

“Bei uns ist immer was los!”

## der 31. Oktober—REFORMATIONSTAG History

In 1516–17, Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar and papal commissioner for indulgences, was sent to Germany to raise money to rebuild St Peter's Basilica in Rome.<sup>[1]</sup>

On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther wrote to Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz and Magdeburg, protesting against the sale of indulgences. He enclosed in his letter a copy of his "Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," which came to be known as *Ninety-five Theses*.<sup>[2]</sup> Hans Hillerbrand writes that Luther had no intention of confronting the church, but saw his disputation as a scholarly objection to church practices, and the tone of the writing is accordingly "searching, rather than doctrinaire."<sup>[3]</sup> Hillerbrand writes that there is nevertheless an undercurrent of challenge in several of the theses, particularly in Thesis 86, which asks: "Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?"<sup>[3]</sup>

Luther objected to a saying attributed to Johann Tetzel that "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory [also attested as 'into heaven'] springs."<sup>[4]</sup> He insisted that, since forgiveness was God's alone to grant, those who claimed that indulgences absolved buyers from all punishments and granted them salvation were in error. Christians, he said, must not slacken in following Christ on account of such false assurances.



The sale of indulgences shown in *A Question to a Mintmaker*, woodcut by Jörg Breu the Elder of Augsburg, circa 1530.

According to Philipp Melanchthon, writing in 1546, Luther "wrote theses on indulgences and posted them on the church of All Saints on 31 October 1517", an event now seen as sparking the Reformation.<sup>[5]</sup> Some scholars have questioned Melanchthon's account, since he did not move to Wittenberg until a year later and no contemporaneous evidence exists for Luther's posting of the theses.<sup>[6]</sup> Others counter that such evidence is unnecessary because it was the custom at Wittenberg university to advertise a disputation by posting theses on the door of All Saints' Church, also known as "Castle Church".<sup>[7]</sup>

The *Ninety-five Theses* were quickly translated from Latin into German, printed, and widely copied, making the controversy one of the first in history to be aided by the printing press.<sup>[8]</sup> Within two weeks, copies of the theses had spread throughout Germany; within two months throughout Europe.

Luther's writings circulated widely, reaching France, England, and Italy as early as 1519. Students thronged to Wittenberg to hear Luther speak. He published a short commentary on Galatians and his *Work on the Psalms*. This early part of Luther's career was one of his most creative and productive.<sup>[9]</sup> Three of his best-known works were published in 1520: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On the Freedom of a Christian*.



Door of the *Schlosskirche* (castle church) in Wittenberg to which Luther is said to have nailed his Ninety-five Theses on 31 October 1517, sparking the Reformation.