THE PASTORAL ROOTS OF LUTHER'S REFORMATION

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Five hundred years have passed since Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church.[1] Although it was primarily his three publications of 1520 that represented a definitive departure from the theology of the Roman Catholic Church, it is this image of Luther at the church door that has captured the public imagination more than any other. It is also the definitive act that brought Luther to widespread attention amongst his contemporaries. Yet Luther was certainly not the first person to write against indulgences; John Wycliffe did so, nearly two hundred years earlier. So, what was it about Luther's protest that made it distinctive? Answering this question will lead us to reflect on the pastoral roots of Luther's Reformation through an examination of the theological and historical context of Luther's early thought.

95 THESES

The theses are ninety-five short sentences declaring a point of view, or posing some very pointed questions, and their more formal title is "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences." Essentially, indulgences were a mechanism linking several concepts: the role of the Pope as the Vicar of Christ; the belief that most Christians (other than the very holy) needed to spend very long periods of time after death in the intermediate state of purgatory before entering heaven; and the belief that there was an accessible celestial "treasury of merit" created by the superfluity of holiness of collected saints.

Purgatory

Purgatory was a concept that had developed over time. Augustine had speculated about the concept in his *Enchiridion*, written sometime after 420.[2] Just before 600, Pope Gregory the Great taught that there was a post-mortem "cleansing fire before judgment, because of some minor faults that may remain to be purged

[1] I am aware that there has been debate about the nature of this posting, but as the exact circumstances aren't crucial to the subject matter of this article, the traditional version is being utilised.
[2] Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, chapter 69 in P. Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 260.

away."[3] By the thirteenth-century, Aquinas was definite that purgatory was a reality, necessary to deal with non-mortal sin: "the penalties of purgatory [were] due to personal defects."[4]

Indulgences

Indulgences came to prominence during the First Crusade of 1095. Pope Urban II announced a plenary indulgence for participation in the crusade, which would guarantee immediate entry into heaven for any crusader who died in a repentant state. The Crusaders were offered indulgences in advance of the sins they may commit in reclaiming the Holy Land for Christ. Plenary indulgences were very rare, and were seen as the Pope's particular privilege.[5] Normally, indulgences were only partial, and were the means by which the Pope offered anyone access to this treasury of merit under certain conditions, with the promise of shortening time in purgatory, either for themselves or a loved one. The action of seeking an indulgence was linked with the attitude of penitence.

Later Popes broadened plenary indulgences to include acts of significant service, and later, to allow people to buy a plenary indulgence as they were about to die.[6] Later still, it was broadened to include visits to Rome. Suffice to say, by the fourteenth century, there was a well-established system in place linking financial contribution, personal effort, and reducing or eliminating time in purgatory. The church's need for finance met the people's need for assurance in the mechanism of indulgences.

When Wycliffe wrote against indulgences in the fourteenth century, his approach was forthright, but predominantly focused on what he saw as Christological error and blasphemy. In a supposed dialogue between Wisdom and Truth, which is aimed especially (but not exclusively) at the friars, Wycliffe puts the following words in the mouth of Wisdom:

> I confess that the indulgences of the pope, if they are what they are said to be, are a manifest blasphemy, inasmuch as he claims a power to save men almost without limit, and not only to mitigate the penalties of those who have sinned, by granting them the aid of absolutions and indulgences, that they may never come to purgatory, but to give command to the holy angels, that when the soul is separated from the body, they may carry it without delay to its everlasting rest…. They suppose, in the first place, that there is an infinite number of supererogatory merits, belonging to the saints, laid up in heaven, and above all, the merit of our Lord Jesus Christ, which would be sufficient to save an infinite number of other worlds, and that, over all this treasure, Christ hath set the pope. Secondly, that it is his pleasure to distribute it, and, accordingly, he may distribute therefrom to an infinite extent, since the remainder will still be infinite…. Moreover, it appears that this doctrine is a manifold blasphemy against Christ, inasmuch as the pope is extolled above his humanity and deity, and so

[3] Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 7
[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1989), III, 14, 534
[5] Richard W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 136.
[6] Southern, *Western Society*, 137.

