

MARTIN LUTHER: PROTESTANT SAINT OR “DEVIL IN THE HABIT OF A MONK”?

c. 1483	Born
1505	Entered Augustinian Order
1510	Journey to Rome on business for his order
1512	Doctorate in Theology from University of Wittenberg
1513-1517	The Lectures on Scripture
1517	The Ninety-five Theses
1519	<i>On Christian Liberty</i>
1520	<i>On Good Works</i> <i>Address to the Christian Nobility</i> <i>Babylonian Captivity of the Church</i>
1521	Diet of Worms
1525	Married Katherina von Bora <i>On the Bondage of the Will</i>
1534	Published complete German Bible
1546	Died

On a summer day in the year 1505, a young German law student was returning to the University of Erfurt after a visit home. He was overtaken by a sudden, violent thunderstorm and struck to the ground by a bolt of lightning. Terrified, he cried out, “St. Anne, help me! I will become a monk.” Such vows were usually quickly forgotten, but not this one, for the student was Martin Luther, the man who was to bring about the most profound revolution in the history of the Christian faith. Within a matter of weeks, he disposed of his worldly goods, including his law books, and joined the order of the Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt. His father was furious; his friends were dismayed. And historians and theologians since the sixteenth century have speculated about the motives that compelled him. But this is only one

of the questions about Martin Luther that have fascinated scholars and made him the subject of more writing than any other figure in European history.

There was seemingly nothing in his youth or adolescence to account for his decision to become a monk. But once that decision was made, Luther was swept by such a tidal wave of religious intensity that it troubled even his monastic superiors. He prayed for hours on end; he subjected himself to such ascetic rigors that he almost ruined his health; and he confessed his sins over and over again. He was assaulted by what one modern scholar has aptly called "the terror of the holy." God was for him a terrible judge, so perfect and so righteous that sinful man could not even begin to deserve anything at His hands but eternal damnation. Martin Luther was beginning his search for "justification," the sense that somehow, against all odds, he might earn God's grace and escape damnation.

The terror of the holy remained, and the monastic life gave Luther no assurance that God's grace was close at hand. But the very religious disquiet that tormented the young monk also caused his superiors to single him out, for this was the stuff that the great figures of religion were made of—St. Francis, St. Bernard, St. Benedict. Moreover, Brother Martin, for all his inner turmoil, was a bright and capable young man and already well educated, a Master of Arts. Soon he was ordained a priest. He was sent on a matter of chapter business to Rome. And his education continued, but now in theology rather than law.

Then the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, approached the Erfurt Augustinians in search of faculty members for the newly founded university in his capital town of Wittenberg. Brother Martin was sent. In Wittenberg he taught the arts course, worked at his own studies, and assumed more than a fair share of the parish duties. By 1513 he earned his doctor's degree and began to teach theology. As he prepared a series of lectures on the Psalms, he began to gain new understanding of his texts. And then, while he was working out his lectures on the Epistles of St. Paul, he found meaning in the familiar passage from Romans 1:17 that he had never before perceived. "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith." Later Luther said, "This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven." Here was the "justification" he had sought so long in vain. People are justified by faith, by the simple act of belief in Christ, in a way that no amount of works, however pious and well intended, no amount of prayers or anguish or penance can ensure. Justification by faith was to become the cardinal doctrine of a new religious sect.

But Luther's inward revelation might never have led to a separate sect, much less a Reformation, except for a chain of events external to him. It began with a particularly scandalous sale of indulgences in the

neighboring lands of the Archbishop of Mainz. The doctrine of indulgences was the basis of the church's profitable traffic in "pardons," as they were sometimes called, remissions of the temporal penalties for sin. Although the doctrine was an outgrowth of the sacrament of penance, many religious were troubled by it. To Luther, the indulgences that had been bought across the border by some of his parishioners and the outrageous claims for their effectiveness that were being made by the indulgence preacher, the Dominican Johann Tetzel, seemed a surpassingly bad example of the concept of "works," especially in light of his own increasing conviction that works could not work salvation in people—that only faith ("sola fides") could. In response to this scandalous situation, Luther was led to propose his ninety-five theses against indulgences. The document was dated October 31, 1517, the most famous date in Protestantism. The theses were written in Latin, intended for academic disputation, but somehow they were translated into German and found their way into print. Despite their dry, scholarly prose and formal organization, they became a popular, even an inflammatory manifesto. Ecclesiastical authorities, including the offended Archbishop of Mainz, complained to Luther's superiors and eventually to Rome. Luther was pressed to recant, but he refused. Instead, he clung stubbornly not only to his basic position on indulgences but to the ever more revolutionary implications of his belief in justification by faith. Within three years, he had come to reject much of the sacramental theory of the church, nearly all its traditions, and the authority of the pope. In 1520 he defied Pope Leo X's bull of condemnation; in the following year he defied the Emperor Charles V in the famous confrontation at the Diet of Worms. The Lord's good servant had become, in Charles's phrase, "that devil in the habit of a monk." The Catholic Luther had become the Protestant Luther.

