Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 38 Article 68

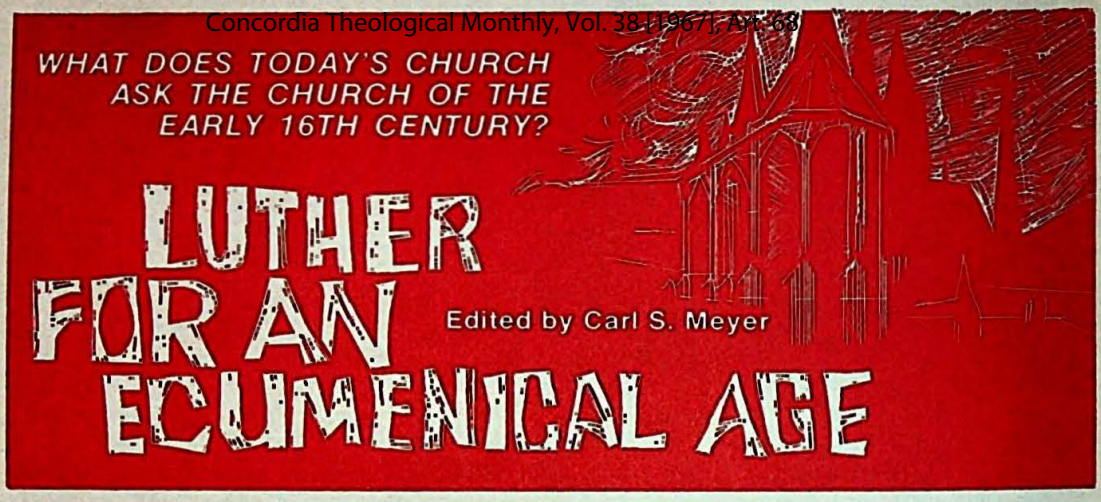
12-1-1967

The Posting of Luther's Theses - Legend or Fact?

Franz Lau
University of Leipzig

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Vol. XXXVIII December 1967 No. 11



In answering this pertinent question, 12 Luther scholars and Reformation historians present a thorough examination of Luther and his theology for the present age. Each underlines why Luther needs to be heard today and presents a thorough study of his beliefs on Christian unity. This volume makes a positive contribution to the 20th century's active ecumenical movement.

12 scholarly studies for Reformation 450 by . . .

E. GORDON RUPP, University of Manchester, England; LEWIS W. SPITZ, Stanford University; JAROSLAV J. PELIKAN, Yale University; FRANKLIN H. LITTELL, Iowa Wesleyan College president; HEINZ BLUHM, Yale University; HAROLD J. GRIMM, Ohio State University; ERNEST G. SCHWIEBERT, University of Florida; ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis; NORMAN NAGEL, Westfield House, Cambridge, England; ROBERT W. BERTRAM, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis; JAMES ATKINSON, University of Hull, England; CARL S. MEYER, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Cloth, 320 pages, 6×9, $9.00. Order No. 15U2017

ANOTHER 450TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

WE CONDEMN

By Hans-Werner Gensichen
Translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman

This critical-historical study discusses the polemics of the 16th-century reformers and the barriers they erected against opposing doctrine. It offers a better understanding of confessional Lutheranism and a basis for genuine interconfessional encounter.

Cloth, 224 pages, 6×9, $7.50. Order No. 15U2012

CONCORDIA
PUBLISHING HOUSE
3558 SOUTH JEFFERSON AVENUE
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI 63118

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Volume XXXVIII December 1967 Number 11

The Theological Journal of
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Edited by
THE FACULTY OF CONCORDIA SEMINARY
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY is published monthly, except July-August bimonthly, by Concordia Publishing House, 3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, Mo. 63118, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. $3.50 per annum, anywhere in the world, payable in advance. Second-class postage paid at St. Louis, Mo. Printed in U. S. A.

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

Contents

Address all communications to the Editorial Committee in care of Herbert T. Mayer, 801 De Mun Ave., St. Louis, Mo. 63105

The Posting of Luther's Theses — Legend or Fact?

FRANZ LAU

Less than 10 years ago a discussion began over the posting of Luther's Ninety-five Theses, some doubting that it actually took place on the traditional day of October 31, 1517, some going so far as to contend that the posting never happened and is only a legend. Ten years ago, in the summer of 1957 at the Lutheran World Federation Meeting in Minneapolis, I was one of those who saw a young Sunday school teacher, impersonating Luther, on a float in a parade vigorously nail a copy of the Ninety-five Theses on a stage door depicting the one of Wittenberg. None of us who witnessed this spectacle had the faintest idea that in the course of the next 10 years the posting of these Theses would become so hot a subject of discussion in academic circles and be so vehemently contested as is the case.

