

The History of the Reformation...



HOW CHRIST
RESTORED
THE GOSPEL
TO HIS
CHURCH

Reformation Day October 31, 1517

It was a Wednesday.

It was a Wednesday, October 31, 1517. It was not really all that much different from the thousands of other Wednesdays that had come before. It was fall, of course, and the air had cooled down and the leaves were putting on a wonderful show of color along the River Elbe on the hillside. It was nice time to be a German. It was a nice time to live in rural Germany.

The harvest had been plentiful. That is, it had been as plentiful as the white sand fields surrounding the little town of Wittenberg would allow. Still there had been a harvest and a pretty good one by their standards and it had been successfully gathered in and had been put away for the impending, German winter.

The people of Wittenberg had also begun to put away their terrible recollections and haunted memories of the plague that had come only a few years before and had destroyed so many without mercy. But even that, even that and the terrible

memories associated with it had subsided somewhat into something of a distant memory. No, at that particular moment, in that particular season, on that particular day...times were good...as good as they had been in years. The plague had subsided. The harvest was in and there was talk still of Italian Columbus and his discovery of a new world in the west only two decades or so before. People, it seemed, knew more than they had ever known. The newly invented printing press has seen to that. Columbus' story had been circulated widely and had set men's minds to dreaming of new and better lands of opportunity and promise. Still, rural Germany was not all that bad. Their own particular province of Saxony ruled, as it was by Frederick the Wise, their crown prince and champion, was especially nice.

In particular, their little town of Wittenberg, and it was little...only 2,000 residents or so and not much more than nine-tenths of a mile long from one end to the other...set as the crown jewel of Prince Frederick's province of Saxony had lots of reasons to count its blessings.

It had become something of the province's chief seat and had become a pet project for their beloved crowned prince, Frederick the Wise. His chief castle and primary residence were there and he had started up a new university in the town just ten years earlier and it too was doing rather well.¹ It was up to almost two hundred young students and was even beginning to enjoy something of a reputation for excellence.² Prince Frederick had started the school to attract and keep students in his own dominions. In fact, all of the other major provinces in the empire already had universities and it had never seemed right to him to have students from his domain travel off to Leipzig or any of the surrounding provinces for their education. It especially did not seem right for them to travel

away and to take their money to some other prince's domain. Still, they knew his motivations regarding the school were not altogether mercenary. He wanted the school to add prestige to his imperial presence and they knew that adding prestige to his imperial presence also meant adding prestige to their little town. In fact, they had been genuinely encouraged by his recent move of upgrading the schools' faculty by replacing some of its six or seven professors with some very gifted teachers from Erfurt and elsewhere. It was true that some of the professors he had added had been priests...priests attached to the Augustinian monastery at the edge of town. But that was all right. There was nothing unusual about that. The Augustinians were known for their erudition and scholarship and many of the priests in other notable cities did double duty as both pastors and as professors. Besides priests...especially monks...were inexpensive and they attracted students who wanted to study for the ministry and there were plenty of available cells at the monastery at the edge of town. One or two more monks added to an order already containing thirty other monks...was not going to hurt anything or crowd anyone.

Now, that morning, that particular Wednesday morning, October 31, 1517, one of the monks from the monastery...one of the monks brought in to teach at the university...a medium height, thin, thirty-three year old Augustinian monk...so thin that he seemed emaciated...almost skeletal...made his way from the monastery at the edge of town up to the castle and the church front door alongside. He had a large sheet of paper rolled up in his hand but other than that there was not very much else about him that would have drawn notice. Oh, he wore a monk's robes and he had his head tonsured...that is, he had his hair cut like a bowl with a bald spot shaved on top and he was terribly thin and pale but other than that...there wasn't very much that would have caught anyone's eye or

attention. They were used to seeing monks in Wittenberg and besides...the streets of Wittenberg were crowded and busy that Wednesday morning. There was a tremendous sense of excitement in the air that Wednesday morning because the next day was a feast day, the Day of All Saints...All Hallowed Ones Day. That meant that special preparations were being made at the Wittenberg Castle for the next day; it was a busy afternoon. All Saint's Day at the Wittenberg castle meant that the All Saints Foundation's collection of religious relics was going to be on display. That meant, of course, and that there would be hundred of pilgrims in town the next day to pay the admission to see them. Now they didn't come, of course, just because they were interested in viewing ancient relics. To be sure, ancient relics were interesting...what person in their right mind would not pay to see the mummified thumb of Jesus' grandmother, St. Anne.

