

A STUDY OF THE

# Protestant Reformation

1517 - 2017

The 500th Anniversary





## Introduction: Part 8

After examining the Roman Catholic dogma on *Purgatory* (Part 6) and the teaching of the Scriptures on *Assurance of Salvation* (Part 7), we now return to the story of the Reformation and the events that unfolded **after** Martin Luther nailed the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Historian Harold Grimm reflected on this posting: “If Luther expected the indulgence issue to remain on an academic level, he was greatly mistaken...The *Ninety-Five Theses* were soon translated into German, printed, and distributed widely, for the reading public liked their spirit as well as their contents.” It is important to note that, according to Roland Bainton, “Luther took no steps to spread these theses among the people.”



# The Spread of the *Ninety-Five Theses*

- A contemporary historian named Myconius wrote: “In a fortnight, they were in every part of Germany, and in four weeks they had traversed nearly the whole of Christendom, as if the very angels had been their messengers and had placed them before the eyes of all men. No one can believe the noise they made.”
- How the *Ninety-Five Theses* spread so rapidly: (1) by the pilgrims who had thronged to Wittenberg for the feast of All-Saints; everyone read them, meditated and commented on them; (2) the people conversed about them in all the convents and universities throughout Germany; (3) the monks in the monasteries were glad that at last “one man had found courage to undertake this perilous struggle.”

# The Unexpected Reformer

Roland Bainton made this compelling comparison: “What Karl Barth (1886-1968) said of his own unexpected emergence as a reformer could be said equally of Luther, that he was like a man climbing in the darkness a winding staircase in the steeple of an ancient cathedral. In the blackness he reached out to steady himself, and his hand laid hold of a rope. He was startled to hear the clanging of a bell.”



# The Reaction to the *Ninety-Five Theses*

- **Johannes Reuchlin** (1455-1522): “Thanks be to God! At last they have found a man who will give them so much to do, that they will be compelled at last to let my old age end in peace.”
- **The Emperor Maximilian** (1486-1519): He admired Luther’s theses and foresaw that this obscure Augustinian monk might one day become a powerful ally for Germany in her struggle against Rome. He said to the Elector of Saxony: “Take great care of the monk Luther, for the time may come when we shall have need of him.”
- **An Aged Priest of Hexter in Westphalia**: “Dear Brother Martin! If you succeed in overthrowing this purgatory and all these paper-dealers, you will be a fine fellow indeed!”



# The Reaction to the *Ninety-Five Theses*

- **Sylvester Mazzolini of Prierio, “Prierias”** (1456-1527), Dominican priest and Master of the Sacred Palace in Rome: He requested Pope Leo X to treat Luther as a heretic. He declared: “Whoever does not accept the doctrine of the Roman Church and of the Roman pontiff as the infallible rule of faith from which sacred Scripture derives strength and authority is a heretic, and he who declares that in the matter of indulgences the Roman Church cannot do what actually it does is a heretic.” He refuted Luther’s errors and described him as “a leper with a brain of brass and a nose of iron.”

# The Reaction to the *Ninety-Five Theses*

“God has given men a physician (Luther) who cuts deep into the flesh, because the malady would otherwise be incurable.”



**Erasmus of Rotterdam**  
1466-1536



# Tetzel's Response to Luther

- **Tetzel:** “Each man will be able to judge who is the heresiarch (the founder of a heresy), heretic, schismatic; who is mistaken, rash, and slanderous. Then it will be clear to the eyes of all who it is that has a dull brain, that has never felt the Bible, never read the Christian doctrines, never understood his own doctors....In support of the propositions I advance, I am ready to suffer all things – prisons, scourging, drowning, and the stake.”
- **Luther:** “When I hear these invectives, I fancy it is an ass braying at me. I am delighted with them, and I should be very sorry were such people to call me a good Christian.”





# Tetzel's Disputation on January 20, 1518

- Tetzel held this debate in Frankfort-on-the-Oder with 300 monks who had been sent from various monasteries throughout the region.
- He read his theses – all 48 of them, including the following:
- “We should teach Christians that the pope, by the greatness of his power, is above the whole universal Church, and superior to the councils, and that we should implicitly obey his decrees.”
- “We should teach Christians that the pope alone has the right of deciding in all matters of Christian faith; that he alone and no one besides him has power to interpret the meaning of Scripture according to his own views, and to approve or condemn all the words or writings of other men.”



# Tetzel's Disputation on January 20, 1518

- “We should teach Christians that the judgment of the pope cannot err, in matters concerning the Christian faith, or which are necessary to the salvation of the human race.”
- “We should teach Christians that those who injure the honor or dignity of the pope, are guilty of high-treason, and deserve to be accursed.”
- “We should teach Christians to regard as obstinate heretics all who declare by their words, acts, or writings, that they will not retract their heretical propositions, even should excommunication after excommunication fall upon them like hail or rain.”



