

Preface

At the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, the *Ninety-Five Theses* and the documents and events that surround them will garner plenty of attention. And yet, over the centuries the *Theses* have become a cipher into which succeeding generations have poured their own meaning, many times without ever having looked at the documents themselves! A display in the top floor of the *Lutherhaus* in Wittenberg, Germany, filled with artifacts from celebrations of Luther and the Reformation, demonstrates our ability to treat the *Ninety-Five Theses* as more of an icon than document, more shibboleth than event. The visitor can see the first depiction of the *Theses* on the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church, from 1617, with Luther writing on the door with a quill, whose feathers are knocking off Leo X's papal tiara in Rome (see p. xiv). A hundred years later, Luther is shown pointing to the *Theses* on the door and talking with passersby. Still later, a youngster is seen on a ladder posting the *Theses* with Luther standing nearby, and by the nineteenth century, the familiar pose of Luther nailing the theses (despite the fact that the sixteenth century hung things on doors with wax) comes to dominate. All depictions, however, contain little or no mention of the *Theses'* contents. As the 500th anniversary arrives, some artists have even taken to painting Luther as an angry young man, scowling over

his shoulder, clearly ready to start a revolution against the authorities of church and state.

Despite the best attempts by historians over the past century or so, these images still dominate our imagination and make it nearly impossible to comprehend either the *Theses* or their meaning for Luther and his contemporaries. Based on this research and over against all the legends and stories that surround Luther and the Reformation, this booklet invites twenty-first century readers to consider what Luther said and why a relatively benign action of writing ninety-five theses for debate had such remarkable results. In addition to the *Ninety-Five Theses* readers are invited to consider two more central documents of the very earliest phases of the Reformation: Luther's cover letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz dated 31 October 1517, and the 1518 *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*. The latter tract, Luther's earliest attempt in German to explain to the non-scholarly world what he was trying to say, turned him into a best-selling author overnight with some twenty-five different printings appearing all over German-speaking lands during the next few years.

These three documents are taken from a larger project, volume one of *The Annotated Luther*, a six-volume collection of many of Luther's most influential works. That first volume (*The Roots of Reform*) contains Luther's important Reformation writings from the *Ninety-Five Theses* of 1517 through the 1520 *Freedom of a Christian*. The volume you are reading is designed for use especially by students, interested laypersons, pastors, and their congregants to prepare for 2017 and beyond. It begins with a thorough introduction to the late-medieval church of Luther's day and its most important practices to help today's readers better understand the specific ecclesial, theological, and educational setting in which the *Ninety-*

Five Theses were written; why the document was sent to Archbishop Albrecht; and why Luther rendered his theses into a far more sermonic form for the laity in the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*.

Armed with this background, the reader then is invited first to read Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*. Extensive notes will help put otherwise cryptic statements into their proper context and identify both the main point and the underlying structure of that text. Here one will discover a world of penitential practices much changed from the ancient church and will find arguments based upon Luther's use of the most recent work on the Greek New Testament and upon his own experience with indulgences.

In the second document, readers will find a humble, pious letter by an Augustinian friar and professor (Martin Luther) to the most powerful church official in all of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (Archbishop Albrecht). Here one discovers that the pastoral concerns echoing throughout the *Ninety-Five Theses* reach a crescendo pitch. The failure of the indulgence preachers to do their job and Albrecht's apparent unwillingness to stop them, coupled with Luther's own sense of call as a *doctor ecclesiae* [teacher of the church], combine to reveal Luther's deep sorrow at church leaders unwilling to proclaim the gospel or to protect the simple believers in their charge.

Finally, the third document, the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* written and published in the spring of 1518 and republished twenty-five times or so, gives insight into Luther's remarkable ability to take complicated, scholarly debates and turn them into simple, direct words. This talent will reveal itself over and over again in Luther's career—from *Freedom of a Christian* in 1520 to the *Catechisms* of 1529 and the commentary on the common lectionary of his day, published in 1544. His opponent, the indulgence preacher Johann

Tetzel, answered this tract with a publication that was never reprinted—a sterling testimony to the power of Luther's pen to spark the common folk's imagination. No wonder that Luther was far and away the most published author in all Europe well into the next decade.

To assist the reader, we have appended a series of discussion questions and suggestions for how to study this book. Of course, readers will discover other ways to use this volume as well. The point is always and only to invite readers into a deeper conversation with the past and with the humble beginnings of one of the most important events in Christian history. If in the process they are moved to discover more of the essential Luther, his theology, and the gospel to which he witnessed, then the central goal will have been realized: to uncover the context and content of the original Reformation documents for another generation of Christian believers.

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Commemoration of St. Joseph, Guardian of Jesus, 2015