> above all that is called God—pretensions which, according to the declarations of the apostle, agree with the character of Antichrist…[7]

In Luther's day, the fundraising aspect of indulgences had become more obvious, and the methods crasser. The previous Pope, Julius II, had initiated an indulgence in 1510 to raise funds to build the basilica of St Peter's in Rome. This was revived in 1513 by his successor, Leo X. Leo appointed Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz, to sell the indulgence in his sees and Albrecht, already in debt, subcontracted out the sale of the indulgence to a banking house. In the final arrangement, Albrecht and the bankers kept half of the money raised, with the other half going to Rome.[8] The end result of this arrangement was that their appointed indulgence preacher Tetzel was preaching a very direct link between paying money and release from purgatory in Luther's vicinity.

Luther's Protest Against Indulgences

When we turn to Luther's protest against indulgences, at first glance, it seems quite similar to Wycliffe's, if somewhat less blatant. A closer reading, though, shows beneath his comments on the actual mechanics of the indulgence system (and the display of the spiritual gifts of disingenuity and sarcasm), Luther's abiding concern is for genuine contrition and repentance. Consider, for example, the following theses:

> 32. Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.
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> 35. They who teach that contrition is not necessary on the part of those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessional privileges preach unchristian doctrine.
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> 36. Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters.
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> 37. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters
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> 39. It is very difficult, even for the most learned theologians, at one and the same time to commend to the people the bounty of indulgences and the need of true contrition.[9]

This concern is made even more explicit in a letter Luther wrote to Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz, whom he was aware had authorised the most recent indulgence sale, even though Luther was unaware of the background financial dealings. This letter was written on the very same day he posted the Ninety-Five Theses, and accompanied a copy of the theses.

> Under your most distinguished name, papal indulgences are offered all across the land for the construction of St. Peter. Now, I do not so much complain about the quacking of the preachers,

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[7] John Wycliffe, "On Indulgences," *The Trialogus*, XXIV in H.E. Fosdick, ed., *Great Voices of the Reformation* (New York: Random House, 1952), 23–24.

[8] Harold J. Grimm, "Introduction to the Ninety-five Theses," in *Luther's Works Volume 31: Career of the Reformer I*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 21.

[9] Grimm, *Career of the Reformer*, 28-29.

> which I haven't heard; but I bewail the gross misunderstanding among the people which comes from these preachers and which they spread everywhere among common men. Evidently the poor souls believe that when they have bought indulgence letters they are then assured of their salvation. They are likewise convinced that souls escape from purgatory as soon as they have placed a contribution into the chest. Further, they assume that the grace obtained through these indulgences is so completely effective that there is no sin of such magnitude that it cannot be forgiven – even if (as they say) someone should rape the Mother of God, were this possible. Finally they also believe that man is freed from every penalty and guilt by these indulgences.[10]

Luther continues that "… on no occasion has Christ ordered that indulgences should be preached, but he forcefully commanded the gospel to be preached. What a horror, what a danger for a bishop to permit the loud noise of indulgences among his people, while the gospel is silenced, and to be more concerned with the sale of indulgences than with the gospel!"[11] Luther's pastoral concern here is certainly taking priority over ecclesial diplomacy, even though he does at least *formally* assume that Albrecht has no real idea of what is occurring under his auspices.

Here then, on the very day that Luther nailed the theses to the door and hence became a very public figure, we see his pastoral concern. Other articles in this journal expand on his later pastoral theology in greater detail. However, having identified that pastoral concern was already a major theme for Luther on 31 October 1517, let us examine what lay behind that, both theologically and culturally, and for Luther personally.