The Protestant Luther

MARTIN LUTHER

The image of Luther the Protestant results most directly, of course, from Luther's deeds—his successful act of defiance against established church and established state, his uncanny ability not only to survive but to build around him a new political-religious community vital enough to maintain itself. Luther's Protestant image is also based upon the incredible quantity of his writings—tracts and treatises, sermons, commentaries, translations, disputations, hymns, and letters—nearly a hundred heavy volumes in the standard modern edition. But his image also rests upon an elaborate Protestant tradition that can be traced to Luther himself.

Luther was a voluble and expansive man. Even his formal treatises are rich in anecdotes from his own experience and filled with autobiographical detail. These qualities carried over into his talk, and Luther loved to talk. As the Reformation settled into a political and social reality and Luther married—for he rejected clerical celibacy along with the other doctrines of the old church—his kitchen table became the center of the Protestant world. In addition to his own large family, there were always people visiting—friends and associates, wandering scholars and ecclesiastics, professors and students, and religious refugees. After dinner, when the dishes were cleared and the beer steins passed around, they would talk, Luther usually taking the lead. He had opinions on practically everything—politics, people, theology, education, child rearing—and he would reminisce about his own life as well.

*Some of the guests took notes on these conversations, and a great many of them have been preserved in a collection appropriately called the *Tabletalk*, which comprises six volumes in the German Weimar edition. The following selections are from the *Tabletalk*. They are fragments of Luther's own recollections of his experiences of monasticism, his inward struggle to gain a sense of justification, and his defiance of the old church.*

He [Martin Luther] became a monk against the will of his father. When he celebrated his first mass and asked his father why he was angry about the step he took, the father replied reproachfully, "Don't you know that it's written, Honor your father and your mother [Exod. 20:12]?" When he excused himself by saying that he was so frightened by a storm that he was compelled to become a monk, his father answered, "Just so it wasn't a phantom you saw!" . . .

[Luther recalled] "later when I stood there during the mass and began the canon, I was so frightened that I would have fled if I hadn't been admonished by the prior. For when I read the words, 'Thee, therefore, most merciful Father,' etc., and thought I had to speak to God without a Mediator, I felt like fleeing from the world like Judas. Who can bear the majesty of God without Christ as Mediator? In

short, as a monk I experienced such horrors; I had to experience them before I could fight them.” . . . “I almost fasted myself to death, for again and again I went for three days without taking a drop of water or a morsel of food. I was very serious about it. I really crucified the Lord Christ. I wasn’t simply an observer but helped to carry him and pierce [his hands and feet]. God forgive me for it, for I have confessed it openly! This is the truth: the most pious monk is the worst scoundrel. He denies that Christ is the mediator and highpriest and turns him into a judge.

“I chose twenty-one saints and prayed to three every day when I celebrated mass; thus I completed the number every week. I prayed especially to the Blessed Virgin, who with her womanly heart would compassionately appease her Son. . . .

“When I was a monk I was unwilling to omit any of the prayers, but when I was busy with public lecturing and writing I often accumulated my appointed prayers for a whole week, or even two or three weeks. Then I would take a Saturday off, or shut myself in for as long as three days without food and drink, until I had said the prescribed prayers. This made my head split, and as a consequence I couldn’t close my eyes for five nights, lay sick unto death, and went out of my senses. Even after I had quickly recovered and I tried again to read, my head went ’round and ’round. Thus our Lord God drew me, as if by force, from that torment of prayers. To such an extent had I been captive [to human traditions]. . . .

“I wouldn’t take one thousand florins for not having seen Rome because I wouldn’t have been able to believe such things if I had been told by somebody without having seen them for myself. We were simply laughed at because we were such pious monks. A Christian was taken to be nothing but a fool. I know priests who said six or seven masses while I said only one. They took money for them and I didn’t. In short, there’s no disgrace in Italy except to be poor. Murder and theft are still punished a little, for they must do this. Otherwise no sin is too great for them.” . . .

[As a young professor in Wittenberg] “the words ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness of God’ struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous [I thought], he must punish. But when by God’s grace I pondered, in the tower¹ and heated room of this building, over the words, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’ [Rom. 1:17] and ‘the righteousness of God’ [Rom. 3:21], I soon came to the conclusion that if we, as righteous men, ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of

¹The tower was the “privy” of the cloister, and it was there that Luther suddenly saw the significance of justification by faith. Hence Lutheran scholarship refers to his *turmerlebnis*, or “tower experience.”

God should contribute to the salvation of all who believe, then salvation won't be our merit but God's mercy. My spirit was thereby cheered. For it's by the righteousness of God that we're justified and saved through Christ. These words [which had before terrified me] now became more pleasing to me. The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower. . . .