# Tetzel's Disputation on January 20, 1518

- After the disputation, Tetzel had a pulpit and scaffold built in an area outside of Frankfort.
- In solemn procession, with his insignia of inquisitor (examiner) of the faith, he railed from the pulpit and exclaimed that the heretic Luther deserved to suffer death at the stake.
- Next, placing Luther's theses and sermon on the scaffold, he burnt them.
- Afterwards, he re-entered Frankfort in triumph.
- The monks who followed Tetzel considered Luther "a madman, a seducer, and a demoniac."



# Response of Wittenberg's Students

- Subsequently, Tetzel sent a man from Halle to circulate *his* theses in Wittenberg.
- Indignant that Tetzel burned the theses of Luther, they surrounded the man, mobbed, and frightened him, saying, “How can you dare bring such things here?”
- The students seized Tetzel’s 800 copies of his theses and posted the following words on the university boards: “Whoever desires to be present at the burning and funeral of Tetzel’s theses must come to the market-place at 2:00.”
- At the appointed hour, Tetzel’s theses were consigned to the flames.



# Luther's Later Reflection

- “I began this business with great fear and trembling. Who was I then, I, a poor, wretched, contemptible friar, more like a corpse than a man; who was I to oppose the majesty of the pope, before whom not only the kings of the earth and the whole world trembled, but even, if I may so speak, heaven and hell were constrained to obey the signal of his eyes?....No one can know what my heart suffered during the first two years, and into what despondency, I may say into what despair, I was sunk.”
- “The reproaches, the timidity, and the silence of his friends had discouraged Luther; the attacks of his enemies produced a contrary effect” (Merle D’Aubingne, pronounced *DOH-been-neh*).

# Luther's Response to Georg Spalatin's Letter

- Note: Spalatin was an early friend of Luther's and spiritual counselor to Elector Frederick the Wise. He remained faithful to Luther during the crisis, consoling and supporting him.
- **Spalatin:** "What is the best method of studying Scripture?"
- **Luther:** "As yet, most excellent Spalatin, you have asked me things that were in my power. But to direct you in the study of the Holy Scriptures is beyond my ability. If, however, you absolutely wish to know my method, I will not conceal it from you."



**Georg Spalatin**

1482-1545





# Luther's Response to Georg Spalatin

- “It is very certain, that we cannot attain to the understanding of Scripture either by study or by the intellect. Your first duty is to begin by prayer. Entreat the Lord to grant you, of his great mercy, the true understanding of his Word. There is no other interpreter of the Word of God than the Author of this Word, as he himself has said: *They shall be taught of God*. Hope for nothing from your own labors, from your own understanding; trust solely in God, and in the influence of his Spirit. Believe this on the word of a man who has had experience.”
- “It is written in the prophets, ‘AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.’ Every one who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me” (John 6:45).

# Albert of Mainz: A Brief Review



Albert of Mainz

1490-1545

- At 23 years of age, he already held the sees (office of bishop) of Halberstadt, Magdeburg (1513-1545), and Mainz (1514-1545) and was made cardinal at the age of 28.
- He paid Pope Leo the installation fee of 10,000 ducats (relating to a *duke* or *dukedom*) through the German banking house of Fugger for the archbishopric of Mainz.
- Through a deal made with Pope Leo X, Albert sold indulgences through the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel.



# Luther's Letter to Albert of Mainz

A copy of the *Ninety-Five Theses* was sent to Albert, along with the following letter on October 31, 1517:

“Father in Christ and Most Illustrious Prince, forgive me that I, the scum of the earth, should dare to approach Your Sublimity. The Lord Jesus is my witness that I am well aware of my insignificance and my unworthiness. I make so bold because of the office of fidelity which I owe to Your Paternity. May Your Highness look upon this speck of dust and hear my plea for clemency from you and from the pope.

“God on high, is this the way the souls entrusted to your care are prepared for death? It is high time that you looked into this matter. I



# Luther's Letter to Albert of Mainz

can be silent no longer. In fear and trembling we must work out our salvation. Indulgences can offer no security but only the remission of external canonical penalties. Works of piety and charity are infinitely better than indulgences. Christ did not command the preaching of indulgences but of the gospel, and what a horror it is, what a peril to a bishop, if he never gives the gospel to his people except along with the racket of indulgences. In the instructions of Your Paternity to the indulgence sellers, issued without your knowledge and consent [Luther offers him a way out], indulgences are called the inestimable gift of God for the reconciliation of man to God and the emptying of purgatory. Contrition is declared to be unnecessary. What shall I do,



# Luther's Letter to Albert of Mainz

Illustrious Prince, if not to beseech Your Paternity through Jesus Christ our Lord to suppress utterly these instructions lest someone arise to confute this book and to bring Your Illustrious Sublimity into obloquy (disgrace), which I dread but fear if something is not done speedily? May Your Paternity accept my faithful admonition. I, too, am one of your sheep. May the Lord Jesus guard you forever. Amen.”