The contention that the Theses were not posted on October 31 but on November 1 was first openly advanced in the *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt* on the occasion of the observance of the Reformation festival in 1957. In other words, the observance of the Reformation act should properly take place not on October 31 but on November 1.[1] For three years now discussions have gone on concerning the date between Hans Volz, author of the article in the journal referred to above, and chief collaborator on the Weimar edition of Luther's Works, and his two main critics, Kurt Aland and Heinrich Bornkamm.[2] Among the laity Volz's contention has created much more of a stir than it has among theological academicians and historians. The nature of the problem involved was not worth all the sharpness of wit expended on it. The issue was whether the evening before a festival is to be counted as belonging to the festival or not, as in this case whether All Saints' Day could not include also the evening before.[3] Whenever Luther remembers the eventful day later, he regularly speaks of it as All Saints' Day. The controversy over the date is almost concluded now in a general rejection of Volz's position. Bornkamm and Aland have advanced really telling points

---

Franz Lau was born in Leipzig and studied there and in Vienna. Since 1947 he has been professor of church history in the University of Leipzig; since 1952 president of the Gustav Adolf Association of the Evangelical Church in Germany; and since 1957 editor of the Luther-Jahrbuch. *The translation was prepared by Elmer E. Foelber.*

[1] H. Volz, "An welchem Tage schlug Martin Luther seine 95 Thesen an die Wittenberger Schlosskirche an?" *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt*, 57 (1957), 457—458.

[2] K. Aland, "Der 31. Oktober gilt zu Recht als Tag des Thesenanschlages Martin Luthers," ibid., 58 (1958), 241—248; H. Volz, "Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag," ibid., pp. 488—490; H. Bornkamm, "Der 31. Oktober als Tag des Thesenanschlags," ibid., 61 (1961), 508 f.

[3] Concerning vigils cf. *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 10, 785—787 (J. A. Jungmann); Rietschel-Graff, *Lehrbuch der Liturgik*, 2d ed. (1950), I, 170 ff.

against Volz.[4] It does not appear that the date problem in this sense will receive much more attention.[5]

However, a much more sensational and serious controversy attached itself to the date controversy. Again it was Hanz Volz who initiated it. In connection with the dating controversy he published a study, worked out with remarkable thoroughness, titled *Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag und dessen Vorgeschichte* (Weimar, 1959).[6] It contained a great amount of material about the posting of the Theses and especially about the Theses controversy. It would not be easy to find a lacuna in this study. Each of the participants in the debate has gratefully made use of Volz's findings. Volz has clearly shown that there exists only one entirely clear and unambiguous report on the posting of the Theses on October 31. This report is found in the very brief biography of Luther which Melanchthon published in the second volume of Luther's Works in Latin in the year Luther died (1546).

Here we read verbatim: ". . . *edidit Propositiones de Indulgentiis, quae in primo Tomo monumentorum ipsius extant, Et has publice Templo, quod arci Witebergensi contiguum est, affixit pridie festi omnium Sanctorum anno 1517.*"[7] Volz questions the reliability of the word *pridie* by pointing out other mistakes in Melanchthon's *Vita* of Luther, which he obviously permitted to slip in.[8] For example, the sequence of lectures is not correctly given, the subject of the lectures is wrongly stated, and Luther's journey to Rome is incorrectly dated. Heinrich Boehmer, whose predilection for drastic formulations is well-known, speaks rather slightingly of Melanchthon's "little biography" of Luther in his study of Luther's journey to Rome.[9] Volz infers that Melanchthon's October 31 dating should not be accepted without reservation.

A number of Roman Catholic historians of the Reformation have followed the inter-evangelical controversy very closely. As things stand now, this involves not only those who have written on the matter. Others have accepted Volz's view and maintain that in fact there exists only this one report on the posting of the Theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on October 31. They have asked the question whether it is so certain that the posting of the Theses actually took place. Erwin Iserloh, formerly at Trier, now at Münster, asserted in the summer of 1961[10] that the posting of the Theses is a legend, a position which he has subsequently reaffirmed.[11]

---

[4] N. 2.

[5] See below, p. 694. If Luther informed the public before the archbishop could react, then it makes no difference whether on 31 October or 1 November. If Melanchthon was not mistaken as to the factuality of the posting of the Theses, why should he have erred in the dating?

[6] Hans Volz, *Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag und dessen Vorgeschichte* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1959). Hereafter cited as Volz.

[7] *Philippi Melanthonis opera quae supersunt omnia*, Vol. VI in *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider (Halle: C. A. Schwetschke, 1839), col. 162, 2—4.

[8] Cf. Volz, pp. 29 ff., and above, n. 1, pp. 457 ff.

[9] 1914, p. 8.

[10] E. Iserloh, "Luthers Thesenanschlag. Tatsache oder Legende?" *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift*, 70 (1961), 303—312; under the same title independently issued, Wiesbaden, 1962.

[11] E. Iserloh, *Luther zwischen Reform und Reformation. Der Thesenanschlag fand nicht statt*, 1966.

The assertion that the posting of the Theses is a legend has provoked a flood of counterutterances that can hardly be controlled.[12] Since Iserloh at the same time asserts that his contention regarding the posting of the Theses has nothing to do with indulgence theses as such and their importance for setting off the Reformation, and asserted, further, that his findings did not question the date of October 31, on which day Luther no doubt sent his Theses to the Archbishop Albrecht of Magdeburg, his assertions did not disturb the academic world very much. However, the church press, both evangelical and Roman Catholic, reacted excitedly to the issue. Even in the daily newspapers the question about the posting of the Theses was vigorously and extensively discussed. The high point was reached in the New Year 1966 issue of *Der Spiegel*.[13] It was not a simple task for me when in 1962 on the occasion of the Reformation festival I had the assignment to report in the *Lutherische Monatshefte* on the current status of the controversy.[14] Even in Leipzig it was difficult to secure articles published in the West German daily newspapers.[15] It should be noted that the commission on church history of the German Historical Society (Deutscher Historikerverband) in October 1964 also concerned itself with the problem. At the date of this writing the debate has not ended.[16] Nor can I guarantee that in this Reformation anniversary year articles on the posting of the Theses will not appear, some contending that it is a legend, others maintaining that it is a historical fact.