"That works don't merit life, grace, and salvation is clear from this, that works are not spiritual birth but are fruits of this birth. We are not made sons, heirs, righteous, saints, Christians by means of works, but we do good works once we have been made, born, created such. So it's necessary to have life, salvation, and grace before works, just as a tree doesn't deserve to become a tree on account of its fruit but a tree is by nature fitted to bear fruit. Because we're born, created, generated righteous by the Word of grace, we're not fashioned, prepared, or put together as such by means of the law or works. Works merit something else than life, grace, or salvation—namely, praise, glory, favor, and certain extraordinary things—just as a tree deserves to be loved, cultivated, praised, and honored by others on account of its fruit. Urge the birth and substance of the Christian and you will at the same time extinguish the merits of works insofar as grace and salvation from sin, death, and the devil are concerned.

"Infants who have no works are saved by faith alone, and therefore faith alone justifies. If the power of God can do this in one person it can do it in all, because it's not the power of the infant but the power of faith. Nor is it the weakness of the infant that does it; otherwise that weakness would itself be a merit or be equivalent to one. We'd like to defy our Lord God with our works. We'd like to become righteous through them. But he won't allow it. My conscience tells me that I'm not justified by works, but nobody believes it. 'Thou art justified in thy sentence; against thee only have I sinned and done that which is evil in thy sight' [Ps. 51:4]. What is meant by 'forgive us our debts' [Matt. 6:12]? I don't want to be good. What would be easier than for a man to say, 'I am a sinful man' [Luke 5:8]? But thou art a righteous God. That would be bad enough, but we are our own tormentors. The Spirit says, 'Righteous art thou' [Ps. 119:137]. The flesh can't say this: 'Thou art justified in thy sentence' [Ps. 51:4]. . . .

"God led us away from all this in a wonderful way; without my quite being aware of it he took me away from that game more than twenty years ago. How difficult it was at first when we journeyed toward Kemberg² after All Saints' Day in the year 1517, when I first made up my mind to write against the crass errors of indulgences! Dr. Jerome Schurff³ advised against this: 'You wish to write against the

²A nearby monastery where, presumably, they were traveling on some routine parish business.

³A colleague of Luther's in the faculty of law.

pope? What are you trying to do? It won't be tolerated!' I replied, 'And if they have to tolerate it?' Presently Sylvester,⁴ master of the sacred palace, entered the arena, fulminating against me with this syllogism: 'Whoever questions what the Roman Church says and does is heretical. Luther questions what the Roman Church says and does, and therefore [he is a heretic].' So it all began. . . .

"At the beginning of the gospel⁵ I took steps only very gradually against the impudent Tetzal. Jerome, the bishop of Brandenburg, held me in esteem, and I exhorted him, as the ordinary of the place, to look into the matter and sent him a copy of my *Explanations*⁶ before I published them. But nobody was willing to restrain the ranting Tetzal; rather, everybody ventured to defend him. So I proceeded imprudently while the others listened and were worn out under the tyranny. Now that I got into the matter I prayed to God to help me further. One can never pay the pope as he deserves."

Young Man Luther

ERIK H. ERIKSON

Erik H. Erikson, from whose book, Young Man Luther, A Study in Psychoanalysis and History, the following selection is taken was a psychiatrist turned historian (d. 1994). In this selection he traces the development of Luther's personality. He also dwells on the evolution of his powerful preaching style and dwells on him as an inspired and popular lecturer and biblical exegete. And he concludes with Luther's perception of justification by faith, which was to become the centerpiece of his new theology.

Martin's preaching and teaching career started in earnest in Wittenberg, never to be interrupted until his death. He first preached to his fellow-monks (an elective job), and to townspeople who audited his intramural sermons. He became pastor of St. Mary's. As a professor, he lectured both to monks enrolled in advanced courses, and to the students in the university. Forced to speak his mind in public, he realized the rich spectrum of his verbal expression, and gained the courage of his conflicted personality. He learned to preach to the

⁴Sylvester Prierias, a papal official and a Dominican, the first dignitary in Rome to attack Luther.

⁵Luther often used this phrase for the beginning of the Reformation.

⁶The book Luther wrote explaining and defending his ninety-five theses.

heart and to lecture to the mind in two distinct styles. His sermons were for the uplift of the moment; in his lectures, he gradually and systematically developed as a thinker.

Luther the preacher was a different man from Martin the monk. His posture was manly and erect, his speech slow and distinct. This early Luther was by no means the typical pyknic, obese and round-faced, that he became in his later years. He was bony, with furrows in his cheeks, and a stubborn, protruding chin. His eyes were brown and small, and must have been utterly fascinating, judging by the variety of impressions they left on others. They could appear large and prominent or small and hidden; deep and unfathomable at one time, twinkling like stars at another, sharp as a hawk's, terrible as lightning, or possessed as though he were insane. There was an intensity of conflict about his face, which might well impress a clinician as revealing the obsessive character of a very gifted, cunning, and harsh man who possibly might be subject to states of uncontrolled fear or rage. Just because of this conflicted countenance, Luther's warmth, wit, and childlike candor must have been utterly disarming; and there was a total discipline about his personality which broke down only on rare occasions. It was said about Luther that he did not like to be looked in the eye, because he was aware of the revealing play of his expression while he was trying to think. (The same thing was said of Freud; and he admitted that his arrangement for the psychoanalytic session was partially due to his reluctance "to be stared at.")

