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Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* and the Origins of the Reformation Narrative

C. Scott Dixon

On 13 October 1760, as a consequence of the ongoing hostilities between Prussian and Imperial troops in the Seven Years War, a relentless hail of bombs, grenades, and 'fire balls' rained down on the Saxon town of Wittenberg. According to the theology professor Christian Siegmund Georgi (1702-71), who was in Wittenberg at the time, most of the buildings adjacent to the centre of the town suffered direct hits and subsequently burned for a number of days. Away from the centre, however, closer to the walls, some areas of the town had been spared and some buildings had survived the onslaught, including the *Augusteum*, the former monastery that had once served as a home to Martin Luther and still housed the famous *Lutherstube* (Illustration 1). But even that was severely damaged and was only preserved because the intervals between strikes were long enough to allow for suppression of the fires. One building that did not survive the attack, however, was the Castle Church, termed by Georgi the 'mother church of all evangelical Lutheranism', which had been reduced to a smouldering pile of stone and ash.¹ Numerous treasures went up in flames, including paintings by Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer, late-medieval imperial tombs, marble statues of the electors, epitaphs of renowned theologians, the church organ, and Luther's stone pulpit. But perhaps the most revered casualty of all was the church door, the very door on which Luther had first posted the *Ninety-Five Theses*. No doubt there had been some repairs in the intervening centuries, but it was still thought to be authentic at the time of

the Reformation bicentennial in 1717, and indeed some people held that Luther's nails were still in the wood.² In October 1760, however, the imperial ordinance had set the church alight and the 'beautiful temple', to use Georgi's words, 'whence the teaching of the Gospel had first rung out and spread to the rest of the world', had been destroyed.³

By the time the imperial battery had reduced the Castle Church (also known as All Saints Church) to pulverised stone and ash, the church door had already secured its lasting place in Reformation history. Although the famous scene of Luther nailing the *Ninety-Five Theses* against indulgences on 31 October 1517 was based on very modest historical foundations, with a single recollection by Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560) being the first and only public testimony to the event, Melanchthon's reference proved authoritative enough for later generations of Lutherans to look back on this act as the starting point of the Reformation. Admittedly, it was just one scene among others, and in truth the theses-posting was slow to grip the visual imagination. It was not until the gothic revival of the nineteenth century that artists such as Gustav König, Ferdinand Pauwels, and Hugo Vogel began to pose Luther in front of the church door with hammer in hand. The elevation of the theses-posting to its current place in the public imagination as the Reformation's dramatic scene *nonpareil* is a legacy of the nineteenth-century.⁴ Nevertheless, the theses-posting became a staple of the Reformation narrative soon after Melanchthon first published his recollection. No one doubted that it occurred on All Saints's Day 1517; and more to the point, all were in agreement that this act marked the origins of the Reformation and thus that 31 October 1517 was the moment when the Reformation began. In Georgi's interior view of the Castle Church (Illustration 2), for instance, the door is clearly marked out (no. 59) and

described as ‘the great door on which Doctor Luther of hallowed memory posted his 95 theses against Tetzel and thus brought about the blessed Reformation’.⁵

With the quincentennial of the German Reformation now upon us, it is worth revisiting how, and why, the theses-posting emerged as such a defining moment in the Reformation story. From the modern perspective it seems straightforward enough: this was the moment when Luther stepped up to challenge the practice of indulgence peddling and with it the associated teaching and authority of the late-medieval Catholic church. Due to this act of defiance, Catholicism ultimately lost its monopoly over Christian salvation in the West. And it was not just a conflict between theological schools. According to a long tradition of scholarship, this was the moment when the individual believer took his stand against the dead hand of tradition and the modern religious conscience was born. As the church historian Ernst Wilhelm Benz once remarked, for the modern mind this act documents the instance when ‘western Christianity had reached a new stage of the religious conscience, one in which, for the individual, personal experience and personal witness becomes decisive in his relationship to God and to the community’.⁶ The theologian Ulrich Barth has recently confirmed this view, claiming that the range and depth of social, moral, and theological criticisms in the *Ninety-Five Theses*, both implicit and explicit, compounded with Luther’s unequivocal doubts about the practice of indulgences and the power of the papacy, warrant the claim that this episode marked ‘the birth of religious autonomy’.⁷

Freighted with this much importance, it is easy to understand why it has assumed pride of place in modern histories. What is less easy to understand, however, is why the theses-posting emerged as the critical moment in the early modern accounts, before the modern cult of individualism and its celebration of religious conscience, for not only

were the historical foundations very shaky but there were so many other moments with even more drama and proximate significance for the Reformation, from the debate in Leipzig and the burning of the Bull to Luther's appearance in Worms, at which stage the critical concern had shifted from the issue of indulgences to papal plenitude. Moreover, as a historical gesture in the symbolic sense meant by Benz, the posting of theses had little shock-value at the time. Many professors posted academic theses, many reform-minded Christians had questioned indulgences, and many high-profile German intellectuals had written at least one critical piece against Rome.

The following article will address this question in three parts. It will begin with a survey of the origins of Reformation history and trace the incorporation of the theses-posting into the narrative stream. The second section will examine the reasons why this act remained so prominent in the Lutheran memory during the two centuries after the Reformation by relating it to the broader analytical framework and sense of self-perception. The final section will examine the process of reinterpretation that occurred during the period of late Lutheran Orthodoxy and the early Enlightenment, when scholars started to revisit the episode and sketch out the features of the modern view. A survey of the theses-posting is nothing new, of course, and indeed German historians have regularly re-examined the episode since the debate first became a national issue in the 1960s. Where this study departs from its predecessors, however, is in its focus on the place and the meaning of the theses-posting within the *evolving* understanding of the German Reformation. It does not treat the episode as a fixed event in an unchanging narrative. The perception of Luther and the Reformation at the tail-end of the early modern period was different to the perception at the beginning, so too the philosophies of history that ordered the past, and yet the theses-posting retained its place of

prominence as the point of origin, the crucial moment in the story. Why was this? Why did this episode remain a fixed point in the history during a period when the entire history was reconsidered and reconceived? The main purpose of this study is to explain the reasons behind the longevity of the theses-posting as the Reformation's perceived moment of creation despite over two centuries of historiographical change. The broader aim of the exercise is to demonstrate how historical conditions can shape historical facts, even when those facts were bound to something as seemingly idealistic as the origins of a new Church.

I

There is very little historical evidence to support the claim that Martin Luther (1483-1546) personally posted a set of ninety-five theses against indulgences to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517. I do not intend to rehash all of the arguments for and against the theses-posting here, but some mention has to be made at the outset of the weaknesses of the historical record, for this will have bearing on the later discussions.⁸ To begin with, as mentioned, there is only one expert witness to this event, namely Melanchthon, who made reference to the theses-posting in the second volume of the Wittenberg Latin edition of Luther's works (1546).⁹ But the authority of Melanchthon's testimony is solely based on his status and his role in the Reformation. In truth he was not even in Wittenberg at the time and his memory remained selective about the event. Melanchthon made further mention of it in a Sunday sermon in 1557, for example, but there was no reference to it in the short historical account of the Reformation he placed in a time-capsule left in the church bell-tower the

following year.¹⁰ Even more critical is the fact that Luther himself never mentioned the posting of the theses. The indulgence debate clearly had priority in his recollections of the origins of the Reformation, and he did consider 31 October 1517 a day of special significance, but he made no reference to the theses and the door. Even when the door fell within his frame of reference, as it did in 1538 when the Swiss neo-Latin poet Simon Lemnius (1511-50) was caught peddling libellious anti-Wittenberg epigrams in front of the Castle Church entrance, Luther spoke from the pulpit against the dishonour brought upon the professors, the university, and the town, but he made no mention of the dishonour brought upon the very site where the Reformation was thought to have begun, though Luther had become sentimental about other sites by this time.¹¹

There are problems with the historical record as well, though some of the counter-arguments are based on circumstantial reasoning. For instance, although it was common to post theses for disputation on church doors, in Wittenberg, as in most other German universities, this was done by beadles rather than professors. Moreover, in Wittenberg, as the university statutes make clear, the disputation placards were to be posted on the doors of all the churches (*in valvis templorum*), not just the Castle Church. (And if Cranach's image of the entrance to the Castle Church in 1509 is anywhere near the historical reality of 1517 [Illustration 3], multiple postings would have been advisable.) Equally as troubling is the fact that historians have yet to find an extant copy of a Wittenberg print of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, though a summons to a public disputation of this kind was usually done in the form of a printed broadside. The few prints that do exist were published elsewhere (Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Basel), and when Luther actually dispatched copies of the theses he seems to have sent them in handwritten form.¹² Even more perplexing is the issue of timing. In Melancthon's original account,

Luther posted the theses ‘on the day before the feast of All Saints,’ (*pridie festi omnium Sanctorum*), that is, on 31 October 1517. He also dispatched letters to the Archbishop of Mainz and the Bishop of Brandenburg, both with a copy of the theses enclosed. The letter to Mainz still exists and is dated 31 October 1517. Context, content, and later testimony would suggest that this letter to the archbishop was the first time that Luther made contact, however in correspondence and recollections stretching from 1518 to 1545, Luther subsequently claimed that he had written to the bishops (sometimes suggesting more than two) before the posting of the theses. Only after waiting in vain for a response of some kind, he claimed, did he decide to go public with the theses. If this is true, then it makes no sense for Luther to have posted the theses on 31 October, for this was the same day that he sent his appeal to the bishops.¹³ Scholars were confronted with this discrepancy as soon as they began to piece together the Reformation narrative, for the letter to the archbishop was published in the Wittenberg (1539-59) and Jena (1554-58) editions of Luther’s works with the date at the bottom.

In the mid-sixteenth century, however, when German Protestants began to write the first histories of the Reformation, there was no need to call Melanchthon’s testimony into question. Admittedly, some of the earliest accounts make no reference to the event, including important foundational histories by contemporaries such as Johann Carion, Friedrich Myconius, Georg Spalatin, and Johannes Sleidan. Nor did sharp-eyed Catholic controversialists such as Kilian Leib, Johannes Cochlaeus, or Hieronymus Emser recall this scene.¹⁴ They spoke of the publication or the dissemination of the theses rather than the posting on the door. But once a shared thread of Reformation history began to emerge in the 1570s, the theses-posting became a common staple of the core narrative. The Tübingen Church historian Volker Leppin has recently retraced this reception

process during the first century of memorialisation. Drawing on the recollection of Melanchthon, the earliest authors to mention the act repeated the basic information provided by Melanchthon and occasionally added small details, such as that Luther was surrounded by pilgrims at the time. After these first attempts, the most influential account was provided by Johannes Mathesius (1504-65) in his cycle of sermons on Luther's life (1562-64). Mathesius included Melanchthon's version of the theses-posting, yet he also related the dispatching of the letters to the bishops as described in the recollections by Luther. He did not try to reconcile the two accounts, nor did he project Luther as a heroic figure who actively sought to challenge the teachings of the Church. According to Mathesius, Luther had been forced into issuing the theses due to the actions of Johannes Tetzel. Only later, in the Luther biographies of the 1570s and 1580s, and beginning in particular with the works of theologico-historians such as Nikolaus Selnecker and Georg Glocker, do we meet Luther in the form of the resolute reformer of the Church who was driven to take a stand against a corrupt medieval Catholic Church. We also start to see the theses-posting emerge as the critical act of 1517 rather than the dispatch of the letters to the bishops.¹⁵

