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Opening Extract from...

Martin Luther

Renegade and Prophet

Written by Lyndal Roper

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Martin Luther

Renegade and Prophet

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Introduction

For Protestants it is almost an article of faith that the Reformation began when Martin Luther, the shy monk, nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517, the eve of All Saints' Day, and set in motion a religious revolution that shattered Western Christendom. For Luther's closest collaborator Philipp Melanchthon, to whom we owe the trenchant description of the event, the posting of the theses advanced the restoration of the 'light of the gospel'. Luther himself liked to celebrate the moment as the beginning of the Reformation, and drank a toast to it with friends later in life.[1]

A little historical debunking, especially with events of such significance, is always salutary. As the Catholic historian Erwin Iserloh pointed out in 1962, Luther himself never mentioned the event, but said only that he sent letters to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and the bishop of Brandenburg, Hieronymus Scultetus, in which he condemned the abuses of selling papal indulgences in forthright tones, and enclosed his theses.[2] The story that he posted them on the door of the Castle Church has come down to us through Melanchthon and Luther's secretary, Georg Rörer, but neither of them was in Wittenberg at the time to witness the event.[3] Others have suggested that, far less dramatically, the theses might have been stuck to the door, rather than nailed to it.[4]

Whether Luther used a nail or a pot of glue will probably never be known for sure, but it is certain that he sent the theses to Archbishop Albrecht, the most important churchman in all Germany, on 31 October. The accompanying letter had a tone of remarkable self-confidence, even of arrogance. After an obsequious opening, it roundly condemned the archbishop's lack of care for his flock and threatened

that if Albrecht did not take action, then 'someone may rise and, by means of publications, silence those preachers' who were selling indulgences which promised the buyers time off Purgatory.[5] Luther wrote a similar letter to his immediate superior, the bishop of Brandenburg, and, more than the posting of the theses in a backwater like Wittenberg, these letters were the provocation which ensured a response. One of Luther's talents, evident even then, was his ability to stage an event, to do something spectacular that would get him noticed.

Luther's Reformation sundered the unity of the Catholic Church for ever, and can even be credited with starting the process of secularisation in the West, as Catholicism lost its monopoly in large parts of Europe. Yet it all began in a most unlikely place. The tiny new University of Wittenberg was struggling to make its name; the town itself was a building site of 'muddy houses, unclean lanes, every path, step and street full of mud'. It was situated at the end of the earth, as southern humanists scoffed, far away from grand imperial cities like Strasbourg, Nuremberg or Augsburg with their connections to fashionable Italy. Even Luther remarked that it was so distant from civilisation that 'a little further, and it would be in barbarian country'.[6] And the man himself was an unlikely revolutionary. Just short of his thirty-fourth birthday, Luther had been a monk for twelve years, working his way up through the Augustinian order and becoming a trusted administrator and university professor. He had published almost nothing, and his experience of public writing was restricted largely to theses for disputation, works of exegesis and ghostwriting sermons for lazy colleagues. Although the Church was slow to respond, the Ninety-Five Theses took Germany by storm. There was a huge readership for them, lay as well as clerical. In just two months they were known all over Germany, and soon beyond it.

Whatever really happened on 31 October 1517, there is no doubting the significance of the theses themselves: the Reformation truly was sparked by a single text. Theses were sets of numbered propositions designed for an academic debate, although in this case that debate never occurred and Luther probably never intended it to. They were not composed in continuous prose, nor were they statements of truth; rather they set out hypothetical claims to be tested through subsequent argument, and were terse to the point of being difficult to understand. Few copies of Luther's text survive, and there are none

from Wittenberg itself.[7] Printed single-sided on a large sheet of paper, they were meant to be posted on a wall – which suggests there may be some truth in the story of the church door – even though the size of the typeface would make them difficult to read. At the top, in a larger font, is an invitation in Luther's name that these theses should be debated at Wittenberg.[8]

The first begins with the words 'When our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ said "do penance" he willed the whole life of a believer to be one of repentance.' The Latin puts the emphasis on the main verb – *voluit* – on what Christ *willed* the believer's life to be. Luther goes straight on to say that this cannot be interpreted to mean simply performing the devotional penalties that a priest might impose, such as saying prayers, or indeed, buying indulgences. The statement is deceptive in its simplicity; in fact, it implied a root-and-branch critique of the whole edifice of the late medieval Church.[9]

How could such a simple message have such implications and cause such uproar? Luther was not even the first or the only person to criticise indulgences; Luther's confessor, the Augustinian Johann von Staupitz, for example, had done so in sermons in 1516. At one level, Luther was simply articulating a long-standing position on the nature of grace that went back to St Augustine: the idea that our own good deeds can never ensure salvation, and that we must rely on God's mercy. Luther, however, alleged that the sacrament of confession was being perverted from a spiritual exercise into a monetary transaction. What sparked his anger, so he later reminisced, was the preaching of a Dominican friar, Johannes Tetzel, in the nearby town of Jüterbog, who went so far as to claim that his indulgences were so efficacious that even if a person had raped the Virgin Mary they would be assured complete remission from Purgatory. Still, the issue of indulgences was a lively subject of theological and political debate, and initially, some saw the indulgences controversy as little more than one of the frequent spats between the monastic orders, part of the old rivalry between Dominicans and Luther's Augustinians.

But it was much more. By arguing that Christians could not earn their way out of Purgatory through good works, viewing relics or acquiring indulgences, Luther was assaulting the medieval Church's claim to be able to grant forgiveness and facilitate salvation through the dispensation of the sacraments. For him, such practices showed