Martin's bearing gradually came to contradict the meekness demanded of a monk; in fact, his body seemed to be leaning backward so that his broad forehead was imperiously lifted toward the sky; his head sat on a short neck, between broad shoulders and over a powerful chest. Some, like Spalatin, the elector's chaplain and advisor, admired him unconditionally; others, like the elector himself, Frederic the Wise, felt uncomfortable in his presence. It is said that Luther and the elector, who at times must have lived only a short distance from him and to whose cunning diplomacy and militant protection he would later owe his survival, "personally never met" to converse, even though the elector often heard him preach—and on some occasions, preach against him and the other princes.

As a preacher and lecturer, Luther combined a command of quotations from world literature with a pervading theological sincerity. His own style developed slowly out of the humanistic preoccupation with sources, the scholastic love of definitions, and the medieval legacy of (to us, atrocious) allegory. He almost never became fanciful. In fact, he was soon known for a brusqueness and a folksy directness which was too much for some of his humanist friends, who liked to shock others in more sophisticated ways: but Luther, horrors! was one who "meant it." It could not have endeared him to Erasmus that of all the animals which serve preachers for allegories and parables, Luther

came to prefer the sow; and there is no doubt but that in later years his colorful earthiness sometimes turned into plain porcography. Nervous symptoms harassed his preaching; before, during, or after sermons he was on occasion attacked by dizziness. The popular German term of dizziness is *Schwindel*, a word which has a significant double meaning, for it is also used for the fraudulent acts of an impostor. And one of his typical nightmares was that he was facing a congregation, and God would not send him a *Konzept*.

But I think the psychiatrist misjudges his man when he thinks that endogenous sickness alone could have kept Luther from becoming a well-balanced (*ausgeglichen*) creature when his preaching brought him success. After all, he was not a Lutheran; or, as he said himself, he was a mighty bad one. On the frontier of conscience, the dirty work never stops, the lying old words are never done with, and the new purities remain forever dimmed. Once Luther had started to come into his own as a preacher, he preached lustily, and at times compulsively, every few days; when traveling, he preached in hospitable churches and in the marketplace. In later years when he was unable to leave his house because of sickness or anxiety, he would gather wife, children, and house guests about him and preach to them.

To Luther, the inspired voice, the voice that means it, the voice that really communicates in person, became a new kind of sacrament, the partner and even the rival of the mystical presence of the Eucharist. He obviously felt himself to be the evangelical giver of a substance which years of suffering had made his to give; an all-embracing verbal generosity developed in him, so that he did not wish to compete with professional talkers, but to speak to the people so that the least could understand him: "You must preach," he said, "as a mother suckles her child." No other attitude could, at the time, have appealed more to members of all classes—except Luther's preaching against taxation without representation which, in 1517, made him a national figure. By then, he had at his command the newly created machinery of communication. Within ten years thirty printers in twelve cities published his sermons as fast as he or the devoted journalists around him could get manuscripts and transcripts to them. He became a popular preacher, especially for students; and a gala preacher for the princes and nobles.

Luther the lecturer was a different man from either preacher or monk. His special field was Biblical exegesis. He most carefully studied the classical textbooks (*Glossa, Ordinaria, and Lyra*), and his important predecessors among the Augustinians; he also kept abreast of the humanist scholars of his time and of the correctives provided by Erasmus's⁷ study of the Greek texts and Reuch-

⁷Desiderius Erasmus (1466?–1536) was the most famous humanist scholar of Luther's time. He corresponded with Luther briefly but later fell away from his support.

lin's⁸ study of the Hebrew texts. He could be as quibbling a linguist as any scholasticist and as fanciful as any humanist. In his first course of lectures he tries the wings of his own thoughts; sometimes he bewilders himself, and sometimes he looks about for companions, but finally he soars his own lonesome way. His fascinated listeners did not really know what was happening until they had a national scandal on their hands, and by that time Luther's role had become so political and ideological that his early lectures were forgotten and were recovered only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because of Luther's habit of telescoping all of his theological prehistory into the events of 1517, when he became a celebrity, it has only been recognized in this century that his theology was already completed in outline when he burst into history. Then it became politics and propaganda; it became Luther as most of us know him.