Luther's World

As the Reformation era forms the bridge between the medieval and modern worlds, it manifests the characteristics of both. Germany—while still far from unified—was in many ways developing its sense of national identity within a larger (and often tense) relationship with the Holy Roman Empire. Diarmaid MacCulloch has made an appropriate warning, however, about adopting the term "nationalism" too readily of this period, as it implies a significant degree of shared language and culture which did not yet exist.[12] Nevertheless, it was in embryonic development, and over a long period of time the privileges and sovereignty of some of the German princes had risen to a point where they were only slightly less than the Emperor's.[13] The tensions that existed between the German princes and the Holy Roman Emperor were primarily about power and money; interestingly, similar tensions surface in the Ninety-Five Theses.

While embryonic national identity was developing, possibly 85% of Germans still lived on the land, but there was a growing under-class driven to urban areas by increasing landlord fees. Those who stayed on

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[10] Martin Luther, "Letter to Albrecht of Magdeburg," 31 October 1517, in G.G. Krodel, ed. *Luther's Works Volume 48: Letters I* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1963), 46.
[11] Ibid., 47.
[12] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 43.
[13] C. Scott Dixon, *The Reformation in Germany* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 7.

the land agitated against the gradual removal of long-standing privileges, such as access to common areas.[14] In addition to the arrival of the printing press some decades previously, there were several universities in Germany by the beginning of the sixteenth-century, and a growing intellectual and cultural rivalry with (especially) Italy.[15] This anti-Italian bias also resonated with secular criticism of the Papacy, which was seen as enriching itself at Germany's expense.[16] Greenfeld has argued that German national feeling was particularly prominent amongst the upwardly mobile scholarly class—such as Luther himself—who had obtained their position in society through academic achievement, rather than inheritance. Education offered a pathway from peasantry to prestige.[17] Many German clergy took this pathway and one estimate is that between one third and one half of them had some experience of university education, even if they had not completed a degree.[18] There is evidence that there was an increasing emphasis on both preaching and pastoral care in the years before the Reformation, fuelled at least partly by competition between the friars and the secular clergy for the finances generated by these activities.[19]

At the same time that both friars and secular clergy appear to have been lifting their standards in these areas, there was also a noticeable increase in anti-clericalism. One argument is that this anti-clericalism was strongest amongst urban Germans who both resented the clergy's exemption from taxation and the imposition of payments for such services as only priests could provide, especially at the time of death.[20] So it appears then, that many of the German people were, in fact, highly suspicious that financial motivations were driving the increase in "pastoral care" activities. This resonated with broader concerns about the wealth and corruption of the clergy. Luther picked up this note of financial exploitation in thesis 50: "Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep."[21]

Luther's attack on the indulgence system of his day was, therefore, embedded in pastoral concern for the immediate context of the German people. His concern was for genuine repentance and contrition, and freedom from exploitation. It is important to note, though, that at this early stage of his career, Luther was not calling for the abolition of the indulgence system, simply an elimination of abuses. There was, however, another significant aspect of Luther's thought fuelling his concern about indulgences, and that was the nature of salvation itself.

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[14] Ibid., 9, 11-12.
[15] Ibid., 15.
[16] Dixon., 17–18.
[17] Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 282–283.
[18] MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 32.
[19] Ibid., 33.
[20] Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 29–30.
[21] Grimm, *Luther's Works Volume 31*, 30.

The Nature of Salvation

It is fair to say that during the Middle Ages, little progress had been made in clarifying the central question "what must I do to be saved?" In the early church period, this had surfaced in the contrast between the views of Augustine and Pelagius. In the centre of this debate several important questions played a role, for example: "how serious is the problem of sin, and how does it affect a person's ability to respond to God?"; "how do God's sovereignty and human will interact in salvation?" and "do our good works contribute to our salvation in any way?". The theological ramifications of the answers to these questions are clearly immense. Augustine magnified the problem of sin and hence God's response of grace; Pelagius saw the human will as essentially free from the bondage of sin. Although the Council of Ephesus condemned Pelagianism in 431, and the 529 Synod of Orange condemned the view that human works aid in salvation, thereby stamping Augustine's position the more orthodox of the two, it is arguable that the Middle Ages saw a gradual drift towards Pelagianism.[22]