A few crucial texts should be added to this survey. One was the reworking of Melanchthon's version of *Carion's Chronicle* by his son-in-law Caspar Peucer (1525-1602), who extended the narrative from the age of Charlemagne to the reign of the Emperor Charles V. Though rather vague in the first Latin edition, the subsequent German translation clearly referred to the theses-posting as the 'occasion and origin' of the Reformation.¹⁶ The other important vehicles for the spread and reception of the notice were the Wittenberg and Jena editions of Luther's works. Given that Melanchthon's preface first appeared in the Wittenberg version, this is a rather obvious

point to make; and yet it is worth pointing out that the editors also added a marginal comment beside the *Ninety-Five Theses* in both editions reminding all subsequent scholars of the theses-posting everytime they consulted the German translations.¹⁷ Moreover, because the first editions of Luther's works opened with the theses and the indulgence debate, it tended to sharpen the sense that Reformation itself began with the theses-posting. Both the Jena and the later Altenburg versions of Luther's works were influential in this regard, as the Lutheran Pietist Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714) observed, for their chronological ordering provided 'a much more exact notion of the entire sequence of events one after the other'.¹⁸ Thus by the time Lutheran clergymen such as Selnecker and Glocker came to write their biographies, the theses-posting was already a central support of the broader narrative. It marked the *terminus ante quem* for the build-up to reform and the catalyst for the rise of the Reformation. To cite the words of one early biography, 31 October 1517 was the date when Martin Luther

posted a set of public propositions and articles on the Castle Church, wherein, drawing on the Word of God and with a bountiful spirit, rigorously, just, and meet, he argued at length against the indulgence trade. This dispute was the beginning and the original cause of the Reformation and why the pure teaching of the Holy Gospel has been brought back to light.¹⁹

The importance of 1517 was confirmed by the centenary celebrations of 1617, when Lutherans had the opportunity to celebrate the origins of the Reformation on a universal scale. Up to that point different regional churches had honoured different episodes, from Luther's birth and death dates to the submission of the *Augsburg*

Confession or an event of local significance, such as the first evangelical communion in a particular place.²⁰ The 1617 centenary thus provided a common vanishing point for the public memory, but when the date arrived, due to the tense political situation and the need for Protestant unity, the main emphasis was placed on the celebration of the Reformation in general or Protestant tropes such as the fall of the papal Antichrist or the spread of the Word rather than Luther's theses-posting as the singular moment of origin. Indeed, in the initial plans for a general Protestant commemoration, which were largely put in motion by Friedrich V, the Reformed elector of the Palatinate, the main day of observation was set for 2 November. In most Lutheran territories, however, as in Electoral Saxony, the celebrations extended from 31 October to 2 November and were marked out by sermon cycles, special prayers of thanks, anniversary publications, and the suspension of secular activities.²¹ The theses-posting was not yet considered such a critical moment in the Reformation story that all celebrations had to be exclusively centered on this day (Hartmut Lehmann's survey of 94 dated sermons, for instance, places just 21 on 31 October), and none of the anniversary pamphlets included an image of Luther in front of the church door; but the anniversary did confirm the widespread conceit that the Reformation originated with the posting of the theses and it did canonise this act in the public memory. Representative in this respect are the cycle of sermons preached in the Castle Church by the Wittenberg professors Friedrich Balduin, Nicolas Hunnius, and Wolfgang Franz, all of whom stressed the significance of the theses as the starting point of the Reformation.²²

For the lasting memorialisation of the theses-posting, however, perhaps the most important act of commemoration was the publication of the so-called *Dream of Friedrich the Wise*, a broadsheet engraving that appeared in 1617, thought to be the first

visual representation of Luther in front of the church door (Illustration 4). References to the dream sequence experienced by Friedrich, who was the prince of Saxony at the time of the theses-posting, predate the broadsheet, but the appearance of this image, rich in detail and symbolism, marked an important juncture. As Robert Scribner observed, the image was significant because it invested the event with two forms of legitimation. On the one hand, it provided a historical provenance for Luther and the church door.

According to the pamphlet, the dream was first related to Friedrich's chaplain Georg Spalatin, one of Luther's Wittenberg contemporaries. Spalatin told Antonius Musa, the pastor of Rochlitz, who recorded it in a manuscript. While visiting the subsequent pastor of Rochlitz in 1591, the editor of the pamphlet claimed, he actually saw the manuscript and the description of the dream. With this, the historical foundations were secured: all of these men were contemporary figures and their words and acts were joined by written testimony. The other form of legitimation was prophetic. In the dream related by Friedrich, which came to him as he contemplated the fate of souls in purgatory, God sent him a monk who seemed to be the natural son of Paul. Assured by God through the saints that he would not regret it if he let the monk write something on his Castle Church, Friedrich, having agreed to the request, next saw the vision of the monk scrawling oversized text on a door with a huge quill that reached all the way to Rome, where it went through the ears of a lion (representing Pope Leo X) and started to tip over the papal crown. Some of these symbols were the common stock of visual culture. Some could be deciphered with a modicum of historical knowledge. Others, such as the burning of a goose, which was an allusion to the prediction uttered by the heretic Jan Hus about the coming of Luther, were specific to the emerging prophecies of the

Reformation. Harmonised in this image, they joined up the theses-posting with the emerging mytho-historical accounts of the Reformation.²³

In historical terms, nothing new was added to the established account of the theses-posting during the seventeenth century. No additional sources were discovered, no new details accrued. In the standard depiction, Luther personally nailed the theses on 31 October 1517 and thereby launched the Reformation. What was new in the seventeenth century, however, was the increasing importance of the theses-posting in Reformation histories as the anchor point for arguments in defence of the faith. Thus in works by Matthias Hoe von Hönegg, Johannes Müller, Caspar Sagittarius, and Johannes Faber, the discussions about the theses-posting and the motives behind it, which only appear after long introductory narratives about the poor state of the late-medieval Church, take centre stage as a way of defending Luther against the accusations of the Catholics. Reform was a historical necessity and the theses-posting was the catalyst. The theses-posting was also emphasised in works that were primarily concerned with defending the providential nature of the Reformation, as in the late-century interpretations by Johann Adam Scherzer, Johann Deutschmann, and Johann Friderich Mayer.²⁴ In this scheme Luther's actions on 31 October 1517 is the singular act that reveals the hand of God. Over the long term, however, perhaps the most important theoretical frameworking was that provided by the Lutheran statesman Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff (1626-92) in his *Commentarius historicus et apologeticus de Lutheranism* (1688). This was the most influential work on German Reformation history to appear in the early modern period, particularly after it was translated into German and supplemented by the Ulm pastor Elias Frick. That Seckendorff found such a prominent place for the Luther's early career and the indulgence debate confirmed the status of the

theses-posting in Reformation history and invested the claim that it was the moment of origin with historiographical credibility.²⁵

The bicentennial celebrations of 1717 will serve as a convenient endpoint to this short survey of the incorporation of the theses-posting. Even at this stage, after two centuries of Protestant development, this scene had not yet captured the historical or the visual imagination in the way that it would in the nineteenth century. In most accounts the theses-posting shared the stage with other dramatic opening acts, from the meeting with Cajetan in Augsburg to the debate in Leipzig or the hearing in Worms. Luther's hammering of the theses to the church door was just one scene in a narrative cycle, as it was, for instance, in the Danish image prepared for the bicentenary celebrations of 1717, where Luther is depicted posting the theses, burning the papal bull, and translating the Bible (Illustration 5).²⁶ At the time, in fact, there was good reason to downplay the theses-posting, which was such a uniquely Lutheran moment in German history. In 1717, the Lutheran church was in a weaker position than a century before. The Counter-Reformation had long since reformed and revitalised Catholicism in the Empire; the Reformed faith, now legally recognised, had emerged from the Peace of Westphalia even stronger than before; and German Lutheranism itself had little sense of common purpose or identity, as was evidenced by the difficulties faced by the statesmen and theologians in Saxony and Hesse who tried to coordinate a master plan for the bicentennial celebrations.²⁷ Moreover, Lutheran historians had now developed a much more source-based and sophisticated history of the early Reformation, and they recognised that the theses-posting did not represent such a radical break in the story, neither with reference to Luther's personal development nor to Reformation history as a whole.

Nevertheless, even though there were good reasons to shift the narrative away from 31 October 1517, once the bicentennial celebrations took place the Lutheran church continued to emphasise the importance of the theses-posting for the rise of the Reformation. The Helmstedt professor Christoph Heinrich Rittmeier (1671-1719) made this point in the build-up to the celebrations. As he remarked, although Luther had been preaching against indulgences before the dispute with Tetzel,

nevertheless, because in the following year of 1517 the issue was further flaming up, Luther was forced by the disagreeable circumstances and the audacious conduct of his antagonists to draw up and publicly post ninety-five theses or principles, which began as follows: ‘When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent!”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance’. This happened on 31 October 1517, and for this reason, as is well known, the Reformation is reckoned from this date. That is why the anniversary of the first Lutheran century was celebrated in 1617. And now with the passage of the second century, yet another is just around the corner.²⁸

As was the case one-hundred years before, the preachers and the historians continued to stress the importance of the dramatic scene on the eve of All Saints for the outbreak of the Reformation. Doubts were creeping in about the reliability of the early accounts, including Luther’s recollection of events, and there was a growing tendency to look for historical rather than providential explanations for Luther’s actions, but the theses-posting remained the crucial and decisive act in Reformation history. For the vast majority of Lutherans in 1717, Luther standing before the door of the Castle Church on

31 October 1517 was the image that came to mind when they recalled the origins of the Church.

II

Why did the theses-posting emerge and then endure as the defining moment in early modern Reformation history? And what does its lasting importance in the narrative say about the Lutheran modes of remembrance and interpretation? Before answering these questions, it is worth pointing out that there were better candidates for what the theologians termed the *annus climacterius* or the *annus restauratae religionis* than the year 1517. Indeed, even within the compass of that year, there were more consequential acts than the theses-posting, for if the point had been to initiate an academic debate, then Luther had failed in his purpose, for no disputation ever took place. In purely historical terms, the dispatching of the theses to the Archbishop of Mainz was the crucial act, as Luther later recalled. Moreover, the theses themselves can hardly be considered a proclamation of evangelical reform. They were, as the theologians acknowledged, a mix of evangelical insight and Luther's abiding 'Papistery', and as more was learned of Luther's early teaching and preaching in Wittenberg, in which similar glimpses of a fledgling evangelical theology were revealed, their importance as the Reformation's first public utterance began to fall away.

A strong case could be made for other points of origin, as contemporary scholars came to recognise. Few went so far as the Kemberg provost Johann Heinrich Feustking (1672-1713), who proposed that the Wittenberg thesis defence by Bartholomäus Bernhardt in 1516, in which Luther presided, was in fact the first evangelical attack on

the ‘six-headed beast’ in Rome and thus the actual starting point of the Reformation.²⁹ But there was enough knowledge and nuance in the histories of the time for scholars at least to imagine other scenarios. As a turning point in history, for instance, the Leipzig debates of 1519 or Luther’s burning of the Bull in 1520 were more significant events. Nor was it difficult to make a case for the importance of the Diet of Worms (1521), as indeed Johannes Mathesius did in the first substantial Luther biography ever written. On a similar note, in his study of the origins of the faith, the martyrologist Ludwig Rabus (1523-92) provided illustrated accounts of the main dramatic events in Luther’s early life, including the meetings in Augsburg, Leipzig, Worms, and the burning of the papal bull, but he did not emphasise the posting of the theses.³⁰

Understanding the place of the theses-posting in the narrative of Lutheran history requires some awareness of the broader process of memorialisation at work. From the very outset of the Reformation the public memory of the Church was closely controlled, just as it was deeply affected – as all public memory is deeply affected – by the shifts of sentiment and perception over time. Thus while the first histories of the Reformation were primarily concerned with finding a place for the faith in the traditional narratives of Christian history, which explains why they were so confessionally charged and so theologically precise, the later histories started to tailor their arguments to fit the temper of the times, with the result that the Enlightenment histories spoke openly of reason, liberty, and freedom of conscience while the histories of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries turned Luther into a proto-nationalist and the Reformation as the first great unfolding of the German spirit. Very few critical details appeared by chance in teleological narratives of this kind, for everything was meant to serve a higher purpose in the wider historiographical scheme, whether it was to legitimise or justify the

faith, provide the community with a sense of identity, or sanction the role of the secular authorities.³¹ Moreover, as Lutherans also had to uproot the Catholic narrative so deeply planted in the medieval mind, this required some delicate acts of reinterpretation, for simply dismissing the past wholesale ran the risk of alienating its broad base of support. Writing a history of the Reformation was thus a very complex, and very deliberate, process of historical fabrication. Indeed, we can see Luther's own hand in the process from the very start, not only in his own account of events from Heidelberg to Worms – as in his *acta Augustana*, for instance, with which he rushed his version of the meeting with Cajetan into print – but also in his attempts to define which episodes properly belonged to a history of 'his' Reformation. Revealing of Luther's involvement is Natalie Krentz's recent reconstruction of the early history of the Wittenberg Movement (1521-2), which recovers the acts of inclusion and exclusion at work in the process, reaching from Luther's writing desk to the Ernestine archives.³² These were the first steps in an ongoing process of Lutheran memorialisation that began in Wittenberg and took on greater definition throughout the confessional age.