Such artifacts aroused a sort of morbid curiosity.

But that was not the principal reason people stood in line and paid money to see the relics at Wittenberg. No, the reason they stood in line and paid to visit the relics at Wittenberg on All Saint's Day was because viewing them provided a wonderful opportunity for the citizens of Saxony to obtain an official papal indulgence or pardon for their sins.

Now the reason they thought such indulgences were necessary was because that had been taught that Christ's death was not sufficient to remove the temporal punishment due their sins. Oh, they knew and believed that Christ had secured their eternal forgiveness but they also knew and believed that they had to pay a temporal punishment of their sins. That is, they believed that God required them

to pay for the sins they had committed in the flesh. Somehow, and they were never quite sure about how all that worked itself out, they knew that Christ had taken care of the eternal punishment of their sins but that the temporal punishment of their sin had to be satisfied either by suffering or by doing good works or by doing works of penance sufficient to offset their sin or by spending a time of purification in that mysterious and terrifying place called purgatory.

Of course, they knew purgatory was not the same thing as hell but they also knew that it was not a place anyone would willingly want to experience. They certainly had no intention of experiencing it if they could avoid it. Indulgences offered them that chance.

Of course, they believed and accepted the doctrine of purgatory and why shouldn't they? Only heretics denied the existence of purgatory...men like John Huss and John Wycliffe and the church had certainly taken care of them. Besides, the doctrine of purgatory had been the teaching of the church straight along since the days of Jesus, hadn't it? All of their priests and bishops alike believed it and taught it, didn't they? Even the Holy Father, Leo X taught it and hadn't he provided for their benefit, as the keeper and dispenser of the Treasury of Merits of the Saints, some practical ways, really convenient and fairly inexpensive ways to avoid purgatory and all of the awful grief of its purifying flames? Wasn't that what days like All Saint's Day at Wittenberg were all about? A person could go up to the castle, pay a few coins, go in and view some extraordinary relics, contemplate his sin, determine to turn over a new leaf and come out afterwards with an official document stamped and sealed by the mother church itself, guaranteeing forgiveness from all the temporal punishment of their sins both now and more importantly again in the day of their death.

What a blessing that was.

What a wonderful and caring pope, Pope Leo was.

What a wonderful and caring crowned prince...Prince Frederick was.

To think that he was willing to provide such a wonderful collection of relics right there in their own community...that he was willing to maintain them...to protect them and to constantly add to them and to so graciously make them available to all his subjects and even to the subjects of other provinces on this one day each year when harvest was in and the weather was still good was just too kind.

It was good to be German.

It was good to live in a nice, quiet little town like Wittenberg in the German province of Saxony in a confederation of provinces known as the Holy Roman Empire on the Wednesday before All Saints Day, October 31, 1517. It was good. It was quiet. It was peaceful. There was hardly any trouble of any kind...I mean except for the plague and except for the occasional war and except for ignorance and poverty and the encroaching Muslims in the east it was a pretty good time to be alive.

But the thin emaciated, 33 year-old skeletal monk...the one with the tonsured hair...the one teaching Bible at their university...the one living in the monastery at the edge of town...the one who was always was so solemn and so serious and who sometimes begged for bread by singing on their front stoops...the one who had a large piece of paper rolled up in his hand and who was weaving his way

through the crowded streets up to the castle and to the large wooden door of the church alongside was about to change all that.

He was about to fasten the piece of paper in his hand to the front door of the castle church. That was all he intended to do. He wanted to fasten a piece of paper to the church door and start a discussion among scholars about a few things that troubled him...a few things that troubled him about indulgences and the practice of selling indulgences and what allowing them to be sold meant in relation to the sacrament of penance and to the gospel. But what he was actually about to do was to start a revolution that would alter, forever, the course of human history. He was about to prick the most vulnerable spot on the richest and most powerful kingdom on earth. He was about to prick Achilles' heel of the Roman Catholic with the point of his pen.

His name was Martin Luther. It was October 31, 1517 and he was about to start the Protestant Reformation.

Let's pray.