Several factors combined to facilitate this. First, the church made no clear statement on the matter of salvation or justification for a thousand years between the Synod of Orange and the Council of Trent. Second, the latter Middle Ages saw the rise of varying theological schools with different approaches, producing differing conclusions.[23] Third, the development of penance and the character of lay piety muddied the waters further. In the early church period, penitential discipline was completely public, involving confession, a time of penance and exclusion from communion, followed by restitution. This was the church's practice for some centuries, and was only seen as occurring once in a lifetime.[24] Later, a Celtic practice known as tariff penance was introduced to Europe, in which fixed penalties were prescribed for certain sins, and confession could be made as often as desired.[25] This was common by the eighth century and refined in the twelfth.[26] It was further codified within the sacramental system by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth-century. By Luther's day, the rising theological school, was the *via moderna*, which primarily saw soteriology as covenantal: God had set certain conditions as necessary for salvation, and he accepted those individuals who met these conditions.[27] This became the point of contact with Pelagianism (even though those within the *via moderna* argued their view was distinct from Pelagianism). Both the University of Erfurt where Luther undertook his initial studies (1501-1505) and the Augustinians in Erfurt, had close links to the *via moderna,* so it was initially what he knew and accepted. However, also linked with the Augustinian order was what became known as the *schola Augustiniana moderna*, which, although keeping key features of the *via moderna*, also emphasised the thought of Augustine. This modern revival of Augustine's

[22] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 912.
[23] Alister McGrath clearly identifies 9 separate theological schools. *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 69.
[24] J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A&C Black, 1980), 216.
[25] Eric Luijten, *Sacramental Forgiveness as a Gift of God: Thomas Aquinas on the Sacrament of Penance* (Nijmegen: Peeters Leuven, 2003), 16.
[26] Ibid., 17.
[27] McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 75.

thought was initiated by Gregory of Rimini at the University of Paris, himself a member of the Augustinian order. Emphasising the total inability of human nature to contribute anything to salvation apart from relying on grace, it disagreed with the more optimistic *via moderna* view of human capabilities.[28] Nevertheless, Luther initially approached soteriology from the *via moderna* perspective.

In this regard, most Germans of Luther's day were also well-accustomed to the idea that their acceptance by God was directly linked to things they needed to *do*, under the explicit direction of a priest. It has recently been claimed that it was the sacrament of penance that stood at the heart of medieval Christianity, rather than the Eucharist (because the laity watched the latter, rather than participating).[29] It is not surprising, then, that in the minds of many, their relationship with God, both present and future, was directly related to their level of participation in confession, penance, or related mechanisms, such as indulgences.

DEVELOPMENTS PRE-DATING THE 95 THESES

At this point, we will turn to consider relevant developments in Luther's thought before he posted the Ninety-Five Theses. Having progressed well in his university studies towards his law qualification, Luther abruptly joined the Augustinian Order in 1505.[30] The reasons proposed for this have been various, including the proximity of death in the forms of both thunderstorm and plague.[31] Regardless of the immediate causes of this decision, it initiated a personal existential journey as Luther sought to find a peace with God that would assuage the fear of death. It was a quest that would prove decisive for his pastoral theology.

Luther himself admits that he did not join the Augustinians to study theology, but "…for the sake of my salvation…."[32] He was therefore ideally placed to identify with all of those who were struggling with uncertainty over their relationship with God and eternal destiny. Luther's own words are the best description of his struggle for peace with God, taken from three different sources.

> Thus formerly, when I was a monk, I used to hope that I would be able to pacify my conscience with the fastings, the praying, and the vigils with which I used to afflict my body in a way to excite pity. But the more I sweat, the less quiet and peace I felt; for the true light had been removed from my eyes.[33]

> I myself was a monk for twenty years. I tortured myself with prayers, fasting, vigils, and freezing; the frost alone might have killed me. It caused me pain such as I will never inflict on myself again, even

[28] Ibid., 77.
[29] Luijten, *Sacramental Forgiveness,* 20.
[30] Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 36.
[31] David M. Whitford, *Luther: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 23.
[32].T.G. Tappert, ed., *Luther's Works Volume 54: Table Talk* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 338.
[33] J. Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works Volume 8: Lectures on Genesis chapters 45-50* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1966), 326.