By the mid-seventeenth century, as a consequence, Lutheranism had developed a broadly consistent sense of its past with a fairly crowded calendar of red-letter days. From the 1580s onward sermons regularly marked Luther's death and birth or important events such as the posting of the theses, the burning of the bull, or the Diet of Worms. In the following century the calendar became more formalised as a series of universal foundational moments entered into the cycle. The centenary celebration of 1617, for instance, was followed by celebrations marking the Augsburg Confession (1630), the Schmalkaldic War (1647), the Peace of Augsburg (1655), and the *Book of Concord* (1680). Annual events were also marked at the regional and local level, where the drama

of reform had been played out, with some cities and territories mandating the days of observance in their church orders. Given that the reformers had been so quick to condemn the medieval cycles of holy days and papal jubilees, later Catholics were quick to point up this seeming contradiction. As the Catholic author Johann Weislinger (1691-1755) critically observed, each day seemed to bring a new cause for celebration in Lutheran lands: ‘cheer and rejoicing in every Lutheran land, city, village, cottage, and spinning room; cheer and rejoicing in the universities, from the pulpits, dance floors and river-side laundry banks; from every preacher, labourer, odd-jobber, horse-doctor, bathhouse-attendant, and sow-gelder there is nothing else to see, hear, or talk about than cheer and rejoicing’.³³ Weislinger was taking aim at the Lutherans of Strasbourg, who used the bicentenary of the Augsburg Confession as an occasion for launching polemical attacks against the Catholics. And he was correct to stress the local dimensions of these rites of public memory. The best evidence of this was the massive assemblage of material brought together by the great Orthodox Lutheran scholar Ernst Solomon Cyprian (1673-1745) in his *Hilaria Evangelica* (1719), a huge collection of reports of the local celebrations marking the bicentenary of 1517. Reports came in from all over the Lutheran world, including descriptions of the celebrations from places as distant to Cyprian’s German town of Gotha as Dublin, Aarhus, and The Hague.

Despite this crowded landscape of memorialisation, growing in complexity over time, and the weakness of the historical evidence discussed above, the theses-posting preserved its place as the moment of creation. It remained the crucial turning point in the story of the Reformation. Why was this? At one level there is a simple answer to this question: Luther said so. Although he did not mention the actual posting of the theses on the church door, in all of his recorded reflections on the early stages of his career and

the origins of the Reformation, Luther considered the indulgence controversy to be the cause and the catalyst. He made this claim in letters to Pope Leo X (May 1518) and Elector Friedrich the Wise (21 November 1518), when out of deference to both figures he tried to justify his criticisms of Tetzel and the indulgence trade and prove that his intervention had been provoked out of good faith and a desire for religious truth. And he made the same claims in his pamphlet *Against Hans Worst* (1541) much later in life, when he set out in detail the origins of the controversy and the reasoning behind his actions. Further reflections were made in his preface to the Wittenberg Latin edition of his works, occasional sessions of his *Table Talk*, and the preface to his Bible, where he simply declared that ‘this present strife began with indulgences in the year 1517’.³⁴ All of the early biographers followed Luther in his assessment of the indulgence controversy as the catalyst of the Reformation and that it was Tetzel, that ‘most impudent sycophant’ (to cite Melanchthon), supported by a coterie of papal yea-sayers, who forced Luther to challenge the teaching of the Church.³⁵

But there was a deeper logic at work than just deference to Luther’s memory. Faced with the Catholic accusations that they had founded a new religion, the early reformers needed to justify the break with Rome while making a case for the antiquity and the orthodoxy of their faith. One of their answers to this dilemma was to remove the human element from Reformation history. Luther’s teachings, it was argued, were not based on personal opinions or internal visions but rather the understanding that gradually came to him through the diligent reading of the Word. Melanchthon portrayed Luther in this manner in his *Vita Lutheri*, the first evangelical biography, in which Luther is an agent of the divine awoken to his purpose by the Spirit and fulfilling the will of God. But he did not have a vision or an agenda of his own. The purpose, and the

essence, of all of his works was to call men's minds back to the ancient truths of the Church.³⁶ Further proof of this, indeed the best proof of this, was offered by the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Luther had not emerged out of obscurity in 1517 with a ready-made confession of the faith but simply a long list of speculative propositions about indulgences. This was not the foundation document for a new religion but an appeal for dialogue by an anxious Christian concerned with religious truth.

In light of this fact, the reformers argued, there had to be other forces at work, as ancient as the Church itself: namely, the spirit of the Christian community (by which they meant something approximating the medieval notion of the *sensus fidelium*) and the providential hand of God. Both testified to the truth and antiquity at the root of Luther's call for penance in the theses-posting. Within the context of late-medieval religiosity, few things seemed more universal than the concern with proper penance and how mankind could make good its sins in the eyes of God. By speaking directly to this question of 'doing enough' (*satisfactio*), which was the underlying theme of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther took on the well-known role of a preacher of penance, a figure of charged venerability in medieval Christianity, and placed himself at the very heart of late-medieval faith. He was articulating the common spirit of the age.³⁷ Even more profoundly legitimising, however, was the suggestion that the Reformation was not the work of human hands but rather the predestined work of God. Using the theses-posting as a form of historical proof, the theologians downplayed Luther's role and projected the incident as an instance of divine intervention along the lines of Belshazzar's feast or the burning bush. Had there ever been a greater miracle than this, later memorialists would ask, than the fact that a single monk in a small university town was able to topple

the pope from his throne, something that even the greatest potentates had been unable to do? And all on the basis ‘of a few propositions’?³⁸

This was the importance of the theses-posting for the first few generations of Lutheran historians: it opened with a call for repentance, woke up believers from their medieval slumber, unveiled the errors of the papacy, and led pious Christians back to the Word.³⁹ For the Reformation’s founding fathers, who had to avoid the Catholic accusation of novelty, it was the ideal point of origin, for ultimately its importance was not based on the thought or the acts of an individual. On the contrary, this was the moment when God intervened in human affairs, with Luther playing the role of a latterday John the Baptist pointing the way to Christ. The Wittenberg professor Wolfgang Franz (1564-1628) put it in these terms:

In these propositions – or rather, as we now say, in these theses – Doctor Luther demonstrates the danger, ambiguity, and vanity of the papal indulgence while also showing how a man who, on account of his sins, was suffering great anxiety and burdens of conscience, could console himself in a true Christian manner by way of the Holy Gospel.⁴⁰

Admittedly, some scholars saw more than just this. After Luther’s death it was not uncommon for theologians to find traces of his mature theology in the theses.

Melanchthon was the first to do this and others followed his example, finding references in the theses to his notions of Scripture alone, grace alone, the distinction between law and gospel, and even justification through faith. And they were not misguided in their views, as modern scholars have pointed out, for even if the theses were more of an

exercise in ‘soundbite theology’ than systematic thought, they are based upon long reflection and it is likely that Luther had developed many of his central insights by that stage.⁴¹ But the real value of the theses as a confession of faith, and one of the reasons why the posting was so quickly accepted as the moment of creation, was precisely because Reformation theology was so hard to find. It would only emerge *after* the act, once Christians had paid heed to the call to repentance and God began to reveal his Word.

Claiming that the Reformation church was founded on Scripture and that it was brought into being by an act of divine intervention enabled Lutherans to answer the Catholic questions about origins. It also enabled them to develop powerful teleological arguments in defence of their Church. There were two main lines of thinking in this regard, one historical and the other providential. Both considered the theses-posting to be the culmination of a preordained passage of time.

The idea that Christianity from the age of Constantine onward had been a relentless trajectory of decline was a commonplace in the late-medieval period. It was particularly popular among heretical groups, but even mainstream theologians and humanists made use of it, as did the evangelical reformers in their early struggles with the papacy. Once the first great Lutheran histories appeared, it took hold as the main interpretative framework of Protestant history and its central assumptions were clear: namely, that over the medieval period the Catholic church had declined to the point of apostacy and that the pope was in fact the Antichrist. Melanchthon’s edited version of *Carion’s Chronicle* was the first Lutheran history to work this scheme into its analysis, but the seminal text in this regard was the *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559-74), composed by the theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-75) and the other centuriators of

Magdeburg. According to Flacius, all of Christian history since the age of the apostles was a tale of unremitting decline. History, however, reveals that there were inspired individuals (the so-called *testes veritatis*, the witnesses to truth) who surfaced on occasion through the centuries and testified to the eternal presence of the Word of God, including recent figures such as Jean Gerson, Girolamo Savonarola, John Wycliffe, and Jan Hus. All of these men were witnesses to the Christian truth to some degree, though it was not until the Gospel was liberated by Martin Luther and his Reformation that the Church of Christ was reborn once again and the trajectory of decline was reversed.⁴²

Lutheran scholars developed a number of historical arguments to bear out this theory of decline, from the rise of papal power to medieval monkery, but one of the most persuasive drew its strength from the history of the indulgence trade. Building on the first-hand accounts of Luther and Friedrich Myconius (1490-1546), whose recollections of Johann Tetzel's campaign provided some of the most scurrilous details – including his infamous claim that indulgences could remit any sin 'even if someone had slept with Christ's dear mother' – Lutherans readily exploited the example of the late-medieval indulgence trade as the first historical line of defence against Catholic accusations that there was no warrant for the rise of the Reformation. Indulgences were the ideal case-study in this regard, for they could be used in a general sense to reveal the alleged failings of the late-medieval church, from its empty sacramentalism to the wealth and corruption of the papacy, and they could also stand in as a specific example of papal deception. To cite the words of the pastor-biographer Paul Seidel in 1581: 'In [indulgences] the sheer power amassed by the pope and his cronies becomes clear and present, so too the wretched blindness of our ancestors, who were taken in by such devilry and monkey business and paid for it to their detriment dearly enough'.⁴³

Based on this body of historical proofs – much of which, the Lutherans pointed out, had been provided by loyal sons of Catholicism such as Jean Gerson and Johann Staupitz – it was not difficult to argue that the Church of the time had in fact never been in more desperate need of reform than just before the outbreak of the Reformation. Nor was it difficult to argue that 31 October 1517 was the great turning point in this long trajectory of decline, when the abuses of the indulgence trade reached the point where Luther had been forced to take a stand. Many of the histories written by the Orthodox Lutherans of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries open with extended discussions of the decline of the medieval Church and then present the indulgence controversy as the pivotal moment when the long chain of decline finally came to an end and the age of evangelical truth began. Even in the studies of the post-Seckendorff generations it was common to flag up the indulgence controversy as the crucial turn in the Reformation story when, through the intervention of Luther under the guiding hand of providence, the time had finally arrived to reverse the decline of the Church and initiate a new Christian age.⁴⁴ As one of his four proofs of the supernatural origins of the Reformation, the Jena theologian Johann Georg Walch (1693-1775) evoked this argument of historical necessity. It was no accident, he proposed, that the Reformation occurred when it did, for God had prepared the ground for the rise of the movement by allowing the Church to reach the lowest point in its history. ‘In particular’, reasoned Walch, ‘we find that the Reformation had to begin at such a time when the papal atrocities had never been more manifest, namely just as the indulgence racket had reached its final extremes. Luther opposed the trade as something contrary to both reason and Holy Writ, and that is why he was so quickly supported’.⁴⁵