Our Great God and King,

You who turn the heart of men to the truth and turn the hearts of kings to do your will, we bless and praise you this day especially for restoring the gospel to your church in the Reformation. We thank you for men like Luther and Calvin and Knox and Zwingli and we long for you to again your gospel to its proper place of prominence in men's hearts and minds. Would you be so gracious as to take these humble lessons...these few meditations and thoughts and use them this morning to stir our hearts to worship and magnify your name and your

faithful stewardship of both your church and of human history? Help us to see your hand as it guided providence and guided men smitten by the gospel in order that we too might come to love gospel and proclaim your great work in this place. This we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Brothers and sisters, it is Reformation Day...rejoice and be glad.

This morning we are starting a new study called the History of the Reformation. It will not be a particularly long or difficult study, only some three months or so. It will a little different than our normal Bible exposition studies. By that, I mean it will be more theological, biographical and historical than what we usually do on Sunday morning. But I still think it can be helpful. I trust our study will give you some new insight into the kindness and work of God in human history and that it will introduce you to a few of the men and women God used to restore the gospel to its proper place. It seems to me the timing is right. We have just finished a lengthy study of Romans and it is after all, Reformation Day, which is named in honor of the day Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses to the castle church door in Wittenberg.

Now there is a sense in which that particular day, October 31, 1517 was not really the start of the Reformation at all. There is a sense in which the Reformation had been underfoot for some time when Luther nailed his paper to the door there in Wittenberg. Some say it had actually started with Wycliffe or with Huss, a hundred years earlier. Some say, it had started with St. Anselm in the twelfth century as he worked out the notion of a forensic or legal justification. Some say it started with St. Augustine in the fifth century when he fought it out with Pelagius over the inherent sinfulness of man. Still October 31st is the day we

celebrate as Reformation Day and I thought I might take a few minutes this morning and explain to you why that is.

Now to do that I need to talk about I need to talk for a minute or two about the three or four different, seemingly unrelated things.

- I need to talk about the political world of 1517.
- I need to talk about the Catholic Church's sacramental theology in 1517.
- I need to talk about the concept of indulgences and the idea of a Treasury of Merit.
- And then finally, I need to talk for a minute or two about the printing press and the impact of the Renaissance and how Luther's understanding of the Bible was impacted by his actually reading the Bible and by that I mean his actually reading a Greek New Testament.

All right then, first the political world in which Martin Luther lived in 1517.

Now the first thing you ought to know is that Martin Luther lived in the German province of Saxony which was one of the provinces that made up a confederation of lands called the Holy Roman Empire and the first thing that you ought to know about the Holy Roman Empire is that it was wasn't and by that I mean it was not holy...it was not even Roman.



It was principally German. Although from time to time it included other lands and other areas it was always principally German.

It had first been created by Charlemagne in 800 AD some 700 years earlier. Charlemagne created an empire out of the various fractured states of Western Europe. The pope of Charlemagne's day recognizing that Charlemagne controlled the political scene crowned him the emperor and protector of Christian. The Pope's reasoning was twofold. First, he wanted Charlemagne to protect Rome from invading Muslim's and secondly he wanted to inject himself into the politics of Europe. If he could get future kings to depend upon the church's recognition, it could perhaps influence who became emperor and how the empire responded to the church.

So you can see the Holy Roman Empire was called the Holy Roman Empire simply because the Emperor was recognized and crowned by the Holy Roman Church. So for the next seven hundred years, something of a battle ensued. The Pope claimed spiritual dominion over Europe and the Emperor claimed temporal dominion. Sometimes the interests of the Pope and the interest of the Emperor put them in terrible conflict with each other. Naturally, the size of the empire and the power of the emperor varied from emperor to emperor.

By 1356, the emperor was selected by electors. That is, several of the crown princes or bishops of Europe were chosen to "elect" a new Roman emperor whenever the old one died. That meant, of course, that the electors held enormous power. If an emperor's descendant was powerful enough he could force the electors to elect him. If he were not very powerful, the electors could

choose an emperor that was more amenable to advancing their own personal agendas. Electors were often influenced by money.



I bring all that up because Frederick the Wise, the crowned prince of Saxony was one of the seven electors of the Holy Roman Empire in 1517. He was very powerful and because he was an older man and had been the crowned prince of Saxony for awhile he would later be able to demand certain protections for Luther that Luther otherwise would not have had. For example, when the Pope Leo wanted Luther to be shipped off to Rome to be tried for heresy, Frederick the Wise demanded that Luther be tried in Germany.