> if I could. What else did I seek by doing this but God, who was supposed to note my strict observance of the monastic order and my austere life? I constantly walked in a dream and lived in real idolatry.[34]
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> When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and I performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession." Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it.[35]

Luther had joined a rigorous order in the Augustinians, enthusiastically pursued every available avenue advocated at the time for peace with God, but nothing satisfied. A trip to Rome, suggested by his mentor Johannes Staupitz, backfired as Luther returned appalled by the immorality of the eternal city. At this point, Luther was himself a metaphor for the *via moderna* covenantal model that linked salvation with individual effort. For at least the first decade of his time as a monk, this was Luther's dilemma; then, a significant development occurred that would not only fuel the Reformation itself, but would also completely reframe Luther's pastoral understanding.

What is often referred to as Luther's "theological breakthrough" occurred in the context of his new lectureship at the University of Wittenberg from 1513 onwards. He began lecturing on Psalms and then progressed to Romans. During these lectures, Luther dealt with the concept of the righteousness of God, which he initially understood (through the *via moderna* lens) as expressing God's impartiality in judging whether individuals have met his covenantal-based preconditions for salvation. Luther's own struggle resonated with this concept, and he felt utterly unable to meet the conditions: the "righteousness of God" became a phrase of condemnation. Consider Luther's own words as he reflected later in life:

> For I hated that word "righteousness of God", which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously… I was angry with God…
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> At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous

[34] J. Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works Volume 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St John, chapters 14-16* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1961), 23–24.
[35] J. Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works Volume 27: Lectures on Galatians 1519, chapters 1-6* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1992), 13.

> shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith.[36]

This new perspective, that righteousness is a gift *from* God rather than a demand, facilitated partly by engagement with the Greek genitive form in Romans 1:16–17, aligned much more closely with the thought of Augustine than the contractual soteriology of the *via moderna*. Although there has been disagreement about the exact dating of Luther's insight, Alister McGrath's very detailed argument is in favour of 1515, two years before the Ninety-Five Theses.[37] While there is a contrary argument for a later date, other early evidence is to hand, such as this letter Luther wrote to fellow Augustinian friar George Spenlein, in April 1516.

> Now I should like to know whether your soul, tired of its own righteousness, is learning to be revived by and to trust in the righteousness of Christ. For in our age the temptation to presumption besets many, especially those who try with all their might to be just and good without knowing the righteousness of God, which is most bountifully and freely given us in Christ. They try to do good of themselves in order that they might stand before God clothed in their own virtues and merits. But this is impossible. While you were here, you were one who held this opinion, or rather, error. So was I, and I am still fighting against the error without having conquered it as yet.[38]

This evidence supports McGrath's claim that Luther had moved towards an Augustinian understanding of righteousness before the Ninety-Five Theses were posted: the process had definitely begun. Therefore, the Luther we meet at the Wittenberg Church door in October 1517 not only understood the prevailing issue of German resentment at financial exploitation at the hands of an Italian-based church, the errors of the mechanical indulgence system, and the Pelagian potential of both *via moderna* soteriology and penance; he was also essentially motivated by a pastoral concern to ensure people avoided the associated by-products of either self-righteousness or the despair he had experienced. As early as 1517, then, in his first very public act at the church door, it was Luther's pastoral motivation that added a distinct tone to his protest and already revealed a new view, not only of Christian life, but of God himself.

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[36] Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings, 1545," in L.W. Spitz, ed., *Luther's Works Volume 34: Career of the Reformer IV* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 336–337.
[37] McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 110, 141–147.
[38] Martin Luther, "Letter to George Spenlein, Wittenberg, April 8, 1516," in G.G. Krodel, ed., *Luther's Works Volume 48: Letters I* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 12.