Walch's allusion to divine intervention evokes the other powerful argument *a posteriori*: namely, the belief that Reformation was a preordained event in the history of Christianity brought into being by the guiding hand of God. Adopting this view, as Geoffrey Dickens once remarked, meant that historians began to think of the Reformation as 'a supernatural act in the history of salvation, to which they [Lutherans] traced their religious roots, but which they viewed in a way that can only be described as profoundly ahistorical'.⁴⁶ Scholars could use different approaches in effecting this type of providential analysis. Some adopted the Flacian method of the 'witnesses to the truth' mentioned above, in which a bloodline of true Christians reaches all the way from the age of the apostles to the modern day preserved in their perfect faith by the superintending hand of God. Other scholars, particularly during the heyday of Lutheran Orthodoxy, pieced together florilegia of prophecies and predictions to prove that the Reformation was the final act in Christian history. An extremely eclectic range of sources was used in order to bear out the facts, ranging from Scripture and the Church Fathers to other writings such as the Sibylline Oracles, Hermetic literature, late-medieval reform literature and Jewish apocalypticism.⁴⁷

Within this providential framework, it is interesting to note how many of the prophecies were resolved specifically with reference to the indulgence controversy and the theses-posting. Soon after Luther's death historians started to emphasise the prophecies that spoke explicitly about the coming of Luther and his quarrel with the papacy in 1517. Granted, the two most famous of all, the prophecies by the Bohemian heretic Jan Hus and the Eisleben Franciscan Johann Hilten, both of whom predicted that a reforming monk would appear in the year 1516, did not match the year exactly; but most historians passed over this discrepancy in silence or made subtle distinctions about

intentions, as did Mathesius when he claimed that 1516 was the year when Luther ‘began to sing,’ but 1517 was when his views became public.⁴⁸ Other prophecies, however, were easier to relate to the year 1517, including those attributed to respected figures such as the famous Doctor Fleck of Laußig, Johann Staupitz, Martin Pollich von Mellerstadt, and Friedrich the Wise. Some scholars made the connection using more ingenious means. Using the logic of typology, for instance, it was common to correlate the year 1517 CE to the year 1517 BCE, the latter date signifying (it was alleged) when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. On a similar note, a popular chronogram of the Ambrosian chant did the rounds in which certain highlighted letters stood in for Roman numerals and pointed to the theses-posting. According to this theory, the proper rearrangement of the letters *Tibi Chervbin et Seraphim Incessabili voce proclamant* reveals the sequence MCCCCLLVVIII, which gives the year 1517.⁴⁹ This list of prophecies, predictions, acrostics, and forewarnings continued to accumulate for well over a century and a half after Luther’s death. Even the Orthodox Lutheran Valentin Ernst Löscher (1673-1749), an exponent of the source-based study of Reformation history, devoted an entire chapter to the prophecies leading up the Reformation. Löscher did not dwell on the year 1517, but having reduced the various predictions to an essential core – namely, that a learned monk from Wittenberg would emerge who would bring about the fall of the Antichrist and the school philosophies (by which was meant indulgences) on the basis of Scripture – he did not leave much room for speculation.⁵⁰

Prophecies and acrostics of this kind provided important proofs for the providential narratives, but there was a deeper rationale at work as well. By the mid-seventeenth century, as the Luther biography reached its apogee as a mode of apologetics, the theses-posting confirmed its place in the grand arch of providential

history. Of course, the conceit that Reformation history fulfilled the biblical prophecies and thus had to be understood in light of Revelation was evident from the very first days of the movement. Indeed, Luther's identification of the pope as the actual Antichrist, rather than just one of the many predicted by John before the End Time, brought about a heightened concern with sacral history and eschatology, not least because it meant that the clock was ticking.⁵¹ But the concern with the Reformation's place in the providential scheme was particularly marked in the seventeenth century, and it often reflected back on the theses-posting.

In the popular exegeses of Revelation 14, for instance, which usually drew in a wide range of biblical prophecies, Luther assumed the figuration of the first angel flying through the midst of heaven preaching penance and the eternal Gospel. To explain the reference to heaven, the clergy equated it with the Church; but to explain the idea of heavenly flight, many referred to the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Did they not fly through the lands of Germany and Europe at a miraculous speed and reach the ears of all nations? Indeed, they were born aloft by the great miracle of print, God's gift to the German people. Were the theses not a call to repentance, sounded from the north at midnight, that brought down the Antichrist from his throne? And was their power not solely based on the Word rather than force, as the prophecies foretold? As Wolfgang Franz (1564-1628) put it, the theses were nothing more than an appeal to the Gospel, landing 'softly and benevolently' among the people 'like rain on dry fields'.⁵² Typologies and allegories of this kind were sometimes difficult to relate to the parishioners in sermons. Before Johann Friedrich Mayer (1650-1712) began with his own reading of Revelation 14 on the anniversary in 1677, for instance, he advised his public to think of the angel's wings in abstract, allegorical terms rather than like a painting in the church. Only then

could the meaning as something so seemingly impossible as Luther's flight (*Lutheri Flug*) be understood.⁵³

Martin Luther the theses-poster caught up in the flow of providential history was the ideal figuration of a church founder in the confessional age. For as 31 October 1517 made clear, he was not a self-proclaimed prophet, just an uneasy Christian, plagued by uncertainty and hedged in by human flaws. Nor was he a self-proclaimed visionary who set out to create a new church.⁵⁴ On both counts, the theses offered ample evidence that Luther alone could not have been the founder of the Reformation, for he did not have a prophetic sense of mission or a perfect vision of religious truth at the time. On the contrary, as Löscher wrote, the very conservatism of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, written when Luther was still in thrall to the papacy, is proof that the Reformation was a miracle, for God works his miracles through the meek, and the theses were certainly the work of a mild-mannered monk who had not yet grasped the truth. It is worth quoting Löscher in full:

They were clearly written in weakness, for Luther acknowledges the supreme authority of the pope in the same. He takes this as a given, and indeed he rises in defence of the idea, as can be seen in theses 5, 6, 9, 20, 22, 25, 26, 38, 42, 48, and following 61, 78, number 90 and the following theses. And those are mistaken who claim that Luther was already writing about the pope here in a satirical manner and secretly taking shots. On the contrary, at that time Luther's veneration of the pope was sincere. The evil state of affairs in Rome distressed him, but he had only the best hopes for, and belief in, the Roman See and the pope himself. It may be that he had some doubts at the time on the issue of Purgatory, nevertheless

he let it stand here, as theses 10, 17, 19, 22, 25, 29 and others demonstrate. Nor in principle had he rejected the indulgences of the Roman church at the time, as theses 71 and 73 in particular attest, and indeed he still speaks of them with respect and without false *Apostolicas venias*.⁵⁵

In order to sustain the broader framework of providentialism, it was important to emphasise that Luther was merely a tool of God's will rather than some sort of supernatural agent directly shaping the destiny of the Church. Thus even though he was likened to prophets, angels, and Biblical heroes from Noah and Moses to John the Baptist, Daniel, and the third Elijah, by the age of Orthodoxy this was meant in a typological or analogical rather than a literal sense. He was termed the instrument or the mouthpiece of the divine, a temple or vessel through which God effected the 'last Reformation'. But this was not the same thing as being a heaven-sent agent of the divine will, as Georg Nuber (1590-1667) remarked: 'Although we must concede that Doctor Luther should not be numbered among the prophets and the apostles, nevertheless we hold him to be a unique, glorious, and distinguished teacher of God's Church'.⁵⁶

Luther's status as an interpreter of the Gospel occasionally reached the point of 'quasi-papalisation', but most theologians did not claim that Luther was directly inspired by the divine or 'completely enlightened' at the moment of conversion like Paul. On the contrary, although he may have been 'awoken' by God, Luther's path to the truth was gradual, it occurred over stages, and it was only possible because he had discovered 'this new and unheard-of manner of teaching', by which was meant his turn to Scripture.⁵⁷ Some traced this insight back to his first stay in Wittenberg in 1508, others left it for later, but most were in general agreement that 'he should be recognised as

belonging to those men, as Augustine writes of himself, who rose through teaching and writing and not to those who are suddenly elevated from a low rank without having any substance, without having put in any work, without having wagered anything, or without having learned through experience'.⁵⁸ Luther did not have a direct relationship with the divine, so there was no need to treat him like prophet or claim that his words were infallible. He came to the truth by exercising his office as a preacher and a teacher in the Church.

Taking up the issue of Luther's calling is an appropriate point to round out this analysis of the theses-posting in the early Reformation histories. For even when it was a question so seemingly straightforward as his credentials as a clergyman, which became a particular point of contention in the seventeenth century, it is interesting to note how often historians invoked the posting of the theses in order to defend Luther's role as the founding father. For instance, one of the arguments of a long line of Catholic critics from Cochlaeus to Bellarmine was that Luther had no authority to challenge the Catholic magisterium and no warrant, either institutional or prophetic, to assume the mantle of reform. The only reasons he did so, the Catholics argued, were first due to his thirst for power and wealth (by which they meant his desire that his own Augustinian order, rather than Tetzel's Dominicans, be placed in charge of the indulgence trade) and second, that he was just acting as a stooge for his prince the Elector Friedrich the Wise, who wanted to scupper the designs of his dynastic rival Albrecht of Mainz.⁵⁹

On all counts, the Lutherans argued, the claims of the Catholics could be easily disproved by a thorough examination of what happened on 31 October 1517. When Luther stepped up to the church door with his theses in hand, he did so as a legitimate member of the Church, ordained in office by the local Catholic authorities. His purpose

was to debate his fellow theologians on the theme of indulgences, which was a right that had been conferred on him in 1512 by virtue of his Wittenberg doctorate. His aim was not to increase the power of his order or elevate his own fame, for he gained nothing by the gesture and he remained very deferential to the Catholic authorities, as the sources attest. Rather, his aim was point up the dangers of the indulgence trade, for which he was accountable to the Christian community due to his office as a preacher and a teacher in the Church.⁶⁰ Indeed, according to the Eisleben clergyman Anton Probus (1537-1613), it was the very posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* that fulfilled Luther's prophetic role in his office as a preacher and teacher of the Word, for that was the moment when he brought about the renewal 'of the primal, prophetic, apostolic, and catholic teaching, which had been snuffed out and obscured in terrible and miserable fashion by the pope's terrible idolatry, false teaching, lies, and human opinions'.⁶¹

III

Sometime around the turn of the eighteenth century the writing of Reformation history began to change. The model of providential history discussed above fell prey to more and more criticism, and many of the basic features of the foundation narrative in place since the early sixteenth century, including the distinction between secular and spiritual history, the Flacian chronologies of rise and decline, the importance of religion in human history, and the role of divine intervention in earthly affairs – including so-called Protestant miracles such as the posting of the theses – were questioned and often rejected outright.⁶² Ultimately, all aspects of the Reformation narrative would be subject to revision, but three trends in particular threatened the survival of the paradigm that

had emerged during the confessional age. First, history became much more of an exact science, by which is meant, in the first instance, that scholars placed greater stress on archival research and critical use of the primary sources. That is why Seckendorff's *Commentarius* was considered so important, for it was the first work in which 'one can see, in an orderly and detailed manner, the process at work in dear Luther's Reformation'.⁶³ Second, as mentioned, historians began to divest Church history of the supernatural. There was no longer place for divine intervention, no justification for the preservation of theological tradition at the expense of truth, and no need for revelation in works of history where research and reason would suffice. And finally, and following from both of these factors, the study of Church history gradually fell prey to secular trends, both intellectual and social. Scholars began to apply the same standards of historical exegesis to the sources of ecclesiastical history as they did to documents of political or military history. Even in the study of the Reformation, the primary materials were no longer simply accepted as testimony of God's greater plan. The records of the past contained 'mere facts', nothing inherently revelatory or sacred, and the historian needed to apply the same standards to the interpretation of the spiritual as the secular past.⁶⁴

Drawing on these new interpretative techniques together with the new philosophies and the shifting sentiments, and with a larger body of published primary materials at their disposal, scholars began to revisit some of the foundational episodes of the Reformation narrative, including the posting of the theses.⁶⁵ Eventually this led to a change in how historians portrayed the event, though without necessarily challenging the long-held conviction that the theses-posting marked the starting point of the

Reformation. On the contrary, with the emergence of the Enlightenment portrayal of the Reformation, Luther and the church door started to monopolise centre stage.