Now there were other electors but the rest of them are not very important to our story this morning. However, one is important and his name is Prince Albert of Brandenburg. Prince Albert was also a crowned prince of Germany but he was not an elector. What he was, however, was a bishop. He had purchased his office from the pope. In fact, he had purchased two of them, one at Halberstadt and one at Magdeburg. But he wanted one more. He wanted to be the Bishop of Mainz, or I should say the Archbishop of Mainz, because he knew if he could obtain that office he would automatically become an elector. Now Albert faced

three obstacles. The first problem that he faced was that canon law did not permit a man to stack up offices. In other words, a man was not allowed to be the bishop of more than one see or diocese or area at a time. The second problem that he faced was that he was only twenty-four and was thus too young to be a bishop in the first place. The third problem he faced was that the Diocese of Mainz was bankrupt. You see whenever a new bishop was chosen the Diocese had to pay a large sum of money to the papacy and the Diocese of Mainz had had three archbishops in ten years. Each of the three previous men had died prematurely so the Diocese had not had enough time to recover all the money it had paid to Rome.

Think of it this way. Imagine that when this church decided to choose Tom Ferrell as its pastor the church had to pay the North Texas Presbytery a sum of money. Let's say the presbytery responded like this, **"We see you want Mr. Ferrell and he is a good man and we are willing to let you have if you send us...say \$50,000."** And let's say the church responded by saying, **"Well that is a lot of money but we expect he will be with us a long time and he is a good man, so yes we will do that."**

Then let's say that Tom Ferrell died unexpectedly and the church decided to call John Duke as pastor and the presbytery responded by saying, **"Yes, well he is a lot more sinful than Mr. Ferrell but alright. That will cost you \$75,000."** Then let's say that the church responded by saying, **"Well that's a lot of money but we want him so I guess we will have to do what we have to do."**

But the John too died unexpectedly and then the church decided to call that wonderful and winsome character Tom Browning but the presbytery responded

by saying, **“Well we know the depth of this character’s character and we know the depth of his depravity and you can have him but it is going to cost you \$200,000.”**

You see the question at point becomes, **“Just how much can a church take?”** Well that is pretty much what happened at Mainz. The diocese was busted...flat out broke...still they needed a bishop...but their bishop because of the prominence of their church’s position and size was more than a bishop. He was an archbishop.

Now there was a sense in which that provided a wonderful opportunity for Albert of Brandenburg. All he had to do was come up with the money. So Albert hired the Fugger Banking House of Germany to negotiate the office for him. They reported back to him that the office could be had for 12,000 gold ducats and the reason for that amount was that there had been twelve apostles. Albert counter offered 7,000 gold ducats because there were after all only seven deadly sins. Eventually, they settled on 10,000 gold ducts presumably because there were after all, Ten Commandments. Only Albert did not have 10,000 gold ducats of his own. So he borrowed the money from the Fugger Bank after he obtained from Rome permission to sell indulgences to raise the money to offset his debt.

Now this is what Rome agreed to. He could have the office and he could see indulgences as long as after the debt was paid half of the money raised were to go to Rome to help pay for building St. Peter’s Basilica.

Now, we’ll talk about that a lot more next week but the main thing I want you to see is that meant there were two electors selling indulgences. One of them was

Frederick the Wise who only sold his indulgences once a year at the Feast of All Saints and the other was Albert of Brandenburg who was also the Archbishop of Mainz. Albert was selling his indulgences every day and he was selling them aggressively and for the most part fairly cheaply.

Luther's Germany

- Was divided up between 7 electors
- The Electors picked the emperor
- One of the electoral offices was connected to a archbishopric



That put them in conflict and made them competitors. Of course, Frederick the Wise was offended and forbade the selling of Albert's indulgences in his province. But because their provinces butted up to each other, it was very easy for Frederick's subjects to slip over the border to Albert's province and purchase whatever they needed.

Now keeping that in mind, let's talk a minute about the Roman Catholic's sacramental theology in 1517. The Catholic Church held to seven sacraments. They were: baptism, the Lord's Supper, confirmation, penance, extreme unction, orders and matrimony. The one that concerns us this morning is penance. The Catholic Church instituted the sacrament of penance based upon a mistranslation of the Greek word "to repent". It provided an opportunity for a sinner to be restored after having made shipwreck of his faith. You see medieval catholic theology viewed grace almost as if it were a substance. When a Christian

committed a sin, some of that grace conferred at baptism was lost. When a Christian committed a mortal sin, murder or adultery or something to that effect, all of their grace was lost...something like water running out of a bathtub.

The Sacrament of Penance allowed that grace to be restored.