But we are interested here in the beginnings, in the emergence of Martin's thoughts about the "matrix of the Scriptures." Biblical exegesis in his day meant the demonstration—scholarly, tortured, and fanciful—of the traditional assumption that the Old Testament was a prophecy of Christ's life and death. The history of the world was contained in the Word: the book of Genesis was not just an account of creation, it was also a hidden, an allegorical, index of the whole Bible up to the crowning event of Christ's passion. Exegesis was an ideological game which permitted the Church to reinterpret Biblical predictions of its own history according to a new theological line; it was a high form of intellectual and linguistic exercise; and it provided an opportunity for the display of scholastic virtuosity. There were rules, however; some education and some resourcefulness were required to make things come out right.

The medieval world had four ways of interpreting Biblical material: literally (*literaliter*), which put stress on the real historical meaning of the text; allegorically (*allegorice*), which viewed Biblical events as symbolic of Christian history, the Church's creation, and dogma; morally (*tropologice*), which took the material as figurative expression of proper behavior for a man of faith; and anagogically (*anagogice*), which treated the material as an expression of the life hereafter. Luther used these techniques for his own purposes, although he always tried to be sincere and consistent; for example, he felt that the demand for circumcision in the Old Testament foretold his new insight that outer works do not count; but this interpretation also expresses the idea that the covenant of circumcision stressed humility by its attack on the executive organ of male vainglory. Luther's ethical

⁸Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522) was the most eminent Hebrew scholar of northern Europe as well as being a distinguished Hellenist. He was linked with Luther in the popular press.

search gradually made him discard the other categories of exegesis and concentrate on the moral one: *tropologicem esse primarium sensum scripturae*.⁹ The scriptures to him became God's advice to the faithful in the here and now.

The Book of Psalms was the subject of the first series of lectures given by the new *lector bobliae* in the academic year 1513–14. Tradition suggested that King David the Psalmist ought to be interpreted as an unconscious prophet whose songs prefigured what Christ would say to God or to the Church, or what others would say to or about Christ. Our point here is to establish the emergence of Lutherisms from the overripe mixture of neoplatonic, sacramental, mystical, and scholastic interpretations; but we must remember that the personal conflict and the theological heresy on which we will focus were firmly based in what was then scholarly craftsmanship and responsible teaching. Nothing could make this more clear than the fact that no eyebrows were raised at what Martin said: and that as far as he was concerned, what he said was good theology and dedicated to the service of his new function within the Church. Furthermore, despite the impression early Lutherisms give, Luther maintained in his sermons and in his lectures a disciplined dedication to his *métier*, and allowed his personality expression only in matters of divine conviction. When he discussed a certain depth of contrition in his lectures, he could confess simply, "I am very far from having reached this myself"; but on the day he was to leave for Worms to face the Emperor, he preached in the morning without mentioning his imminent departure for that historical meeting.

His series of lectures, at the rate of one lecture a week, extended over a two-year course. Luther took the job of being a professor rather unprofessionally hard. He meticulously recorded his changes of mind, and accounted for insights for which he found the right words only as he went along with editorial honesty. "I do not yet fully understand this," he would tell his listeners. "I did not say that as well the last time as I did today." *Fateamur nos proficere scribendo et legendo*, he pleaded: We must learn to become more proficient as we write and read. He does not try to hide his arbitrariness ("I simply rhymed the abstract and the concrete together"), or an occasional tour de force: "All you can do with a text that proves to have a hard shell is to bang it at a rock and it will reveal the softest kernel (*nucleum suavissimum*)."⁹ For these words he congratulated himself by marks on the margins. It is obvious that his honesty is a far cry from the elegant arbitrariness of the scholastic divines, and their stylized methods of rationalizing gaps between faith and reason. Luther's arbitrariness is part of a working lecture in which both rough spots and polish are made apparent. The

⁹"The tropological [figurative] is the primary sense of scripture."

first lectures on the Psalms impress one as being a half-finished piece of work; and Luther's formulations fully matured only in the lectures on Paul's Epistles to the Romans (1515–16). But concerned as we are here with the solution of an extended identity crisis rather than with a completed theology, we will restrict ourselves to the first emergence of genuine Lutherisms in the lectures on the Psalms.

Rather dramatic evidence exists in Luther's notes on these lectures for the fact that while he was working on the Psalms Luther came to formulate those insights later ascribed to his revelation in the tower, the date of which scholars have tried in vain to establish with certainty. As Luther was reviewing in his mind Romans 1:17, the last sentence suddenly assumed a clarity which pervaded his whole being and "opened the door of paradise" to him: "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, *The just shall live by faith.*" The power of these words lay in a new perception of the space-time of life and eternity. Luther saw that God's justice is not consigned to a future day of judgment based on our record on earth when He will have the "last word." Instead, this justice is in us, in the here and now; for, if we will only perceive it, God has given us faith to live by, and we can perceive it by understanding the Word which is Christ. We will discuss later the circumstances leading to this perception; what interests us first of all is its relation to the lectures on the Psalms. . . .

