that weakened both the Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church. What direction will you take in this quest? How will you face the looming, and ever growing, Protestant Reformation? How will you interpret the Ninety-Five Theses? The 95 theses ignited the debate that lead to a much wider and deeper reformation than even Luther would have expected. 3. Sponsored by USAFIS. Martin Luther then took all of the ideas and wrote them down in a letter we now know as the Ninety-Five Theses. While we cannot be sure, legend has it that Martin Luther went to a major church and nailed a printed copy of his theses on the door. In addition to his theses, Martin ended up translating the Bible from Latin and Hebrew into German so that everyone could read it for themselves. He then went to numerous towns and handed out copies of his theses and the Bible so that there were many copies. Many people agreed with him about the problems in the Catholic church and protested against the church.