My present task, of course, is not to report on all the different opinions which have appeared in print, such as in *Welt am Sonntag, Christ und Welt,* the Hannover *Sonntagsblatt, Der Spiegel,* or the many church and parish papers. Sensation-hungry journalists have had their say as much as serious historians. Many discussions have been highly emotional. Reliable technical knowledge is unevenly distributed. The journal *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* carried articles by Heinrich Steitz in 1963 and 1965 which reported all the contributors to the controversy. I shall restrict myself to calling attention to these two reports, adding only a reference to Irmgard Höss's report in the one journal (1965) on the discussion of this subject at the meeting of the West German Historians in October 1964.[17] I shall restrict myself to such publications as are of real significance in the ongoing discussion of the problem, reserving, of course, the right to draw in pertinent details where needed from other studies. My special aim is to work out the significant factual and methodological problems.

---

12 H. Steitz, "Luthers 95 Thesen. Stationen eines Gelehrtenstreites," *Jahrbuch des hessischen kirchengeschichtlichen Vereins,* 14 (1963), 179 to 191; id., "Martin Luthers Ablassthesen von 1517. Bericht über die Diskussion (1957 bis 1966)," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht,* 16 (1965), 661—674.

13 "Luthers Thesen, Reformator ohne Hammer," *Der Spiegel,* 1966, Nos. 1 and 2.

14 F. Lau, "Zweifel um den 31. Oktober 1517?" *Lutherische Monatshefte,* 1 (1962), 459—463.

15 *Die Deutsche Bücherei* does not accession newspapers.

16 October 7—11, 1964. Cf. *Berichtsband über die 26. Versammlung deutscher Historiker in Berlin,* Supplement to *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht,* (Stuttgart, 1965) pp. 37—42.

17 I. Höss, "Diskussion über 'Luthers Thesenanschlag,'" Bericht. *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht,* 1965, pp. 695—699.

It is self-evident that it is somewhat hazardous to report on a controversy still in progress, particularly when one is himself a participant. In this anniversary year pertinent new contributions could appear at any moment. New and even decisive discoveries are possible. It is conceivable that unexpectedly a copy of the first printing of the Theses as posted will be found which may provide evidence to show that hitherto we have been dealing only with a copy of the Theses as it was mailed out. I shall list the individual phases of the controversy, as well as problems concerning facts, and number them to simplify the discussion.

1

What preceded the controversy over the Theses has already been presented, ranging from the assertion that the posting of the Theses took place on November 1 to Iserloh's contention that the posting of the Theses is only a legend.

As soon as the assertions were made, the ensuing controversy naturally developed into a widespread Roman Catholic-Lutheran debate. However, there are also Lutheran researchers who vigorously support their Roman Catholic colleagues, for example, the church historian Heinrich Steitz of Mainz. It is not true that the opinions are strictly divided along confessional lines. So much in passing. Something else is much more important. The entire debate is not being conducted on a confessional basis as was the older polemic. Roman Catholic researchers actually stand up as apologists for Luther. They are not solely concerned with the fact that Melanchthon is the only person who reports on the posting of the Theses. They proceed from the indisputable fact that on October 31 Luther sent the Theses to Archbishop Albrecht. The original of the accompanying letter is extant and is preserved in the Swedish national archives in Stockholm.[18] From the entry memorandum of receipt on the verso side it appears that Albrecht's Magdeburg counselors had received the letter and opened it and then immediately forwarded it to Albert at Aschaffenburg, together with the accompanying document (the Theses) plus a treatise. More about the letter later.

Iserloh argues that if on October 31 Luther wrote to the archbishop and, as he later affirms, also to his diocesan bishop Hieronymus Scultetus at Brandenburg concerning the indulgence problem, then he could not have appeared in public with his Theses on the same day or on the next day. If we assume that he did, this action casts a shadow on Luther's character. "If there had been no posting of the Theses, Luther cannot be faulted for any lack of integrity, or, to put it more politely, 'an adjustment of the fact,' and thus it would also become clearer that he became the Reformer unintentionally and not basically because of a deficiency in religious and moral responsibility on the part of the bishops and the curia."[19] Another researcher, Klemens Honselmann, concludes his first essay with the words: "Luther's importance is not thus undermined. Indeed, I might say that as a result of the collapse of the legend of the posting of the

[18] *D. Martin Luthers Werke.* Briefwechsel 1 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1930), No. 48, cf. p. 114. Hereafter cited as WA.

[19] Iserloh, "Luthers 95 Thesen" (see n. 10 above), p. 312.