As mentioned earlier, there were some discrepancies in the original accounts of the theses-posting with reference to the issue of timing. Did Luther dispatch letters before posting the theses? If so, how long was the interval between the two acts? None of the early historians had dealt with this issue in any systematic way. The martyrologist Ludwig Rabus was one of the very few to even touch on it, and his solution was to backdate the Mainz letter to 1 October.⁶⁶ Only with the rise of the new historiography did it become a concern, and while to my knowledge no Lutheran scholar ever challenged the veracity of the theses-posting outright, some started to question, or at least to re-examine, the facts. Seckendorff, for instance, did not doubt that letters to four bishops had been dispatched, as Myconius claimed, but he did concede that it was difficult to prove this one way or another due to the absence of source materials. He could only conclude that ‘one can well see how Luther wrote more letters to the bishops than are presently to be found in his collected works’.⁶⁷ Löscher was also uneasy about the fact that there was no evidence in support of the claim that Luther wrote to the four bishops, not even a clear reference from Luther himself. Ernst Salomon Cyprian (1673-1745), like Löscher one of the great Lutheran Orthodox thinkers of his day, had fewer doubts, but he was unable to make a stronger case for the sequence of events than the historians before him. As one writer noted, Cyprian’s use of the word ‘then’ or ‘subsequently’ (*mithin*) in his accounting of events did little to clarify things.⁶⁸

Ultimately, even historians who defended the idea that Luther wrote to the bishops and then waited on a response undermined, by virtue of their more exacting methods of research, the credibility of the original source-base. Having surveyed the various

arguments pro and con, for instance, Johann Gottlob Walter (1704-82) reached the conclusion that the words of Myconius and Luther were more than enough proof that letters had been sent out in advance of the posting. On the basis of this conviction, he then cast doubt on the competence of Georg Rörer (1492-1557) and the editors of the Jena edition of Luther's works, who had erroneously interpreted Luther's reference to 'prelates' to mean only the Archbishop of Mainz and the Bishop of Brandenburg. This mistake 'is all the more remarkable', Walter added, because these men were in daily contact with Luther during the editing and correcting process. He then added in the footnote that it only goes to show that 'that there are some things in the older works touching on both Reformation history and Luther's life that are in need of correction'.⁶⁹

There were similar concerns with the sequence of events in Wittenberg that led up to the theses-posting. As many of Luther's early sermons had not yet been recovered or dated, there was only rudimentary knowledge of Luther's views on indulgences before All Saint's Eve, and this left room for speculation about continuity. Having seen a dated indulgence letter in Berlin signed by Tetzl on 5 October 1517, Wilhelm Ernst Tetzl (1659-1707) concluded that the main developments must have taken place after this date, though he knew that Luther had preached against indulgences earlier in the year, just as he knew that Luther had disputed against scholastic theology in September.⁷⁰

Similarly, in his compilation of primary materials relating to the indulgence controversy, Johann Erhard Kapp (1696-1756) took up the issue of timing by examining the provenance of Luther's *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*. Kapp correctly dated the sermon to 1517, but he confessed that there was always room for doubt when examining this period of the Reformation, particularly when scholars were forced to rely on the first editions of Luther's works, 'as it is well known that the compilers of Luther's

works did not always observe the appropriate level of accuracy, which holds true with reference to dates as well'.⁷¹ Finally, some scholars began to doubt the authenticity of *The Dream of Friedrich the Wise*, which had emerged as the most powerful support of both the historical and the providential theory of the theses-posting. Catholics had been denying its authenticity for years, of course, but in the early eighteenth century some Lutherans also began to express doubts about the timing, the meaning, and the authenticity of the source. As the critics pointed out, neither Luther nor Spalatin ever mentioned the dream, and it was unlikely the reformers would have relied on visions of this kind, they added, for such dreams were the stuff of Anabaptism. Convinced that the sources did not add up, Christoph August Heumann (1681-1764) devoted a chapter in his work *Lutherus Apocalypticus* to the proposition that Friedrich's dream was nothing more than a fable.⁷²

Critical re-evaluation of the sources along these lines thus did much to weaken the assumptions of the original providential accounts, but ultimately even more subversive were the new interpretations about the meaning of the theses-posting. Löscher touched on the two main strands when he accused Heumann, who was an Enlightenment enthusiast, of indifference and syncretism, by which he meant the growing tendency to look for causation in historical laws rather than providence and the application of standards of reason to issues of belief.⁷³ This was the framework for the revised meaning of the theses-posting during the age of Enlightenment. No longer the moment of divine intervention as in the providential accounts, 31 October 1517 now became the great turning point in the history of western civilisation as historical necessity and the use of reason began to displace faith and tradition. Both approaches were still bound to the broader idea that the theses-posting marked the pivotal moment in the medieval

Church's trajectory of decline, but they were fundamentally at odds in terms of explanation.

In the works of the early Enlightenment, as profane historians began to outnumber the theologians, it became more and more common to apply the new modes of historical analysis to the Reformation, and this encouraged scholars to view 31 October 1517 in a different light. In place of the providential readings of the past, secular-minded historians started to think of the theses-posting as one link in a chain of historical causation that did not necessarily have to lead to Luther's separation from Rome. Blame for the division was placed squarely at the door of the papacy, for if the papal theologians had reacted differently to the demands for reform, and if the popes had responded with more humility and good will to the critics of the indulgence trade, the Catholic clergy of northern Europe would still be watching over their sheep.⁷⁴ To make their case historians began to publish detailed histories of the Church on the eve of the Reformation, drawing on the source materials in order to prove (and not just to preach, as in earlier works) that religion was in a state of crisis at the time and in desperate need of reform. Most scholars still acknowledged that the theses-posting was the critical moment in the story – or as Erdmann Uhse (1677-1730) put it 'the main and most immediate cause of the Reformation' – but it was just still one link in a chain of events.⁷⁵

In place of the earlier notion of divine intervention, scholars started to dwell on the mistakes made by the papacy during the indulgence controversy, the underlying idea being that the essential cause was human error. As the jurist Samuel Pufendorf (1632-94) remarked, 'it was a big mistake on the part of Leo X that he was so quick to take the side of the indulgence peddlers and that he responded to the emerging disputations with

the new Bull of November 1518. With this he eliminated all paths to accommodation and removed any hopes Luther may have had about a consensual solution'.⁷⁶ Some scholars went even further than this, conceding that Catholic corruption and human error had undoubtedly played their part, but anyone with an understanding of historical causation can see that the coming of the Reformation was inevitable. As Gottlieb Samuel Treuer (1683-1743) put it, 'by human reckoning, the beginning of the sixteenth century was simply the right time for a great revolution in the Church. Anyone of intelligence could have taken a leaf from Machiavelli and quite easily have seen this coming'.⁷⁷

There was also a change in the way historians treated the subject of indulgences. In the foundational narratives, the indulgence controversy had been depicted as the episode that forced Luther to take a stand, the posting of the theses being his divinely inspired act of defiance. But more than this, indulgences perfectly conveyed the teaching and practice of medieval Catholicism for an evangelical audience and thus served as a foil to Luther's new insights on repentance, grace, and justification.⁷⁸

By the late seventeenth century, Lutheran historians could no longer assume that their readers even knew what medieval indulgences were. In his 1646 anthology of Luther quotations, for instance, Philipp Saltzmann (1614-67) included a glossary at the end of the work with a number of 'special terms' that had fallen out of German usage, including a number relating to the indulgence trade (*Ablaßbuben*, *Ablaßnarren*, *Ablaßvogt*).⁷⁹ As a way of illustrating the problem, one historian told the story of John Maylorn, an Irish Catholic, who could not believe that Tetzl said the things he said, particularly the infamous quote about sinning against the Virgin Mary, and wagered one-thousand pounds that it was not true. Eventually Maylorn was shown the historical

proofs, but he never paid up and was last seen living as a Mennonite in Amsterdam.⁸⁰ In the face of fading knowledge, theologico-historians started to publish compilations of medieval letters of indulgence or devoted whole chapters in their Reformation histories to the topic in the hope it would jog evangelical memories. Indeed, Tetzel himself found worthy biographers in Gottfried Hecht and Johann Jacob Vogel, whose detailed treatment of Tetzel's life, thought, and career helped to explain how he 'pulled in so many fish with his golden net'.⁸¹ But this effort to preserve the memory of the indulgence trade and remind Protestants of its great danger to salvation had little effect on a public that had started to look back on the medieval period as an age of fairy tales and superstition. Historians too thought about indulgences in a different manner and were more likely to stress the corruption or the irrationality of the trade than its sacerdotal dangers. Pufendorf, for instance, suggested that Luther posted the theses on 'good and reasonable' grounds and that his adversaries were 'such individuals, whose foolishness and wickedness bring people of honour to sigh'.⁸² In his historical survey of the rise of the Reformation, even the theologian Johann Georg Walch stressed the irrationality of the practice before mentioning that it was contrary to Scripture. In his words: 'The matter itself was unreasonable...something simply illogical and unreasonable.'⁸³

For Orthodox Lutheran scholars such as Valentin Ernst Löscher, Ernst Salomon Cyprian, and Wilhelm Ernst Tentzel, all of whom thought of themselves as the keepers of the public memory of the Church, these trends were alarming. To treat the Reformation as a historical event as any other, to suggest that it was brought into being due to political miscalculation as Pufendorf did, or to propose new models of interpretation as Heumann did, was to challenge the time-honoured providential reading

of the Reformation and lead Christians down the path to religious indifference (*Indifferentismus*).⁸⁴ In response these great scholars embarked on an extended campaign of research and recovery in an effort to bring together as much source-material as possible and thereby confirm the original narrative and its assumption that the Reformation was the work of God and the outcome of providence. But there was no denying the shift in perception. The Lutheran histories of this period are run-through with complaints about the lack of interest in Reformation history and the life and the works of Luther. This lack of knowledge was particularly marked among the younger people, as Georg Nuber remarked, who knew ‘next to nothing, or at best very little, about Luther and who he was’.⁸⁵ But even more alarming was the growing tendency to treat the Reformation as a purely secular event, and one moreover that could be explained with reference to the rise of reason or the outcome of political decision-making. The Mecklenburg theologian Georg Friedrich Stieber (1684-1755) read the signs in this regard:

For just as the secular reigns have their revolutions, their particular times and periods, so too have the Church and the sciences experienced great changes, especially at the start of our own eighteenth century. I’ll make no mention now of philosophy, which has taken on such a different form in our age, nor will I speak of theology, whose discourse and form have also changed over time, and begins to depart from the main methods of the previous century. Rather, I will stick just to history, for even though one may be of the opinion that, because it is based purely on stories and facts, it must remain the same through all times. And yet as we

have experienced in our own time, this too can take on a completely different aspect.⁸⁶