When the lectures on the Psalms reached Psalm 71:2, Luther again faced the phrase, "Deliver me in thy righteousness," again preceded (Psalm 70) by "Let them be turned back for a reward of their shame that say, Aha, aha." But now his mood, his outlook, and his vocabulary had undergone a radical change. He twice quotes Romans 1:17 (the text of his revelation in the tower) and concludes

"Justitia dei . . . est fides Christi": Christ's faith is God's righteousness. . . .

This was the breakthrough. . . .

Luther between Reform and Reformation

ERWIN ISERLOH

A phenomenon of the last generation or so of Luther scholarship has been the emergence of a new, more balanced, and more charitable Catholic view of him. The polemical tone has almost disappeared, the shortcomings of the old church have

been recognized, and Luther himself is interpreted in ways other than simply as a bad Catholic and a worse monk, led by his own overweening hubris to an inevitable apostasy.

One of the best of the new Catholic critics is Erwin Iserloh, professor of church history at the University of Münster in Germany. The following selection is taken from his liveliest and most widely read book, *The Theses Were Not Posted: Luther between Reform and Reformation*. It is, quite apart from its point of view, a stunning demonstration of how a thoughtful scholar may use a precise event to reach a general conclusion. The event in this case is the "primal image" of Luther nailing the ninety-five theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, thereby defiantly proclaiming the beginning of his rebellion from the Catholic church. Iserloh presents evidence that this treasured picture appeared only after Luther's death, that it came not from Luther himself but from his younger associate Philipp Melancthon, and that Melancthon had not even witnessed the event. Iserloh goes on to point out that, far from an act of rebellion, Luther's handling of the matter of the theses shows him to have been, at this crucial point, both a good Catholic and a responsible theologian—in Iserloh's phrase, "an obedient rebel." Iserloh argues further that it was not necessary for Luther to have been driven to rebellion; he might well have been kept within the church to its great advantage, as well as his own.

Our investigation of the sources and the reports concerning October 31, 1517, compels us to conclude that the drama of that day was notably less than what we would suppose from the jubilee celebrations which have been held since 1617 and from the Reformation Day festivals since their inception in 1668. In fact the sources rule out a public posting of the ninety-five theses.

Although October 31, 1517, lacked outward drama it was nevertheless a day of decisive importance. It is the day on which the Reformation began, not because Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, but because on this day Luther approached the competent church authorities with his pressing call for reform. On this day he presented them with his theses and the request that they call a halt to the unworthy activities of the indulgence preachers. When the bishops did not respond, or when they sought merely to divert him, Luther circulated his theses privately. The theses spread quickly and were printed in Nürnberg, Leipzig, and Basel. Suddenly they were echoing throughout Germany and beyond its borders in a way that Luther neither foresaw nor intended. The protest that Luther registered before Archbishop Albrecht¹⁰ and the inclusion of the theses with the letter eventually led to the Roman investigation of Luther's works.

Some will surely want to object: Is it not actually of minor impor-

¹⁰The Archbishop of Mainz, who had authorized the particular sale of indulgences.

tance whether Luther posted his theses in Wittenberg or not? I would answer that it is of more than minor importance. For October 31 was a day on which the castle church was crowded with pilgrims taking advantage of the titular feast of All Saints. Luther's theses on the door would have constituted a public protest. If Luther made such a scene on the same day that he composed his letter to Archbishop Albrecht, then his letter loses its credibility, even when we take into account its excessive protestations of submissiveness and humility as conventions of the time.

Above all, if Luther did post his theses, then for the rest of his life he knowingly gave a false account of these events by asserting that he only circulated his theses after the bishops failed to act.

If the theses were not posted on October 31, 1517, then it becomes all the more clear that Luther did not rush headlong toward a break with the church. Rather, as Joseph Lortz has never tired of repeating, and as Luther himself stressed, he started the Reformation quite unintentionally. In the preface to an edition of his theses in 1538 Luther gave a detailed picture of the situation in 1517. It is as if he wanted to warn the Protestant world against dramatizing the start of the Reformation with false heroics. First he stresses how weak, reticent, and unsure he was; then he tells of his efforts to contact church authorities. This is something he knows his readers cannot appreciate, since they have grown used to impudent attacks on the broken authority of the pope. . . .

If Luther did turn first to the competent bishops with his protest, or better, with his earnest plea for reform, and if he did give them time to react as their pastoral responsibilities called for, then it is the bishops who clearly were more responsible for the consequences. If Luther did allow the bishops time to answer his request then he was sincere in begging the archbishop to remove the scandal before disgrace came upon him and upon the church.