Theses on October 31, Luther is all the more impressive. He is not a revolutionary who would challenge the Christian world by posting his Theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, but a monk zealous for the church and wanting to stem the evils in the church by passing the Theses on privately. Without really desiring to do so, he drew the masses after him." [20]

It may be noted here that since the outbreak of World War II a change of direction has taken place in the Roman Catholic Luther research, although there had been forerunners. Representative of this change in Roman Catholic Luther and Reformation research is Joseph Lortz of Mainz.[21] Less effective because of its dry style and the overload of an oppressive mass of material is Adolf Herte's study *Das Katholische Lutherbild im Banne der Lutherkommentare des Cochläus* (1943).[22] Cochläus' commentaries on Luther are the oldest Luther biography inimical to Luther. This work determined the Roman Catholic view of Luther for hundreds of years. However, Herte's work has essentially the same significance as Joseph Lortz's interpretation of the history of the Reformation. In the 1950s the Roman Catholic researchers turned their inquiry to Luther's theology.[23] Many Roman Catholic theologians show an openness to Luther in a previously unheard of way. Briefly stated, Vatican Council II has also a strong influence on Luther research, indeed, had begun to do so even before it was opened. Those who dispute the factuality of the posting of the Theses belong to the group of ecumenically-minded Roman Catholic theologians. I have no doubts that they believe that they are engaged in a rescue of Luther's honor.

2

A closer study of Iserloh's thesis, somewhat modified in his book of a year ago, and of Luther's letter to Albrecht, which is Iserloh's starting point, brings us close to the heart of the controversy. The plea *(petitum)* made in the letter is not identical with what is stated in the Theses. With the humility becoming a monk, Luther in the letter pleads with the bishop to withdraw the instructions which had been given to preachers of indulgences over his name, since they fostered the misconception that indulgences effect forgiveness of sins rather than only release from temporal punishments imposed by the pope himself, and which he can remit or modify. Albrecht should therefore give the preachers of indulgences something else to preach about *(aliam praedicandi formam)*.[24] He points out how dangerous it is to postpone action for long. Of the Theses themselves there is not a word in the letter. Only in a postscript under his signature does Luther refer to the enclosed disputations in which he had pointed out what a doubtful thing the theological doctrine of indulgences is, although the preachers of indulgences promulgated it as something absolutely certain. There is no word indicating an open or veiled threat that Luther might

[20] *Theologie und Glaube*, 55 (1965), 23.

[21] J. Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, 1939/40; 4th ed., 1962.

[22] 3 vols., 1943. Previously by the same author: *Die Lutherkommentare des Johannes Cochläus*, 1935.

[23] Th. Sartory, "M. Luther in katholischer Sicht," *Una Sancta*, 16(1961) 38—54.

[24] WA Br 1, No. 48, p. 112, 56 f.

under given circumstances publish his Theses.[25]

The main point of Iserloh's argument and that of all those sharing his opinion is that Luther was at least morally, if not lawfully, obligated to await the reaction of the archbishop. Also they point out that the publishing of a book really needed the assent of the ecclesiastical censor of books, the diocesan bishop. But is this presupposition correct? Against the attacks made on his Theses Luther again and again appealed to his right as a professor to engage in disputations.[26] This right allowed discussion of open questions (questions not yet definitely answered by the pope) thus making an attempt to achieve a settlement by way of dialog and debate. In his *Resolutiones,* his large commentary on the Theses, which Luther sent to Rome at the end of May or the beginning of June 1518, and which were then published in definitive form,[27] he indicates with scrupulous precision what he firmly maintains and what he suggests as something intended for discussion only.[28] In my opinion, the question concerns no less than this, whether discussions of theological matters within an academic framework, in academic form and in the language (Latin) then employed by scholars, were still free in the pre-Reformation era or whether already there existed the obligation to secure a special license for academic probing of such matters.

3

Perhaps it is in place to point out in this connection that at almost the same time that this controversy is going on, another controversy actually more vital for the theologian is engaging Luther researchers. It revolves about the exact date of Luther's reformatory discovery.[29] At first glance the two controversies have nothing in common. This second controversy is concerned with the question of when Luther became an evangelical theologian. In other words, when for Luther did his relationship to God change from a merit-relationship to a grace-relationship? In his short autobiography published shortly before his death, Luther traced his great discovery, which involved his understanding of a word in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, back to the time of his second series of lectures on the Psalms, hence, the years 1518 or 1519.[30] The so-called Holl School (Karl Holl was professor of church history in Berlin up to the time of his death in 1926), whose adherents were able to occupy nearly all the teaching positions for church history in the years after World War I, has moved the exact date of the reformatory discovery back to the time of the first series of lectures on the Psalms,

[25] "Ne forte aliquis tandem exurgat, qui editis libellis et illos et libellum illum [the "Instructions" of the indulgence preachers] confutet, ad vituperium summum illustrissimi tuae sublimitatis, quod ego vehementer quidem fieri abhorreo et tamen futurum timeo, nisi cito succurratur." WA Br 1, No. 48, p. 112, 57—60.

[26] WA 1, 528, 27—30.

[27] WA 1, 525—628.

[28] WA 1, 534, 22; 545, 12; 567, 29; etc. On the other hand, WA 1, 530, 18; 531, 23; 532, 4; 533, 37; 570, 34; 587, 17; etc. Also cf. 562, 4 f.

[29] Basic is E. Bizer, *Fides ex auditu. Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther,* 1958; 3d., ed., 1966.