Wittenberg, 1517, on the eve of All Saints

“If you will look over my theses, you will see how dubious is the doctrine of indulgences, which is so confidently proclaimed.”

Martin Luther, Augustinian Doctor of Theology



# Albert's Response

- Albert decided not to reply but to forward Luther's letter and the *Ninety-Five Theses* to Rome in December 1517, with these words: "His Pontifical Holiness will know how 'such error' is to be countered."
- Historian Frank James summarizes this exchange: "In a relatively short period of time, Luther was perceived as a loyal German standing up to the Roman religious occupation of Germany, and Albert was seen as a collaborator with the enemy of the German people. A groundswell of support for Luther emerged in late 1517 and early 1518. When faced with ecclesiastical opposition, this new German Hercules (as early woodcuts make clear) would not back down."





# The Disputation in Heidelberg

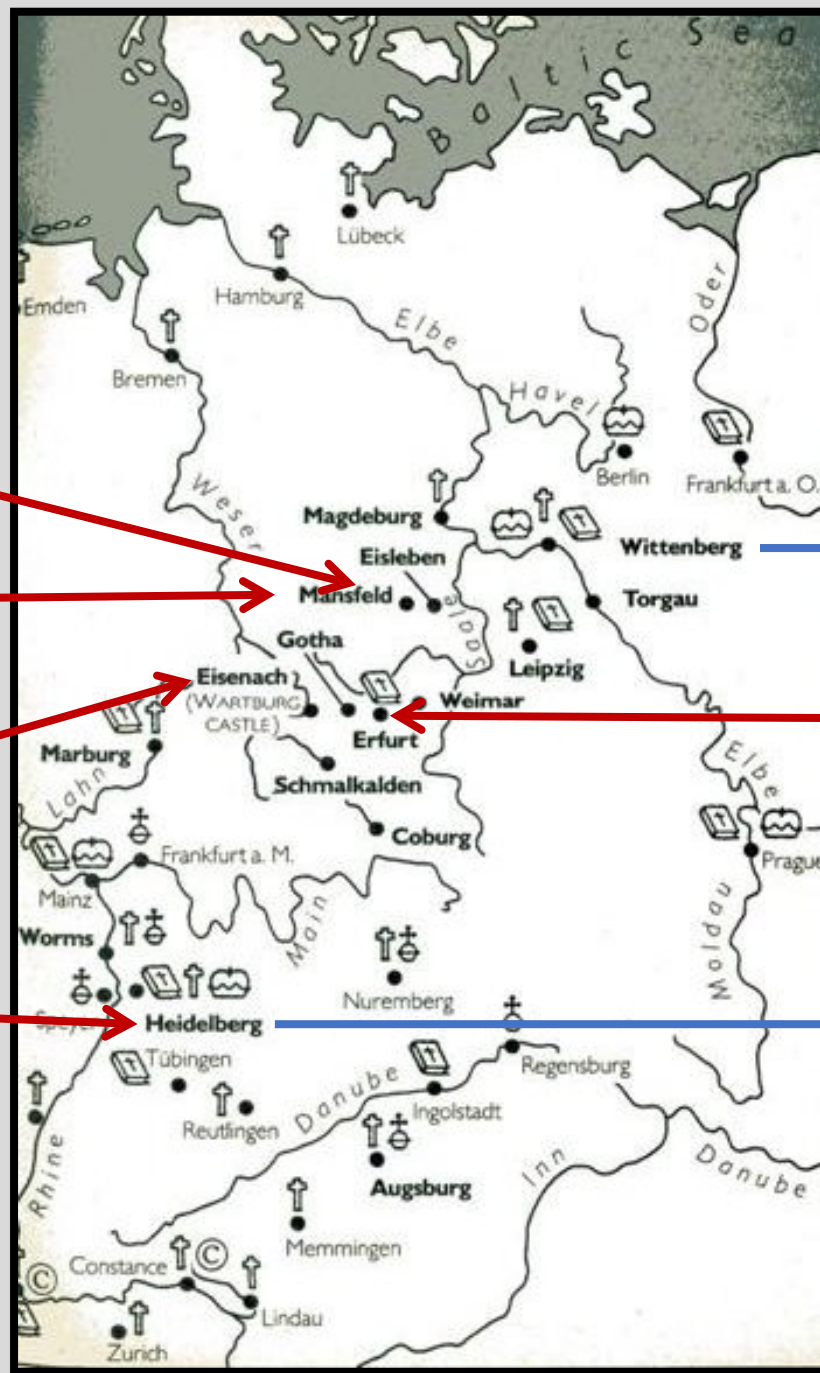
- Pope Leo X appointed a new leader of the Augustinians, Gabrielle della Volte (1468-1537), that he might “quench a monk of his order, Martin Luther by name, and thus smother the fire before it should become a conflagration” (Bainton).
- The disputation (debate) was held on April 26, 1518 at the monastery in Heidelberg at the regular triennial gathering of the chapter.
- Luther received warnings of danger from many sources. Some said he would be “burned within a month, some within two weeks.”
- Luther departed on April 9 and traveled incognito. After four days of traveling, he wrote: “I am properly contrite for going on foot. Since my contrition is perfect, full penance has already been done, and no indulgence is needed.” From Erfurt, he rode in a wagon.