No one dreaded these changes and the related rise of *Indifferentismus* more than Löscher. He was also quick to recognise the dangers of the early Enlightenment, and he did not hesitate to cite Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) as its prime mover in Germany. In the work of Thomasius, Löscher saw all of the principles that would eventually bring about the collapse of his mode of Lutheran history, including the displacement of the providential narrative by secular thought, the primacy of reason over revelation as a mode of interpretation, and the supersession of scriptural warrant by natural, social or historical laws. He spent the better part of his life trying to hold back the tide, but in the end, as he recognised, his efforts were in vain.⁸⁷

Löscher's worst fears were realised when the Enlightenment turned its attention to Luther and the origins of the Reformation. In many respects the Reformation with its faith and dogmatism was alien to the Enlightenment mind, as was demonstrated in its approach to the reformer. As a historical figure, as Goethe once remarked, the public found Luther's character fascinating, but this was really the only thing that held their attention.⁸⁸ Enlightenment intellectuals had little sympathy for the monk who, riddled by doubt and anxiety, rose up against something so trivial as indulgences. The indulgence dispute still held the place of privilege as the moment of origin, but historians such as Johann Matthias Schröckh (1733-1808) now had alternative explanations as to why it was that 'the Reformation, the greatest and most incredible revolution to occur in the Church since the days of Christ and the apostles, emerged out of such a minor dispute.'⁸⁹

For Schröckh, as for many other thinkers of the time, the reasons why the Reformation emerged out of so small a matter had little to do (and perhaps nothing at all) with theology or divine providence. Rather, the Reformation came into being because Luther was an early antagonist of the values and ideas held so dear by the Enlightenment. Thus for thinkers ranging from church historians such as Walch and Schröck, literary men such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Goethe, or universal scholars such as Anton Friedrich Büsching and Johann Salomo Semler, Luther became the heroic prefiguration of the Enlightenment. In their eyes, Luther's resolve to take a stand in the indulgence debate was due to his desire to defend the rational interest and free the Christian conscience from the yoke of late-medieval superstition. And he launched his campaign with the theses-posting. As Friedrich Germanus Lüdke (1730-92) put it, in doing this Luther became in effect the guardian angel of 'the rights of reason, humanity, and freedom of conscience,' and took on the defence of religious liberty, religious tolerance, and the German people against the tyranny of the papacy – which was reason enough, according to Friedrich the Great, 'for altars to be erected in his honour as the liberator of the Fatherland'.⁹⁰ This last point became very important in the age of Romanticism that followed, when Luther took his place among the pantheon of German heroes.

Thus in the historical imagination of the age of the German Enlightenment, the Martin Luther who stepped up to the door of the Castle Church on 31 October 1517 was very different to the figure in Mathesius, Selnecker, or even Löscher. The image that emerged in this period was that of a man full of courage, resolve, and certainty of purpose who was determined to free the German church and the German people from their medieval captivity. He was a freedom fighter of the soul and a champion of the

spirit, a hero in the classical mould. ‘Luther was a man of this kind,’ read an entry in the *Berlin Journal for Enlightenment*, ‘as are all who play a leading role in the theatre of the world. Enterprising, fearless, resolute, merciless in the face of prejudice and superstition...’.⁹¹ His main concern was liberty of conscience, which is why he posted the theses in the first place, for all Christians had been created equally and none should be subject to the judgements of the Church against his or her will. For Semler this was Luther’s lasting legacy to the modern age, namely that he ‘gave every Christian the freedom to think for himself about Christian ideas and truths and to follow his conscience.’⁹² From this liberation of the individual it was a small step to the liberation of the nation, and this too became part of the Enlightenment discourse. For Luther was no longer just a religious but a cultural hero, the man who turned German into a literary language and, to cite a passage in Zedler’s *Universal Lexicon*, ‘sought with the utmost diligence the uprooting of ignorance among the people’.⁹³ And of course he was a German as well, a fact eloquently captured in the thought of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the architect of German nationalism, who once remarked that ‘Luther was a powerful mind and the true prophet and preacher of our fatherland’.⁹⁴ With Luther being all of these things in the German imagination of the eighteenth century, it is little wonder that something as dramatic as the theses-posting preserved its place in the narrative.

Artists did not really begin to capture this revised image until the gothic revival of the nineteenth century, when Luther emerges with hammer in hand, but we can get some sense of the extended meaning of the theses-posting in Christian Siegmund Georgi’s portrayal of a Wittenberg procession held in 1755 as part of the Peace of Augsburg bicentennial celebrations (Illustration 6). Georgi relates how the procession,

having begun with a meeting of the professors and other university illuminaries in the *Lutherstube*, made its way through the city streets in the direction of the Castle Church, accompanied throughout by drums, trumpets, and choirs. What is particularly interesting is the social mix, for it was not just a parade of university academics and clergymen but an event that took in the entire social profile of the town, from noblemen and city councillors to local residents and students, and they were all marching in the direction of the final destination, namely 'the church door on which Doctor Luther of blessed memory posted his propositions against Tetzels indulgence trade'.⁹⁵ By this stage, the people of Wittenberg, as indeed the people of Germany as a whole, would have been thoroughly familiar with the importance of the theses-posting in German history and they would have associated it with the courageous actions of the great German hero Martin Luther. He was no longer just a religious figure guided by the hand of God but a historical personage of the type projected by the Enlightenment historians, and he had become the common property of the people at large. Indeed, commemorating the Reformation and its heroes in this manner became very popular in the eighteenth century, and in fact at some stage in the build-up to the bicentennial celebrations in Wittenberg the magistracy had to order that soldiers be deployed in the town with fixed bayonets, just in case there was trouble with the press of the crowd. This was a rather different scenario to the one faced by the magistracy five years later, when Prussian soldiers patrolled the streets and prepared the defences against an imperial bombardment that would ultimately destroy over half of the town, including the Castle Church and its famous door.

¹ Christian Siegmund Georgi, *Wittenbergische Klage-Geschichte* (Wittenberg, 1760), p. 28. For the history of the Castle Church and its destruction and reconstruction, see M. Steffens and I. C. Hennen, eds., *Von der Kapelle zum Nationaldenkmal: die Wittenberger Schloßkirche* (Wittenberg, 1998).

² Matthaeus Faber, *Kurzgefaste historische Nachricht von der Schloß- und Academischen Stifts-Kirche zu Aller-Heiligen in Wittenberg* (Wittenberg, 1717), mentioned in the preface by Gottlieb Wernsdorff.

³ Georgi, *Wittenbergische Klage-Geschichte*, p. 6.

⁴ H. Lehmann, *Luthergedächtnis 1817 bis 2017* (Göttingen, 2012), pp.17-34; on nineteenth-century memorialisation, see M. Steffens, *Luthergedenkstätten im 19. Jahrhundert. Memoria – Repräsentation – Denkmalpflege* (Regensburg, 2008); S. Reichelt, *Der Erlebnisraum Lutherstadt Wittenberg. Genese, Entwicklung und Bestand* (Göttingen, 2012).

⁵ Georgi, *Wittenbergische Klage-Geschichte*, p. 56.

⁶ E. Benz, 'Symbole und Ereignisse der Reformation', in R. Schmidt, ed., *Die Bedeutung der Reformation für die Welt von Morgen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1967), p. 70; see also the discussion in V. Leppin, 'Die Monumentalisierung Luthers: Warum vom Thesenanschlag erzählt wurde – und was davon zu erzählen ist', in J. Ott and M. Treue, eds., *Luthers Thesenanschlag – Faktum oder Fiktion* (Leipzig, 2008), pp. 69-92.

⁷ U. Barth, *Aufgeklärter Protestantismus* (Tübingen, 2004), p. 94.

⁸ For recent discussions of the theses debate, see Ott and Treue, *Luthers Thesenanschlag*; V. Leppin and T. Wengert, 'Sources for and against the Posting of the Ninety-Five Theses', *Lutheran Quarterly* xxix (2015), pp. 373-98; and the articles in I.

Dingel and H. P. Jürgens, eds., *Meilensteine der Reformation. Schlüsseldokumente der frühen Wirksamkeit Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh, 2014); for a wide-ranging survey of the theses-posting through history, see now Peter Marshall, *1517 - Martin Luther, the 95 Theses and the Invention of the Reformation* (Oxford, forthcoming).

⁹ Recent research has proposed that a marginal comment about the theses-posting by Georg Rörer in Luther's working copy of the Bible may precede Melancthon's published remarks (and perhaps even Luther's death). But even if this were the case, Rörer's comment remained buried in his research notes and would have been seen by very few. See M. Treu, 'Urkunde und Reflexion: Wiederentdeckung eines Belegs für Luthers Thesenanschlag', in Ott and Treu, *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, pp. 59-68.

¹⁰ Johann Christian Crell, *Sächsisches Curiositäten Cabinet* (Dresden, 1731), Part II, pp. 82-9.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (65 vols., Weimar, 1883-1993), I. 348-51 (hereafter WA). In 1532 Luther feared that renovation work on the town defences threatened to destroy his study where '...ich doch das bapstumb gesturmet habe'. Quoted in H. Schilling, *Martin Luther. Rebelle in einer Zeit des Umbruchs* (Munich, 2012), p. 127.

¹² It is interesting to note that early modern scholars regularly declared that Luther had the theses printed in Wittenberg before posting them on the church door, and indeed some even professed to own a copy. The Husum clergyman Johann Melchior Krafft, for instance, claimed to have a Wittenberg original, and Johann Quodvultdeus Bürger, among others, claimed to have consulted it, though the description Krafft gives of the format also matches the Nuremberg print. See Johann Melchior Krafft, *Das andere Hundert-Jährige Jubel-Jahr der Evangelischen Kirchen, von der 1517 angegangenen*

Reformation (Hamburg, 1717), p. 10. Both Bernd Moeller and Andrew Pettegree have convincingly argued that the Nuremberg and Leipzig prints were based on an original by the Wittenberg printer Rhau-Grünenberg. See Moeller, ‘Thesenanschläge’, in Ott and Treu, *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, pp. 9-31 and A. Pettegree, *Brand Luther* (New York, 2015), pp. 70-2. According to the Nuremberg jurist Christoph Scheurl (1481-1542), the copies sent out by Luther were ‘bloß geschrieben’. See E. Iserloh, *Luthers Thesenanschlag: Tatsache oder Legende?* (Wiesbaden, 1962), p. 31.

¹³ H. Volz, *Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag und dessen Vorgeschichte* (Weimar, 1959), pp. 19-27; Iserloh, *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, pp. 3-40. The matter is further complicated by the account by Friedrich Myconius in his *Historia Reformationis*. According to Myconius, Luther first wrote to the bishops of Meissen, Frankfurt [Brandenburg or Lebus], Zeitz, and Merseburg as well as Mainz. With no response forthcoming, he had the theses printed and went public with his criticisms. This question of timing has recently been re-examined in H. Junghans, ‘Martin Luther, kirchliche Magnaten und Thesenanschlag’, in Ott and Treu, *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, pp. 33-46.

¹⁴ Iserloh, *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, p. 20. Spalatin did not comment on the theses, but his history in its published form only begins in 1518 due to the fact that the manuscript (to cite the editor) ‘durch die Länge der Zeit beydes Anfang und Ende gantz verlohren gegangen, in der Mitte aber vieles durch Nässe und Moder zerfressen und verderbet worden’. See the preface by Ernst Salomon Cyprian in *Georgii Spalatini Annales Reformationis* (Gotha, 1718), fo. a3^v.

¹⁵ V. Leppin, “‘Nicht seine Person, sondern die Wahrheit zu verteidigen.’” Die Legende vom Thesenanschlag in lutherischer Historiographie und Memoria’, in H. Schilling, ed., *Der Reformator Martin Luther 2017. Eine wissenschaftliche und gedenkpolitische*

Bestandsaufnahme (Berlin, 2015), pp. 85-97. On early representations of Luther in general, see L. Roper, 'Martin Luther's Body: The "Stout Doctor" and his Biographers', *American Historical Review*, cxv (2010), pp. 351-84.