[30] E. Stracke, *Luthers grosses Selbstzeugnis über seine Entwicklung zum Reformator historisch-kritisch untersucht,* 1926.

that is, to the years 1513, or 1514.[31] Some Luther researchers argue even for 1508 or 1509. Among Luther scholars the Holl disciples are to this day in an overwhelming majority. At the third assembly of the Luther researchers in Helsinki in 1966,[32] when the problem was discussed by a special committee, consisting of Lutherans and Roman Catholics, the followers of Holl won an almost total victory, supported also by the Roman Catholics. The opinion that one can confidently give credence to Luther's statement that the so-called "tower experience" did not actually occur until 1518 or 1519 was, to be sure, mentioned but not seriously defended or upheld.[33]

The small minority, it is true, did not come to Helsinki at all, and this was done purposely on the part of some. One representative of the minority opinion, Kurt Aland of Münster, was absent because of other commitments. If the minority opinion should be correct, Luther would have still been a medieval Roman Catholic when he published his Theses. In that case, Luther's turning to a Reformation direction would be a consequence of the Theses controversy. I must confess that to me the correctness or at least the essential correctness of the position of the minority becomes more and more plausible. I cannot, of course, cover the entire problem area. Luther's liberal position on the question of the right of expression in matters of scientific theology would certainly belong to his pre-Reformation heritage. I trust I have made it quite clear that in the discussion on the posting of the Theses obviously much more than the question of form is involved. In the present Theses controversy the question is the transformation of medieval Roman Catholicism into a Counter-Reformation Roman Catholicism. The Counter-Reformation Roman Catholicism is something quite different from the broad-minded Roman Catholicism of the Middle Ages.[34]

4

The other Roman Catholic researcher who entered the discussion is the aforementioned Klemens Honselmann of Paderborn. He is more sure of his opinion than most others and believes he can definitely prove that the posting of the Theses never took place. However, he always places the burden of proof on the one who is skeptical of the claim that the posting of the Theses is a legend. Iserloh has seen much more clearly that only a single known witness for the existence of the posting of the Theses is extant and that this one is not entirely incontestable. This therefore forces us into the area of circumstantial evidence and obliges us to line up pieces of evidence and then weigh them one against the other. In the end Iserloh is critical of Honselmann's conclusions.[35] In one respect, however, Honselmann's studies are extraordinarily important and fruitful. Honselmann has reminded us that the textual problem

[31] A survey of the various attempts to fix the date is found in K. Aland, *Der Weg zur Reformation. Zeitpunkt und Charakter des reformatorischen Erlebnisses Martin Luthers,* 1965 (*Theologische Existenz heute,* NF 123).

[32] I. Asheim, ed., "Kirche, Mystik, Heiligung und das Natürliche bei Luther," *Vorträge des III. Internationalen Kongresses für Lutherforschung,* 1967.

[33] The latest dating is in H. Pohlmann, *Hat Luther Paulus entdeckt?* 1959.

[34] Cf. the document cited on page 702, n. 66.

[35] E. Iserloh, *Luther zwischen Reform und Reformation,* 1966, pp. 73 f.

connected with the indulgences theses is so difficult that it will become necessary to work out a critical edition of the text. The original reading of Luther's Theses is not absolutely settled. The enclosure in the letter to Archbishop Albrecht is not in the national archives at Stockholm. Nor has it been found in the Vatican archives, where one would suppose it to be if Albrecht had sent it to Rome as evidence for proceeding against Luther.[36] Obviously, since Albrecht asked for a formal opinion on the Theses from the University of Mainz, he must have sent them there.[37] The archives of the old University of Mainz were destroyed in the Napoleonic days. A Mainz historian, Franz Joseph Bodmann, made a copy of what he considered to be the most important pieces at the end of the 18th century, and these copies are preserved in the Mainz city library.[38] Bodmann did not make a copy of the Theses, obviously not deeming it necessary, for the existing text was uncritically accepted. In 1799 no one dreamed how uncertain the Theses text was. The fact that the variations are actually not too serious lends support to Bodmann's opinion. In 1901 Walther Koehler published a critical edition of Luther's Theses. He brought together much valuable material of a commentary nature, but he did not adduce the various readings or compare them.[39]

In the Weimar edition of Luther's Works the so-called *textus receptus* is based on three printings, carelessly prepared, based either on the Theses previously published or, as Iserloh and Honselmann hold, on texts in manuscript form, sent by Luther to his friends.[40]

It is strange that in these texts the Theses are numbered differently. In the one case the numbers run from 1 to 25 three times and from 1 to 20 once. In the other printing 87 is the last number; however, after theses No. 26, the count resumes with No. 17, with the result that we are either 10 theses short or two over. The surplus of two theses (87 instead of 85, and 97 instead of 95) results from dividing two theses, Nos. 55 and 83. Honselmann makes it seem probable that originally the Theses were not numbered and points, for example, to two textual forms of 1530 and 1538,[41] in which the individual theses have no numbers. In one instance Luther had his Theses reprinted (1538) for purposes of disputation; in another, Melanchthon had them reprinted

[36] On the fate of the minutes of the proceedings in the Vatican archives see Karl Müller in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 24(1903), 46.

[37] F. Hermann, "Luthers Tractatus de indulgentiis," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, XXVIII (1907), 371. Herrmann cites a notation by the Mainz historian Franz Anton Dürr (18th century) in which he speaks of a "Mainz manuscript copy" of the Theses. The wording of the notation does not exclude the possibility that Albrecht sent an original copy (with the request that it be returned to him) to Mainz. A copy would then have been made of it in Mainz.