**Magdeburg**

**Mansfeld**  
(Moved here in 1484)

**Eisenach**

**Heidelberg**



**Erfurt**

**Distance between Wittenberg  
and Heidelberg: 317 miles**



# The Disputation in Heidelberg

- He arrived in Heidelberg as a guest of honor.
- He had prepared his *Heidelberg Theses*, concerned with sin, free will, and grace, and defended his views before the Augustinian chapter.
- The older men did not take to Luther's teaching, while the younger men were enthusiastic about it. Luther said, "I have great hope that as Christ, when rejected by the Jews, went over to the Gentiles, so this true theology, rejected by opinionated old men, will pass over to the younger generation."
- After it was over, the Nurnberg delegation invited Luther to ride with them in a wagon until their ways parted (at Nurnberg)."



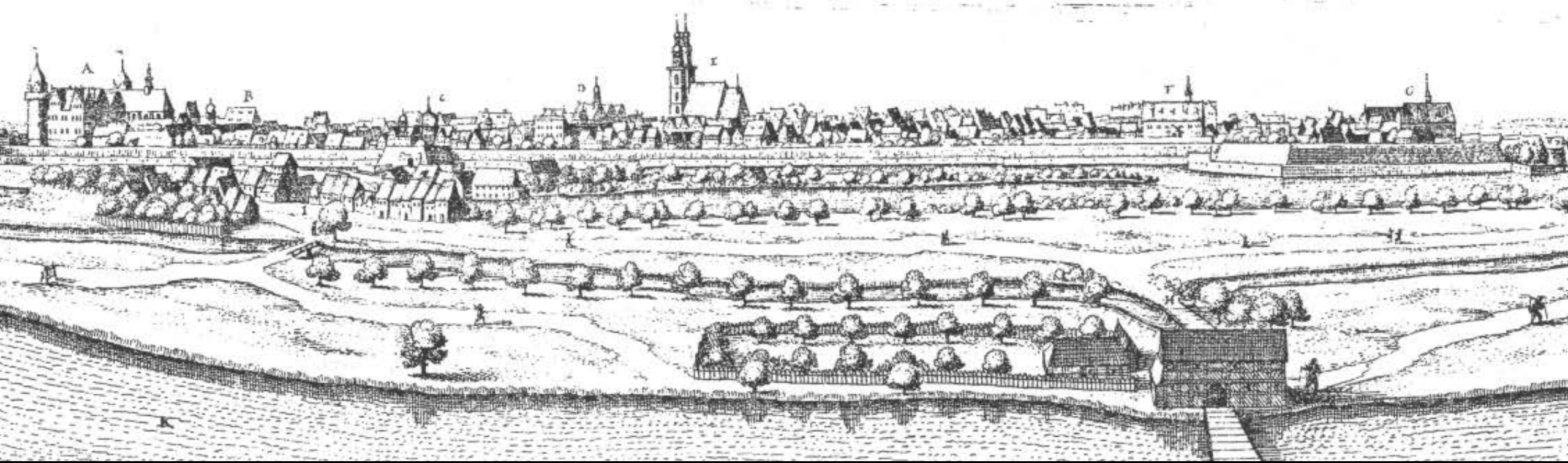
# The Heidelberg Theses: 5 of 28

1. The law of God, although the soundest doctrine of life, is not able to bring man to righteousness but rather stands in the way.
18. It is certain that a man must completely despair of himself in order to become fit to obtain the grace of Christ.
19. The law also brings about the wrath of God, - it kills, reviles, makes guilty, judges, condemns all that is not in Christ.
26. The law says: "Do this!", and it never is done. Grace says: "Believe in this one!", and forthwith everything is done.
28. The love of God does not find its object but rather creates it. Human love starts with the object.





# Wittenberg



After he left his brothers in Nurnberg, Luther continued by wagon until he returned home to Wittenberg.

# How Would You Answer?

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?
2. Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the purity and peace of the Church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account?