Penance itself was made up of three parts: contrition...being sorry for your sin, confession...telling someone like a priest about your sin, and satisfaction...doing something tangible to demonstrate the reality of having turned away from sin. Now initially, satisfaction involved works of mercy or charity and the like. A person could obtain satisfaction by giving money to the poor or caring for the poor or defending the faith or going on a pilgrimage, etc.

The idea of pilgrimages became especially important during the time of the Crusades. In fact, the whole idea of dealing with the temporal satisfaction of sin came to the forefront during the Crusades and the church began to offer plenary indulgences to any man who would enlist in the service of the church to go to the middle east and help fight for and secure the Holy Land and all of its holy sites for the church. Later, opportunity was offered to those who could not go to help pay the way for others to go and with that idea the notion of indulgences was born.

You can see then how indulgences became a way to pay money to deal with the temporal satisfaction of sin. At first, the church was very careful offering indulgences only every hundred years or so. But as the church began to need money and especially as the church came under increasing pressure from Muslims in the east, it began to sell indulgences more often.

Now in the hands of a responsible man like Frederick the Wise, selling indulgences provided revenue for public works projects and the like. It did not make the theology right but there were few if any of the terrible abuses that were to come later. In the hands of a younger man like Albert of Brandenburg the selling of indulgences reached new and terrible lows.

In fact, Albert brought in the best, or perhaps I should say the worst, salesman he could find to sell his indulgences. His name was John Tetzel and he was an awful man. There was almost nothing that he wouldn't do, almost nothing he wouldn't say to get the money. He became famous for this little ditty,

As soon as coin the coffer rings
A soul from purgatory springs.

To which critics responded,

When a coin goes into the pitcher,
The pope keeps getting richer and richer.

Now you might be asking yourself, **“Why did they think an indulgence was able to provide satisfaction for temporal sin?”**

They believed that was possible because they believed in something called the Treasury of Merit. The Treasury of Merit was a collection of merit secured in heaven and made up of all of the good works of all of the saints of all of the ages. You see the theology of the medieval church recognized that some saints were so good that they did more than was required in their case to provide satisfaction for their sins and the church believed that no good work was ever wasted or forgotten and that the extra merit provided by the good works of saints was

“**treasured up**” in the Treasury of Merit and that the Pope could apply the value of such works to other sinners as he saw fit. In other words, he had the power to “**impute**” to an undeserving sinner the benefit of the Treasury of Merit if he chose.

Now those of you who were raised in catholic backgrounds will especially appreciate that, I think.

Now the benefit of that imputation occurred whenever a person obtained an indulgence. The excess good works that were stored up there were applied to the sinner and satisfaction for the temporal punishment of his sin was obtained and the long and the short of that meant that such sinners escaped the purifying fires of purgatory altogether.

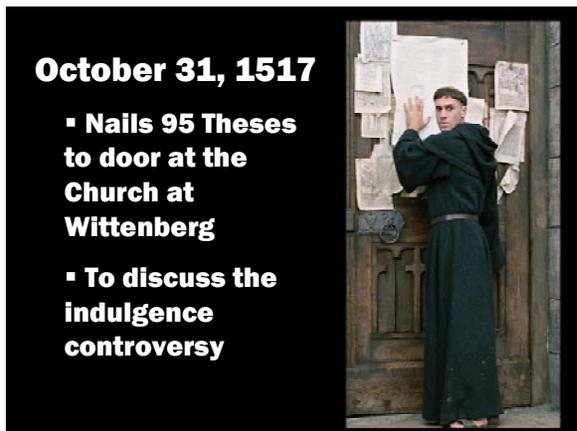
Listen for example to a section of a sermon preached by Tetzel appealing to his listeners to purchase an indulgence for their parents suffering in purgatory.

You should know that all who confess and in penance put alms into the coffer according to the counsel of the confessor, will obtain complete remission of all their sins. Why are you then standing there? Run for the salvation of your souls! Be as careful and concerned for the salvation of your souls as you are for your temporal goods, which you seek both day and night. Seek the Lord while he may be found and while he is near.