¹⁶ Caspar Peucer, *Liber quintus chronici Carionis a Friderico Secundo usque ad Carolum Quintum* (Wittenberg, 1566), fo. Vv3^r; Caspar Peucer, *Chronica Carionis* (Wittenberg, 1588), p. 1080.

¹⁷ *Der Neundte Teil der Bücher der Ehrwürdigen Herrn D. Martini Lutheri* (Wittenberg, 1557), p. 9^v; *Der erste Teil der Bücher und Schrifften des theuren, seligen Mans Doct: Mart: Luther, vom XVII Jar an, bis auff des XXII* (Jena, 1555), p. 2^v. The Jena edition terms them 'Sprüche', the Wittenberg edition 'Propositiones'.

¹⁸ Quoted in S. J. Lee, 'Luther-Rezeption bei Gottfried Arnold' (Marburg University, Dissertation, 2010), p. 75.

¹⁹ Paul Seidel, *Historia und Geschicht des Ehrwürdigen unsers in Gott lieben Vaters, Herrn Doctoris Martini Lutheri* (Wittenberg, 1581), pp. 1-2; similar views were expressed in Anton Probus, *Renovalia Lutheri* (Jena, 1590), fo. C1^v; Georg Glocker, *Wahrhaftige Historia, und gründlicher summarischer Bericht* (Strasbourg, 1586), fp. C3^r; Nikolaus Selnecker, *Historica Oratio vom Leben und Wandel...Martini Lutheri* (Leipzig, 1576), fo. 11^v; Johannes Mathesius, *Historien von des Ehrwürdigen in Gott seligen thewren Manns Gottes, Doctoris Martini Luthers, Anfang, Lehr, Leben und Sterben* (Nuremberg, 1567), fo. CCX^v.

²⁰ On the role of local pastors for the preservation of memory see S. Dornheim, *Der Pfarrer als Arbeiter am Gedächtnis. Lutherische Erinnerungskultur in der Frühen Neuzeit zwischen Religion und sozialer Kohäsion* (Leipzig, 2013).

²¹ H. J. Schönstädt, *Antichrist, Weltheilsgeschehen und Gottes Werkzeug. Römische Kirche, Reformation und Luther im Spiegel des Reformationsjubiläums 1617* (Wiesbaden, 1978), pp. 10-85, 200-53; T. Kaufmann, 'Reformationsgedenken in der Frühen Neuzeit. Bemerkungen zum 16. und 18. Jahrhundert', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, cvii (2010), pp. 285-324; R. Kastner, *Geistlicher Rauffhandel. Form und Funktion der illustrierten Flugblätter zum Reformationsjubiläum 1617 in ihrem historischen und publizistischen Kontext* (Frankfurt, 1982), pp. 195, 244, 310-19, 352-5.

²² Balthasar Meisner, ed., *Christliche Evangelische Lutherische Jubel Predigten, auff das Erste, hohe Lutherische Jubelfest* (Wittenberg, 1618), pp. 18, 64-5, 75, 83-4; Lehmann, *Luthergedächtnis*, pp. 17-24; Kaufmann, 'Reformationsgedenken', p. 321.

²³ R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), pp. 310-3; H. Volz, 'Der Traum Kurfürst Friedrichs des Weisen vom 30/31. Oktober 1517', *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, xlv (1970), pp. 174-211.

²⁴ For a bibliographical overview of the various works, see Ernst Gustav Vogel, *Bibliotheca Biographica Lutherana* (Halle, 1851), pp. 31-4, 84-7.

²⁵ On the influence of Seckendorff's *Commentarius* and its mix of history and apologetics, see S. Strauch, *Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff: Reformationsgeschichtsschreibung – Reformation des Lebens – Selbstbestimmung zwischen lutherischer Orthodoxie, Pietismus und Frühaufklärung* (Münster, 2005), pp. 132-49; Seckendorff emphasised the first seven years of Luther's life, considering this the crucial period (*propria historia Lutheri*).

²⁶ Ernst Salomon Cyprian, *Hilaria Evangelica* (Gotha, 1719), p. 65.

²⁷ H. Cordes, *Hilaria evangelica academica. Das Reformationsjubiläum von 1717 an den deutschen lutherischen Universitäten* (Göttingen, 2006), pp. 22-75.

²⁸ Christoph Heinrich Rittmeier, *Vorbereitung zu dem instehenden Evangelischen Jubel-Jahre* (Helmstedt, 1716), p. A2^v.

²⁹ Johann Heinrich Feustking, *Historia Clerogamiae Evangelicae, sive de primo Sacerdote marito Lutherano, Bartholomaeo Bernardi, schediasma historico-theologicum* (Wittenberg, 1703), p. 18.

³⁰ E. Wolgast, 'Biographie als Autoritätsstiftung: Die ersten evangelischen Lutherbiographien', in W. Berschin, ed., *Biographie zwischen Renaissance und Barock* (Heidelberg, 1993), p. 64; Roper, 'Martin Luther's Body', pp. 364-6.

³¹ See the articles by Müller and Flügel in W. Müller, ed., *Das historische Jubiläum. Genese, Ordnungsleistung und Inzenierungsgeschichte eines institutionellen Mechanismus* (Münster, 2004); W. Flügel, *Konfession und Jubiläum. Zur Institutionalisierung der lutherischen Gedenkkultur in Sachsen 1617 - 1830* (Leipzig, 2005), pp. 26-84; J. Eibach und M. Sandel, eds., *Protestantische Identität und Erinnerung. Von der Reformation bis zur Bürgerrechtsbewegung in der DDR* (Göttingen, 2003); Lehmann, *Luthergedächtnis*, pp. 17-24; Kaufmann, 'Reformationsgedenken', 285-324.

³² N. Krentz, 'Auf den Spuren der Erinnerung. Wie die "Wittenberger Bewegung" zu einem Ereignis wurde', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, 36 (2009), pp. 363-95; J. Burckhardt, *Das Reformationsjahrhundert. Deutsche Geschichte zwischen Medienrevolution und Institutionsbildung 1517-1617* (Stuttgart, 2002), pp. 30-48.

³³ Johann Nicholas Weislinger, *Huttenus Delarvatus* (Constance, 1730), pp. 29-30.

³⁴ Volz, *Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag*, pp. 19-27; Iserloh, *Luthers Thesenanschlag*, pp. 4-7; WA, li, 538; WA, liv, 180.

³⁵ R. Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520-1620* (Grand Rapids, 1999), pp. 21-5.

³⁶ I. Backus, *Life Writing in Reformation Europe: Lives of Reformers by Friends, Disciples and Foes* (Aldershot, 2008), pp. 1-9.

³⁷ W. E. Winterhager, 'Ablasskritik als Indikator historischen Wandels vor 1517: Ein Beitrag zu Voraussetzungen und Einordnungen der Reformation', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, xc (1999), pp. 6-71; B. Hamm, *Der frühe Luther* (Tübingen, 2010), pp. 90-114; B. Moeller, *Die Reformation und das Mittelalter* (Göttingen, 1991), pp. 53-72.

³⁸ Schönstädt, *Antichrist, Weltheilsgeschehen und Gottes Werkzeug*, p. 240, no. 16; Cyriacus Spangenberg, *Von der Geistlichen Haußhaltung und Ritterschaft D. Martin Lutheri* (Eisleben, 1563), fos. G3^v-G4^r.

³⁹ See for instance Ernst Salomon Cyprian, *Frederici Myconii Historia Reformationis* (Gotha, 1718), pp. 102-4; *Der erste Teil der Bücher und Schrifften des theuren, seligen Mans Doct: Mart: Luther, vom XVII Jar an, bis auff des XXII* (Jena, 1555), fo. A^r; Mathesius, *Historien*, fo. XII^v; Probus, *Renovalia Lutheri*, fo. C1^v; Matthias Hoe von Hoeneegg, *Christliches Geburt und Lobgedächtnis des [...] D. Martini Lutheri* (Leipzig, 1604), fo. B^v.

⁴⁰ Franz in Meisner, ed., *Christliche Evangelische Lutherische Jubel Predigten*, pp. 83.

⁴¹ Hamm, *Der frühe Luther*, pp. 62-72; Thönissen, 'Luthers 95 Thesen gegen den Ablass', pp. 96-7; M. Schmidt, 'Luthers 95 Ablassthesen als kirchliches Bekenntnis', *Lutherjahrbuch*, xlv (1978), pp. 35-55; D. Bagchi, 'Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and the Contemporary Criticism of Indulgences', in R. N. Swanson, ed., *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits: Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 331-

55, here p. 341. With reference to the idea of justification, Mathesius noted that Luther ‘etwas dunckler von diesem Artickel redete’ in the theses and only worked out the full implications over time. See Mathesius, *Historien*, fo. XII^v.

⁴² On this, see M. Pohlig, *Zwischen Gelehrsamkeit und konfessioneller Identitätsstiftung. Lutherische Kirchen- und Universalgeschichtsschreibung 1546-1617* (Tübingen, 2007), pp. 301-22.

⁴³ Seidel, *Historia und Geschichte*, p. 25.

⁴⁴ Elias Veiel, *Historia et necessitas reformationis evangelicae, per B. Lutherum feliciter institutae* (Ulm, 1692), pp. 26-8.

⁴⁵ Johann Georg Walch, *Historische und theologische Einleitung in die Religions-Streitigkeiten der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirchen* (5 vols., Jena, 1733-9), i.11.

⁴⁶ A.G. Dickens and J. M. Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Oxford, 1985), p. 95.

⁴⁷ R. B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford, 1988), pp. 60-258; V. Leppin, *Antichrist und Jüngster Tag. Das Profil apokalyptischer Flugschriftenpublizistik im deutschen Luthertum 1548-1618* (Gütersloh, 1999), pp. 206-92.

⁴⁸ Mathesius, *Historien*, fos. Xiⁱ-XIIⁱ; CXCVIIIⁱ. On the strength of these two prophecies, Georg Mylius went so far as to refer to 1516 as the year of the theses-posting. See M. Pohlig, ‘Luthers Thesenanschlag von 1516 (!) und seine prophetische Legitimation. Georg Mylius’ Gedenkpredigt von 1592’, in S. Rau and B. Studt, eds., *Geschichte Schreiben. Ein Quellen und Studienhandbuch zur Historiographie (ca. 1350-1750)* (Berlin, 2010), pp. 501-6. Over time, as Thomas Kaufmann has remarked, these references were ‘corrected’ and 1517 became the standard year. In large part this

was due to the authority of Luther's own recollections. As Kaufmann writes: 'Durch Luthers Äußerungen...war die "Kanonizität" des Initialdatums 1517 gesichert'. See Kaufmann, 'Reformationsgedenken', pp. 292, no. 34.

⁴⁹ Kaspar Roth, *Gloria Lutheri* (Leipzig, 1619), pp. 1-25; Selnecker, *Historia Oratio*, fos. 11^r-13^r; Seidel, *Historia und Geschicht*, pp. 10-25; Glocker, *Wahrhaftige Historia*, fos. C4^r-C7^v; on these prophecies in general, Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero*, pp. 75-126.

⁵⁰ Valentin Ernst Löscher, *Vollständige Reformations-Acta and Documenta* (3 vols., Leipzig, 1720), i. 145-73.

⁵¹ A. Seifert, *Der Rückzug der biblischen Prophetie von der neueren Geschichte* (Cologne, 1990), pp. 1-10.