[38] Reproduced by F. Herrmann in "Miscellen zur Reformationsgeschichte," ZKG 23 (1902), 263—268.

[39] W. Köhler, *Luthers 95 Thesen samt seinen Resolutionen sowie Gegenschriften von Wimpina-Tetzel, Eck und Prierias und den Antworten Luthers darauf*, 1903.

[40] WA 1, 233—238. Facsimiles of the three independent printings are found in Volz as supplements and between pp. 48 and 49.

[41] K. Honselmann, *Urfassung und Drucke der Ablassthesen Martin Luthers und ihre Veröffentlichung*, 1966, Supplement, pp. vii—xix and xx—xxxii.

(1530). To be sure, Honselmann's main purpose is not to establish the existence of as many texts as possible or even of all extant texts. He is first of all interested in the so-called Dialog of Sylvester Prierias, *"In praesumptuosas Martini Lutheri conclusiones de potestate papae dialogus,"*[42] which the theologically astute Pope Leo VIII composed against Luther in mid-June 1518 and which, as Honselmann confidently supposes, was based on the copy of the Theses sent by Luther to Albrecht and forwarded by him to the curia. This could be so in fact. Apparently the Dialog contains all of Luther's Theses. The Theses are not numbered; however, as we count them, we have only 93. Numbers 92 and 93 are missing.[43] From this Honselmann draws the conclusion, in combination with other observations, that the theses forwarded to Albrecht were secret material, intended for him alone at least up to December 20, 1517, although they were already on the way to Rome. About December 20, 1517, Honselmann says, Tetzel published countertheses in Frankfort-on-the-Oder and thereby induced Luther to send a version lengthened by two theses to a number of his friends. Thereafter, that is, at the beginning of the year 1518, the Theses in general first became generally known, and the famous 14 days within which the Theses ran all the way through Germany, as Luther put it in writing shortly before his death, fall in the year 1518.[44]

Objections must be raised to several points in Honselmann's argumentation. For example, Prierias himself states in the Dialog that towards the end he omitted some things unintelligible to him. What is more reasonable than to think of Theses 92 and 93, which Prierias in this case would have had before him.[45] It is even more irritating that Honselmann, in his enthusiasm for his discovery, has overlooked the fact that we have Luther's answer to the Dialog. In his answer, Luther, in calling attention to the omissions, skips a little more textual matter than does Prierias and in doing so unfortunately gives a rather summary treatment especially to the conclusions. Thus no argument can be built on the basis of the alleged missing theses. However, Luther's *Responsio* numbers the Theses, a fact which so far has been entirely disregarded.[46] Luther himself numbered the Theses, and from this numbering and from several phrasings in the *Responsio* highly interesting conclusions can be drawn. In a critical edition of the Theses the text of the *Responsio* must, of course, also be taken into account. From this one sees how unpleasant an emotionally weighted controversy such as the one over the posting of the Theses may become.

---

[42] Text in *D. Martini Lutheri opera latina varii argumenti ad reformationis historiam imprimis pertinentia*, I, ed. Henricus Schmidt (Erlangen: Heyder & Zimmer, 1865), 344—377; German trans. in *D. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Johann Georg Walch, XVIII (Halle: Johann Gebauer, 1746), 81—119; St. Louis ed., XVIII (1888), 310—345.

[43] Honselmann, pp. 57 ff., 144 ff., and Supplement, pp. i ff.

[44] K. Honselmann, "Die Veröffentlichung der Ablassthesen Martin Luthers 1517," *Theologie und Glaube*, 55 (1965), 19 (especially the second last paragraph).

[45] H. Bornkamm, "Thesen und Thesenanschlag Luthers. Zur Frage des 31. Okt. 1517," in *Geist und Geschichte der Reformation. Festgabe Hanns Rückert zum 65. Geburtstag*, 1966, p. 208 and n. 91.

[46] Cf. F. Lau in *Luther-Jahrbuch*, 34 (1967), 52 ff. Also cf. n. 54 below.

5

Naturally, objections are being raised continually against Iserloh's contentions [some with particular vigor by Kurt Aland of Münster,[47] by others in somewhat milder form,[48] and others not always clearly stated, by Peter Meinhold of Kiel.[49]] At the time of the 1962 Reformation festival I expressed myself on the subject under discussion in the *Lutherische Monatshefte* and pointed out then and later to others that at the time when Melanchthon was under heavy fire — after Luther's death Lutheranism split over Melanchthon into Gnesio-Lutherans and Philippists — Melanchthon's account met no contradictions from any side.[50] The first Roman Catholic life of Luther, written by John Cochläus sometime after 1532 in a decidedly hostile spirit, refers in his introduction (written to be sure at the conclusion of his work) to Luther's presentation of 1545 (Letters to the Bishops) and Melanchthon's presentation of 1546 (posting of the Theses) and does not think of questioning a single fact.[51] In spite of this the situation in the fall of last year was such that Erwin Iserloh could give his summarizing study the subtitle: "The Posting of the Theses Did Not Occur."[52] Honselmann's larger work, which may have appeared a bit earlier is advertised in the publisher's blurb in similar terms.[53]

And now in the anniversary year two larger essays have appeared independently of each other and within a short time. They may shift the situation somewhat. Both authors have successively held the same professorship in church history at Leipzig. My own essay appears in the 1967 *Luther-Jahrbuch*, published February 18, 1967;[54] Heinrich Bornkamm's appeared in the *Festschrift* for Hanns Rückert.[55] Rückert had preceded Bornkamm as incumbent of the same professorship. Bornkamm deals most intensively with H. Böhmer's critique of Melanchthon. Böhmer had held the same chair prior to Rückert. The texts to which Bornkamm and I refer are hidden away as miscellanies in the 1902 and 1907 volumes of *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*.[56] At that time the best informed specialist on what occurred in the Theses controversy was Theodore Brieger, Böhmer's predecessor as professor of church history at Leipzig.