Further, there was clearly a real opportunity that Luther's challenge could be directed to the reform of the church, instead of leading to a break with the church. But such reform would have demanded of the bishops far greater religious substance and a far more lively priestly spirit than they showed. The deficiencies that come to light here, precisely when the bishops were called on to act as theologians and pastors, cannot be rated too highly when we seek to determine the causes of the Reformation. These deficiencies had far more serious consequences than did the failures in personal morality that we usually connect with the "bad popes" and concubinous priests on the eve of the Reformation. Archbishop Albrecht showed on other occasions as well how indifferent he was to theological questions, and how fully incapable he was of comprehending their often wide-ranging religious significance. For example, he expressed his displeasure over the momentous Leipzig debate of 1519 where famous pro-

fessors were, as he saw it, crossing swords over minor points of no interest for true Christian men. This same Albrecht sent sizable gifts of money to Luther on the occasion of his marriage in 1525 and to Melanchthon after the latter had sent him a copy of his commentary on Romans in 1532.

A whole series of objections might arise here: Do not the indulgence theses themselves mark the break with the church? Do they not attack the very foundations of the church of that day? Or, as Heinrich Bornkamm wrote, do they not decisively pull the ground from under the Catholic conception of penance? Was a reform of the church of that day at all possible by renewal from within? Is not the Luther of the ninety-five theses already a revolutionary on his way inevitably to the Reformation as a division of the church?

Our first question must be whether Luther's indulgence theses deny any binding doctrines of the church in his day. And even if this be true, we cannot immediately brand the Luther of late 1517 a heretic. This would be justified only if he became aware of holding something opposed to the teaching of the church and then remained adamant in the face of correction. It is especially important to recall this in view of Luther's repeated assertions that the theses do not express his own position, but that much in them is doubtful, that some points he would reject, and no single one out of all of them would he stubbornly maintain. . . .

Still, a truly historical judgment on the theses will not consider their precise wording only. We must further ask in what direction they are tending and what development is already imminent in them. Luther's theses can only be understood in the context of late medieval nominalism. This theology had already made a broad separation of divine and human activity in the church. For God, actions in the church were only occasions for his saving action, with no true involvement of the latter in the former. Regarding penance and the remission of punishment, Luther simply carries the nominalist separation of the ecclesiastical and the divine to the extreme in that he denies that ecclesiastical penances and their remission even have an interpretive relation to the penance required by or remitted by God. I see here one root of Luther's impending denial of the hierarchical priesthood established by God in the church.

The theological consequences of the ninety-five theses were not immediately effective. The secret of their wide circulation and their electrifying effect was that they voiced a popular polemic. Here Luther touched on questions, complaints, and resentments that had long been smouldering and had often been expressed already. Luther made himself the spokesman for those whose hopes for reform had often been disappointed in a period of widespread dissatisfaction.

Theses 81–90 list the pointed questions the laity ask about indulgences. If the pope can, as he claims, free souls from purgatory, why

then does he not do this out of Christian charity, instead of demanding money as a condition? Why does he not forget his building project and simply empty purgatory? (82) If indulgences are so salutary for the living, why does the pope grant them to the faithful but once a day and not a hundred times? (88) If the pope is more intent on helping souls toward salvation than in obtaining money, why is it that he makes new grants and suspends earlier confessional letters and indulgences which are just as effective? (89) If indulgences are so certain, and if it is wrong to pray for people already saved, why are anniversary masses for the dead still celebrated? Why is the money set aside for these masses not returned? (83) Why does the pope not build St. Peter's out of his own huge wealth, instead of with the money of the poor? (86) These are serious and conscientious questions posed by laymen. If they are merely beaten down by authority, instead of being met with good reasons, then the church and the pope will be open to the ridicule of their enemies. This will only increase the misery of the Christian people. (90)

Here Luther's theses brought thoughts out into the open that all had more or less consciously found troublesome. . . .

The rapid dissemination of his theses was for Luther proof that he had written what many were thinking but, as in John 7:13, they would not speak out openly "out of fear of the Jews" (WBr 1, 152, 17).

Luther regretted the spread of the theses, since they were not meant for the public, but only for a few learned men. Furthermore, the theses contained a number of doubtful points. Therefore he rushed the "Sermon on Indulgences and Grace" into print in March 1518 (W 1, 239-46) as a popular presentation of his basic point on indulgences, and he wrote the *Resolutiones* (W 1, 526-628 and LW 31, 83-252) as an extensive theological explanation of the theses. . . .

[The] prefatory statements accompanying the explanations of the theses have been singled out for a remarkable combination of loyal submissiveness, prophetic sense of mission, and an almost arrogant conviction of their cause. Meissinger saw here the maneuverings of a chess expert. This does not strike me as an adequate analysis. I see rather the genuine possibility of keeping Luther within the church. But for this to have happened the bishops who were involved, and the pope himself, would have to have matched Luther in religious substance and in pastoral earnestness. It was not just a cheap evasion when Luther repeated again and again in 1517 and 1518 that he felt bound only by teachings of the church and not by theological opinions, even if these came from St. Thomas or St. Bonaventure. The binding declaration Luther sought from the church came in Leo X's doctrinal constitution on indulgences, "*Cum postquam*" (DS 1447ff.), on November 9, 1518. . . .