⁵² Franz in Meisner, ed., *Christliche Evangelische Lutherische Jubel Predigten*, pp. 84, 75; Simon Gedick, *Solennitas Jublaei* (Leipzig, 1618), fos. Cii^v, F4^{r-v}; Valerius Herberger, *Gloria Lutheri et Evangelicorum* (Leipzig, 1608), pp. 30-120 (Herberger spoke of the origins of the Reformation as an 'Engelische[r] Federkrieg'); Schönstädt, *Antichrist, Weltheilsgeschehen und Gottes Werkzeug*, pp. 256-60; Revelations 14 became a popular theme for anniversary sermons, which were then often reworked and turned into substantial theological works. See Johann Friedrich Mayer, *Lutherus Apocalypticus* (Leipzig, 1677), pp. 150-64; Johann Müller, *Defensio Lutheri Defensi* (Frankfurt am Main, 1684), pp. 48-58; Christoph August Heumann, *Lutherus Apocalypticus* (Hannover, 1717), which is a revisionist collection of six dissertations that begins with the typology of Michael and the dragon. There is a survey of the main interpretations from Bugenhagen to Heumann in Johann Georg Walch, *D. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften* (23 vols., Halle, 1740-53), xv. 82-3.

⁵³ Mayer, *Lutherus Apocalypticus*, pp. 149-50.

⁵⁴ As Luther's own confession that 'I got into these turmoils by accident and not by will or intention' seemed to confirm. WA liv. 180.

⁵⁵ Löscher, *Vollständige Reformationen-Acta and Documenta*, p. 459. Löscher was primarily referring to Hermann von der Hardt in his discussion of those who claimed that Luther wrote satirically.

⁵⁶ Georg Nuber, *Lutherus Redivivus* (Stuttgart, 1658) fo. (a)2^v; Philipp Melanchthon, Matthias Ritter, ed., *Vita Lutheri* (Frankfurt am Main, 1564), fo. Vv^r; Mathesius, *Historien*, fo. Aii^v; Georg Mylius, *Parentatio Lutheri* (Wittenberg, 1592), fo. A4^v; Mayer, *Lutherus Apocalypticus*, pp. 92-4; Schönstädt, *Antichrist, Weltheilsgeschehen und Gottes Werkzeug*, pp. 286-303.

⁵⁷ Selnecker, *Historica Oratio*, fo. 8^v; Wolgast, 'Biographie als Autoritätsstiftung', pp. 43. In 1617 many of the clergy numbered him among the 'pastors and teachers' evoked in Ephesians 4, 11. See Schönstädt, *Antichrist, Weltheilsgeschehen und Gottes Werkzeug*, pp. 260-2.

⁵⁸ Selnecker, *Historia Oratio*, p. 28^{r-v}; Mathesius, *Historien*, pp. xii^v-xiii^v; Matthias Hoe von Hoeneegg, *Martinalia Sacra Pragensia* (Leipzig, 1613), pp. 26-7; these are close to the words of Luther himself, who, also citing Augustine, claimed 'I was not one of those who from nothing suddenly rise to the top...'. Quoted in S. H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven, CT, 2015), p. 41.

⁵⁹ See the surveys in Philipp Hailbrunner, *Der unschuldige Luther* (Laugingen, 1599) and Johann Müller, *Lutherus Defensus* (Hamburg, 1634). See also E. W. Zeeden, *Martin Luther und die Reformation im Urteil des deutschen Luthertums* (2 vols., Freiburg, 1950), ii. 113-14.

⁶⁰ Glocker, *Wahrhaftige Historia*, fos. B2^r-C3^r; Andreas Kesler, *Luthertum* (Coburg, 1630), pp. 15-59, here 57; Müller, *Defensio Lutheri Defensi*, pp. 69-115.

⁶¹ Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero*, pp. 96.

⁶² T. Fuchs, 'Das Ringen mit der Tradition. Die Kritik an Kirche und Religion in der Historiographie der Aufklärungsepoche', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, lv (2003), pp. 121-37.

⁶³ Erdmann Uhse, *Kirchen-Historie des XVI und XVII Jahr-Hunderts nach Christi Geburth* (Leipzig, 1710), fo.)(3^v.

⁶⁴ P. H. Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (London 1975), pp. 2-21; John Stroup, 'Protestant Church Historians in the German Enlightenment', in H. E. Bödeker et. al., eds., *Aufklärung und Geschichte. Studien zur deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 1986), pp. 169-92; D. R. Kelly, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven 2003), pp. 9-16. On the foundations see U. Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung. Die Vorgeschichte des Historizismus* (Munich 1991).

⁶⁵ The theses and the indulgence dispute were the subject of a number of university disputations over the course of the seventeenth century, including defences overseen by Wolfgang Franz (1617), Johann Conrad Dannhauer (1661), Johann Friedrich Mayer (1685), and Hermann van der Hardt (1703). Occasionally scholars mention a manuscript history of the conflict written by Konrad Samuel Schurzfleisch entitled *Anfang und Ursach Doctor Luthers Predigen und Schreiben wieder den Ablass*. I have not been able to locate a copy of this work.

⁶⁶ Leppin, 'Nicht seine Person, sondern die Wahrheit zu verteidigen', p. 93; Ludwig Rabus, *Historien der Martyrer* (2 vols., Strasbourg, 1571-2), ii. Avi^r.

⁶⁷ Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff, Elias Frick, ed., *Ausführliche Historie des Lutherthums und der heilsamen Reformation* (Leipzig, 1714), pp. 62-84, here p. 66.

⁶⁸ Johann Gottlob Walter, *Ergänzte und verbesserte Nachrichten von den Letzten Thaten und Lebensgeschichten des seligen D. Luthers* (Jena, 1750), part 1, section 2, pp. 97-98. Walter is referring to the following passage in Ernst Salomon Cyprian, *Historia der Augspurgischen Confession* (Gotha, 1730), ch. 2., p. 23: ‘Er schriebe auch, wie Myconius berichtet, so wohl an seinen ordentlichen Bischoff nach Brandenburg, als an den Cardinal Albrechten, sehr demüthig, bate zugleich um Unterricht, und Abstellung des grossen aus dem Ablaß-Kram erwachsenden Aergernisses, mithin schlug er den 31. Octobris gewisse Sätze von der Busse und von dem Ablaß, darüber zu disputiren, und die Wahrheit zu erforschen, öffentlich an...’.

⁶⁹ Walter, *Ergänzte und verbesserte Nachrichten*, pp. 101, 106. Working on the assumption that Luther’s reference to ‘prelates’ in his letter to Leo X (‘aliquot magnates ecclesiarum’ in the original Latin, ‘etliche Prelaten’ in the German) signifies more than just Mainz and Brandenburg, Walter criticised the Jena marginal note for interpreting it to mean just these two men. Even worse than this, he added, is the fact that the marginal comment refers the reader back to the copies of Luther’s letters to Mainz and Brandenburg, one of which is dated 31 October 1517 (Mainz) and the other May 1518 (Brandenburg). See *Der erste Teil der Bücher und Schrifften des theuren, seligen Mans Doct: Mart: Luther, vom XVII Jar an, bis auff des XXII* (Jena, 1555), fos. 47^v; 1^r-2^r; 43^r-44^v. See also the survey in Walch, *Sämmtliche Schrifften*, xviii. 31-2. Many aspects of Walter’s analysis touch on the same points that would later be raised by Iserloh, Volz, and Bornkamm in the modern debate.

⁷⁰ Wilhelm Ernst Tentzel, ed., *Monatliche Unterredungen* xi (November, 1697), pp. 900-22. Tentzel, *Historischer Bericht*, 234-64.

⁷¹ Johann Erhard Kapp, *Sammlung einiger zum Päpstlichen Ablass überhaupt, Sonderlich aber zu der im Anfang der Reformation zwischen D. Martin Luther und Johann Tetzel hiervon geführten Streitigkeit gehörigen Schrifften* (Leipzig, 1721), p. 309. See also Walch, *Sämmtliche Schrifften*, xviii. 35-6. On the dating of Luther's pre-theses indulgence sermons, see Timothy Wengert, 'Martin Luther's Preaching of Indulgences in January 1517', *Lutheran Quarterly*, xxix (2015), pp. 62-75.

⁷² Heumann, *Lutherus Apocalypticus*, pp. 73-115.

⁷³ Valentin Ernst Löscher, ed., *Unschuldige Nachrichten* xviii (1718), p. 299.

⁷⁴ Christian Kortholt, *Papa Schismaticus* (Rostock, 1663), pp. 11-25; Johann Georg Lairitz, *Der Römische Pabsts-Thron* (Bayreuth, 1685), pp. 845-94; see also Nicholas Hunnius, *Offentlicher Beweiß, daß Martinus Luther zu des Pabstthumbs Reformation rechtmäßig von Gott sey beruffen worden* (Dresden, 1717), preface by Löscher.

⁷⁵ Uhse, *Kirchen-Historie des XVI und XVII Jahr-Hunderts*, p. 60.

⁷⁶ Samuel von Pufendorf, *Politische Betrachtung der geistlichen Monarchie* (Halle, 1717), pp. 187-8.

⁷⁷ Gottlieb Samuel Treuer, *Die politischen Fehler des päpstlichen Hofes welche die Reformation Lutheri sollen befördert haben* (Leipzig, 1718), p. 19.

⁷⁸ Hamm, *Der frühe Luther*, pp. 90-114.

⁷⁹ Philipp Saltzmann, *Singularia Lutheri* (Naumburg, 1646), 'Sonderbare Worte', p. 1.

⁸⁰ Hugo Wismeider, *Historische Untersuchung, ob die bekannte Lästerung wider die hl. Mutter Gottes dem päpstischen Ablass-Crämer Johann Tetzeln, mit Grund könne zugeschrieben werden?* (Jena, 1718), pp. 25-6.

⁸¹ Johann Jacob Vogel, *Leben des päpstlichen Gnaden-Predigers oder Ablass-Crämers Johann Tetzels* (Leipzig, 1717), p. 125; Gottfried Hecht, *Vita Joannis Tezelii Quaestoris Sacri* (Wittenberg, 1717). Walch drew on the recent work on indulgences for his huge collection of sources in *Sämmtliche Schriften*, xv. 1-469.

⁸² Pufendorf, *Politische Betrachtung*, p. 175.

⁸³ Walch, *Historische und theologische Einleitung*, i. 12.

⁸⁴ Georg Friedrich Stieber, *Vorspiel zur Historia der Reformation und Leben Lutheri* (Güstrow, 1710), p. 254; Löscher, ed., *Unschuldige Nachrichten* xviii (1718), 295.

⁸⁵ Nuber, *Lutherus Redivivus*, fo. B2^f.

⁸⁶ Georg Friedrich Stieber, *Historien von des Ehrwürdigen in Gott seeligen theueren Mannes Gottes D. Martin Luthers* (Güstrow, 1715), p. a4^f.

⁸⁷ M. Greschat, *Zwischen Tradition und neuem Anfang. Valentin Ernst Löscher und der Ausgang der lutherischen Orthodoxie* (Witten 1971), pp. 20-75; compare I. Hunter, *The Secularisation of the Confessional State: the Political Thought of Christian Thomasius* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁸⁸ A. Beutel, 'Martin Luther im Urteil der deutschen Aufklärung. Beobachtungen zu einem epochalen Paradigmawechsel', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, cxii (2015), p. 164.

⁸⁹ Johann Matthias Schröckh, *Das Leben Martin Luthers* (Frankfurt, 1771), p. 9.

⁹⁰ Beutel, 'Martin Luther im Urteil der deutschen Aufklärung', pp. 164, 168; Zeeden, *Martin Luther*, i. 189-316; H. Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1970), pp. 13-19, here p. 17; H. Stephan, *Luther in den Wandlungen seiner Kirche* (Berlin, 1951), pp. 35-49.

⁹¹ Andreas Riem, 'Wie weit erstreckt sich die Macht der weltlichen Obrigkeit in Religionssachen', *Berlinisches Journal für Aufklärung*, i (1788), pp. 248-9.

⁹² Zeeden, *Martin Luther*, i. 231.

⁹³ *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste* (68 vols., Halle/Leipzig, 1731-54), xviii. 1292.

⁹⁴ Zeeden, *Martin Luther*, i. 322.

⁹⁵ Christian Siegmund Georgi, *Wittenbergische Jubel-Geschichte* (Wittenberg, 1756), p. 49.