Bornkamm and I, on whose studies I now report, go our own way, of course, in details. We have never conferred with each other on the Theses question, not even last fall at Helsinki scarcely a month before I presented my studies to the theological faculty at Helsinki and placed du-

[47] Cf. *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 16 (1965), 686—694; also see *Martin Luthers 95 Thesen mit den dazugehörigen Dokumenten aus der Geschichte der Reformation*, 1965.

[48] For a survey of the participants in the discussion see Steitz (n. 12) or Höss (n. 17).

[49] *Christ und Welt* for Aug. 3, Nov. 2, 9, 16, 1962, and *Welt am Sonntag* for Aug. 8, 1962.

[50] Cf. n. 14.

[51] A. Herte, *Die Lutherkommentare des Johannes Cochläus*, 1935, p. 10.

[52] Cf. n. 11.

[53] Cf. n. 41.

[54] F. Lau, "Die gegenwärtige Diskussion um Luthers Thesenanschlag. Sachstandsbericht und Versuch einer Weiterführung durch Neuinterpretation von Dokumenten," *Luther-Jahrbuch*, 34 (1967), 11—59.

[55] *Geist und Geschichte der Reformation. Festgabe Hanns Rückert zum 65. Geburtstag*, 1966, pp. 179—218.

[56] ZKG 23 (1902), 263—268; 28 (1907), 370—373.

plicates of my text into their hands. As to method, we are so much in agreement that I feel considerably strengthened and have at any rate come to be very sure of my method; though in another matter, namely, the question of the date for the Reformation discovery, I cannot go with Bornkamm all the way. Both Bornkamm and I proceed from the conviction that the problems involved in the issuing of the Theses can be cleared up only in connection with all the proceedings against Luther. I have made an effort to provide a new interpretation of 28 documents. Bornkamm's exposition made clear to me that if one wanted to do a complete job, he would have to add several more documents. For example, Bornkamm has given a great deal of attention to the formal opinion voiced by the theological faculty at Leipzig. This opinion can be reconstructed from the letter of the faculty addressed to Duke George of Saxony. I did not refer to this opinion because I did not wish to go beyond the beginning of June 1518.[57] To Bornkamm and to me it has become clear that what matters first and foremost is to inquire into the oldest witness for the existence of the Theses after October 31, 1517.

We are dealing here with Luther's letter to Spalatin, the confidant of the elector of Torgau. The Weimar edition of Luther's Works (cf. Letter No. 50) dates it at the middle of November (in the letter itself no date is given).[58] Luther explains why he did not make his Theses known to the court. He purposely failed to do so in order to protect the elector from the suspicion, motivated by the jealousy of the Brandenburgers, that he had inspired the Theses, as loose talk was already buzzing about *(sicut iam audio a multis eorum somniari)*. The letter can be dated fairly accurately, for something is said in it about a new cowl which the elector had promised to give Luther. This letter is the first of a chain of letters, the last of which was Luther's letter to Spalatin, November 11, 1517, reprinted in the Weimar edition as Letter No. 53.[59] The first letter in the chain, Letter No. 50, must have been written between November 3 and 5 and becomes a witness of the fact that four to six days after October 31 the Theses were not a private matter, unknown to the public, but were widely publicized. We are forced therefore to fix the famous 14 days already mentioned, certainly not to be taken in the strictly mathematical sense, at the turn of October to November 1517.[60]

I may say in passing that in the fall of 1966 Aland tried to show in a Rhineland church paper that the Theses were known in Nuremberg already on November 5 (without reference to the Spalatin letter).[61] In an original study, in which he expands his essay in the Rückert *Festschrift*, Bornkamm takes issue with Aland's arguments and does not deem them convincing.[62] With this remark I shall let the matter rest. As to procedural method, Bornkamm, Aland, and I agree that it is necessary to search for the earliest possible

[57] Bornkamm's essay has subsequently appeared in expanded form.

[58] WA Br 1, No. 50, pp. 117—119.

[59] WA Br 1, No. 53, pp. 124 f.

[60] WA 51, 540, 25—27: ". . . meine Propositiones . . . lieffen schier in vierzehen tagen durch gantz Deudsch land" (Wider Hans Worst, 1541).

[61] *Kirche in der Zeit*, 21 (1966), 466 to 469.