Don't you hear the voices of your wailing dead parents and others who say, '**Have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me, because we are in severe punishment and pain. From this you could redeem us with small alms and yet you do not want to do so.**' Open your ears as the father says to the son and the mother to the daughter... '**We have created you, fed you, cared for you, and left you our temporal goods. Why then are you so cruel and harsh that you do not want to save us, though it only takes a little? You let us lie in flames so that we only slowly come to the**

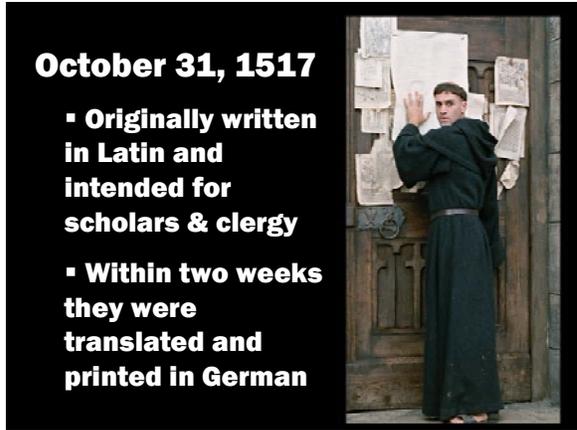
promised glory.' You may have letters which let you have, once in life and in the hour of death...full remission of the punishment which belongs to sin. Oh, those of you with vows, you usurers, robbers, murderers, and criminals - Now is the time to hear the voice of God. He does not want the death of the sinner rather he wants that the sinner be converted and live. Convert yourselves...³

You can see, I think, how such blatant greed made good men like Frederick cringe. You can especially see, I think, how it made a good man like Martin Luther cringe and so Luther a young thirty-three year old monk wrote up Ninety-Five Theses regarding the selling and the nature of indulgences not because he wanted to start a revolution but rather because he wanted to help stop the bleeding of the poor...because he wanted to stop such awful abuse.



Now Luther wrote his Ninety-Five Theses in Latin and he did that because he wanted it to be an academic or ecclesiastical discussion. He had no intention of making it public. But within two weeks, his Ninety Five Theses had been translated into German and circulated all across Germany.

Luther it seems had hit a nerve.



Listen to what Roland Bainton says:

Luther took no steps to spread his theses among the people. He was merely inviting scholars to dispute and dignitaries to define, but others surreptitiously translated the theses into German and gave them to the press. In short order they became the talk of Germany. What Karl Barth 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.⁴

I like that, **“He was startled to hear the clanging of a bell.”**

Now the ringing of that bell signaled the start of the Reformation. Praise be to God...it rings still.

Let's pray.

¹ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, translated by James L. Schaaf, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 118. Brecht writes: “Since Leipzig lay in Albertine Saxony, Electoral Saxony did not have its own university after the territory was partitioned. At that time it was a necessity for a developing territorial state to have its own institution of higher learning. That was why Brandenburg in 1506 had established the University of Frankfurt on the Oder. There is evidence as early as 1493 that Frederick the Wise had plans to establish a university. On 6 July 1502 he obtained from King Maximilian a privilege for the establishment of a full

university in Wittenberg with the right to grant degrees. On 24 August Frederick and his brother John invited attendance at the opening of the university on 18 October. Papal confirmation of the university was not forthcoming until 1507. That is noteworthy in itself for until then all universities had begun with a papal privilege, while Frederick was at first content with an imperial one.”

² Mark Knoll, “The Earliest Protestants and the Reformation of Education,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 43:1 Fall 1980, 102-103. Success is a somewhat relative term based upon modern standards. The school probably ran around a hundred to two hundred students in 1517. I base that upon Noll’s numbers in the following paragraph and from Brecht’s book cited below. “The cumulative effect of these opinions spelled disaster for schools in the early Reformation period. Statistics are hard to come by for the lower schools, but the sad plight of the universities reflected a general decline in education throughout Germany and Switzerland. Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses with their attack on the Roman Catholic concept of Christianity in 1517. When he entered the University of Erfurt in 1501, it had an enrollment of 2,000 students; by 1529 it was down to 20. The University of Leipzig, an institution of comparable size in 1500, was down to slightly under 200 students by 1525 and under 100 by 1529. Even Luther’s own University of Wittenberg had dropped from 250 to 173 students in the period 1525 to 1529. The situation could have been even worse in the lower schools. At least the universities continued to exist. But many of the local schools, stripped of financial support and of community confidence, had simply vanished from sight.” See also: Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, translated by James L. Schaaf, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 119. “At the beginning of Luther’s time, between 184 and 221 students matriculated annually. After 1517 the number increased by leaps and bounds.”

³ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (New York: Abigdon Press, 1950), 78.

⁴ *Ibid*, 83.