The papal constitution declares that the pope by reason of the power of the keys can through indulgences remit punishments for sin

by applying the merits of Christ and the saints. The living receive this remission as an absolution and the departed by way of intercession. The constitution was quite reticent and sparing in laying down binding doctrine. This contrasts notably with the manner of the indulgence preachers and Luther's attackers. . . .

Silvester Prierias, the papal court theologian, exceeded his fellow Dominican Tetzel in frivolity. For him, a preacher maintaining the doctrines attacked by Luther is much like a cook adding seasoning to make a dish more appealing. Here we see the same lack of religious earnestness and pastoral awareness that marked the bishops' reaction to the theses.

This lack of theological competence and of apostolic concern was all the more freighted with consequences, in the face of Martin Luther's zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls in 1517–18. There was a real chance to channel his zeal toward renewal of the church from within.

In this context it does seem important whether Luther actually posted his theses for the benefit of the crowds streaming into the Church of All Saints in Wittenberg. It is important whether he made such a scene or whether he simply presented his ninety-five theses to the bishops and to some learned friends. From the former he sought the suppression of practical abuses, and from the latter the clarification of open theological questions.

I, for one, feel compelled to judge Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses a legend. With this legend removed it is much clearer to what a great extent the theological and pastoral failures of the bishops set the scene for Luther to begin the divisive Reformation we know, instead of bringing reform from within the church.

Questions for Review and Study

1. Did Luther set out to found a new religious sect? Explain.
2. How did Luther formulate his important concept of justification by faith?
3. How did the indulgence scandal of 1517 contribute to the break in the church that became known as the Reformation?
4. How did Luther move from being an obedient rebel to being an enemy of the established church?
5. Why did Luther succeed where so many others failed?

Questions for Comparison

1. Compare and contrast the conversions of Constantine and Martin Luther. What were the social, political, and personal catalysts of their

conversions? How helpful is psychology in understanding their motives? In what personal changes did their transformations result? What were the historical effects of their choices? How had the church changed from Constantine to Luther's day, and what were the two men's relations to it? Were the two men's Christian faiths essentially similar?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Luther was himself a voluminous and powerful writer, and students should sample his writings beyond the brief excerpt from the *Tabletalk* presented in this chapter. The standard English edition of his works is in many volumes and sets of volumes, each edited by several scholars, elaborately cross-indexed and with analytical contents so that individual works are easy to find. The set *Martin Luther, Career of the Reformer*, vols. 31–34 is of special interest. Some of the same works will be found in another edition, *Martin Luther, Reformation Writings*, translated by Bertram L. Woolf.

The career of the young Luther, which is emphasized in this chapter, has been of particular interest to Luther scholars. Heinrich Boehmer's *Road to Reformation* is the standard work by a great German authority. The same ground is covered by Robert H. Fife in *The Revolt of Martin Luther*. DeLamar Jensen gives a detailed look at the terminal event in young Luther's career in *Confrontation at Worms*. Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther* is a famous and controversial book that students find provocative. It is excerpted in this chapter.

Of the many works on Luther's theology and thought, two are recommended: *Luther's World of Thought*, by Heinrich Bornkamm, one of the most influential works of modern Luther literature, is fundamentally a theological rather than a historical work and is difficult but also important. For the background of the young Luther, see *Luther and the Mystics*, by Bengt R. Hoffman.

Of the many general biographical works, James Atkinson's *Luther and the Birth of Protestantism* places emphasis on his theological development. Probably the best and most readable of all the Luther biographies is *Here I Stand*, by Roland H. Bainton. Four books are recommended for the broader topic of Luther and his age. Two are very large and comprehensive—Ernest G. Schwiebert's *Luther and His Times* and Richard Friedenthal's *Luther*. The third, by A. G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther*, is an attractive, authoritative extended essay. David C. Steinmetz's book *Luther in Context* is a collection of ten essays in which Luther's ideas are compared with such figures as Staupitz, Biel, and Hubmeier. Eric W. Gritach's *Martin*, while not a connected biography, is a study of aspects of Luther's life, personality, work, and influence by a great European authority. It is scrupulously

based on Luther's own writings but reviews in a knowledgeable way the best modern scholarship. Two attractive, up-to-date biographies, *Martin Luther* and *Luther*, are by Walter von Loewenich and Heiko A. Oberman, respectively. See also Heiko Oberman's *The Reformation*.

For the still larger topic of Luther in relation to the Reformation, see A. G. Dickens, *Reformation and Society in Sixteenth-Century Europe*; Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*; and Harold J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era*. The new social history enters Lutheran-Reformation studies with Steven Ozment's *When Fathers Ruled*. A short book by R. W. Scribner, *The German Reformation*, surveys the recent trends of Lutheran and Reformation scholarship and has a fine annotated bibliography. An excellent recent book on a specialized topic is *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, by Mark U. Edwards. (Titles with an asterisk are out of print.)

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