[62] *Thesen und Thesenanschlag Luthers*, p. 41, n. 123.

source, one, I must add, which clearly antedates November 11, the day when Luther sent a copy of his theses to John Lang of Erfurt. By means of this copy a wider publicizing of the Theses was then made possible in quite another way.[63]

For Bornkamm and me a second document is highly important, namely a theological and canonical opinion of the University of Mainz that Albrecht procured for himself in the first half of December 1517. He did not wait until the written opinion arrived but passed the affair on at once to the curia.[64] In the opinion and especially in the accompanying correspondence, Luther is described as a *quidam sacrae theologiae magister ordinis Heremitarum divi Augustini,* and his theses are identified as *nonnullae conclusiones seu positiones in insigni universali gymnasio Wittenbergensi scolastice et publice disputatae.* If only the words *scolastice disputatae* had been used, the meaning could be that with respect to content the Theses belonged in the category of matter for debate (open questions for discussion purposes) and could not be characterized as matter for public debate. But *publice disputatae?* It is most interesting that a public debate did not actually come to pass, as Luther clearly declares.[65] However, Mainz University assumed that the debate had taken place, as did also Doctor Jodocus Lorcher, who placed the matter before the Mainz faculty. He was the commissioner of indulgences for the Hohenzollern territories near Nüremberg and clearly also for the archbishop. How else could the mistake have occurred if not through a public invitation to the debate? And how could this have happened if not by a posting of the Theses? If in spite of all this the posting of the Theses is a legend, could it have originated within six weeks after the day when the Theses were sent out to Magdeburg and Mainz?

The Mainz faculty opinion yields more evidence. It sees nothing objectionable in Luther's Theses as theses for debate. Neither the Mainz canonists nor the Mainz theologians assigned to Luther's case disputed the right to engage in an academic debate. Only one canon is cited from the *Corpus juris canonici,* which adverts to Nicholas I and contains the sentence: *quod non liceat alicui de summi pontificis potestate vel judicare vel disputare.*[66] Luther may debate anything outside the matter of papal authority. To be sure, in the *Corpus juris canonici* the sentence is somewhat different: *Nemini est de sedis apostolicae judicio judicare aut illius sententiam retractare permissum est.* This has to do with the pope as the only ultimate authority whose judicial decisions are incontestable, not with the right to debate on the extent of the pope's authority. Besides, the decretal is a forgery and apparently has a pseudo-Isidorian source. Now this simply indicates that Luther was condemned for his position over against the pope, for he was accused of violating a dogma which had not yet been promulgated.[67] Thus

[63] WA Br 1, No. 52, 121—123.

[64] WA Br 1, p. 115. The opinion of Mainz University and the correspondence connected with it is reproduced in ZKG 23 (1902), 265 to 268. The so-called Bodmann papers, from which the texts are taken (copies from the old Mainz University archives), are still preserved in the Mainz city library.

[65] WA Br 1, No. 58, p. 46.

[66] ZKG 23 (1902), p. 267.

[67] An attempt has been made to establish the doctrine concerning indulgences dogmatically on the basis of Leo X's bull *Cum postquam*

during the proceedings against Luther the pope's doctrinal authority was further strengthened. However, Luther's case did not then result in the establishment of a dogma. Quite otherwise. The Reformation did not begin with a dispute over the doctrine of justification by faith but over the question of papal authority. This touches the entire view of the Reformation espoused by the Holl School. It is, of course, clear to me that I must provide specific evidence in support of this statement.

6

In the controversy over the posting of the Theses another methodological possibility is open for debate, namely whether it is possible to clear up the question of the posting of the Theses by way of an analogical process. In the obscure spot of Minden the local paper reports on the posting of theses by the Minden reformer Nikolaus Krage in 1530. Supposedly imitating Luther, he nailed 19 theses on the doors of the Minden churches.[68] Quite rightly doubts have been raised, in part by Aland, about the conclusiveness of this analogical deduction.[69] However, in December 1517 and January 1518, Tetzel arranged for a debate in Frankfort-on-the-Oder and carried it out. It seems very probable that he proceeded in the same way Luther did. That Tetzel's theses were published is undisputed. I have tried to take the same road also in order to move ahead. Unfortunately, there exists no study dealing with John Tetzel's posting of theses and its background parallel to Hans Volz's (1959) work on Martin Luther's posting of his theses and its prehistory. I had to take for granted that the printing of Tetzel's theses, publicized by Nikolaus Paulus, is the first printing rather than a reprint. However, the question has not been raised at all and is yet to be considered.[70]

Herewith I shall conclude my explications of a problem that is now in a very complicated state. They concern themselves with happenings which did not constitute a problem 10 years ago but were viewed as established historical facts and as such were undisputed. At the moment, the result of the discussions seems to me to be that the Theses were probably nailed and that the traditional view of things is fairly correct; also, it is more probable that the posting occured on October 31 than on November 1. In many cases scholarly controversies do not at all yield a clear result. I have already voiced the opinion that the possibility exists of settling the controversy over the posting of the Theses with one stroke. All we need is the first printing of the Theses! As to material relating to territorial church history, the archives have not been exhausted. Why should not there be the possibility of finding somewhere a wholly unambiguous and ancient witness either for or against the posting of the Theses? Likewise some pleasant surprises as well as disappointments may yet occur. The final resolution of the question still lies in the future.

Leipzig, Germany

circumspectio tua of 9 November 1518(!). See C. Mirbt, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums und des römischen Katholizismus*, 4th ed., 1924, No. 416, p. 256.

[68] A. Clos, "Luthers Thesenanschlag. Ein Beitrag aus der Mindener Reformationsgeschichte," *Mindener Heimatblätter*, 34 (1962), 288—291.

[69] *Kirche in der Zeit*, 21 (1966), p. 467.

[70] N. Paulus, *Johann Tetzel*, 1899, pp. 170 to 180.