

Martin Luther and the Reformation: Ninety-five Thesis to the Diet of Worms

Phillip J. Greer

American Military University

ABSTRACT

Martin Luther is one of the most pivotal individuals in human history especially regarding Christianity. His action and Theses led to a schism between the Catholic and Protestant religions and became known as the Reformation. The Reformation began with Luther and the first few years after the posting of his *Ninety-five Theses*. The Holy See did not approve of Luther's challenge to their authority and directed charges of heresy against Luther that culminated in the Diet of Worms. It is there that Luther had a trial regarding his actions from the posting of the *Ninety-five Theses* to the Diet of Worms.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Reformation, *Ninety-five Theses*, Diet of Worms, Pope Leo X, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, indulgences, Protestantism, Holy Roman Empire, Charles V

Martín Lutero y la reforma: noventa y cinco tesis sobre la dieta de Worms

RESUMEN

Martín Lutero es una de las personas más fundamentales en la historia de la humanidad, especialmente en lo que respecta al cristianismo. Su acción y tesis llevaron a un cisma entre las religiones católica y protestante y se conoció como la Reforma. La Reforma comenzó con Lutero y los primeros años después de la publicación de sus Noventa y cinco Tesis. La Santa Sede no aprobó el desafío de Lutero a su autoridad y dirigió cargos de herejía contra Lutero que culminaron en la Dieta de Worms. Es allí donde Lutero tuvo un juicio con respecto a sus acciones desde la publicación de las Noventa y cinco Tesis a la Dieta de Worms.

Palabras clave: Martín Lutero, Reforma, Noventa y cinco tesis, Dieta de Worms, Papa León X, Sobre la libertad de un cristiano, indulgencias, Protestantismo, Sacro Imperio Romano Germánico, Carlos V

马丁·路德和宗教改革：从《九十五条论纲》到沃尔姆斯议会

摘要

马丁·路德是人类历史上最重要的人物之一，尤其是在基督教方面。他的行动和论纲导致天主教和新教分离，被称为宗教改革。马丁·路德在公布其《九十五条论纲》的几年后发起了宗教改革。圣座并未批准路德对其权威发起的挑战，并在沃尔姆斯议会强烈指控路德为异教徒。路德因其在该议会中公布《九十五条论纲》的行为而接受审判。

关键词：马丁·路德，宗教改革，《九十五条论纲》，沃尔姆斯议会，教皇利奥十世，《论基督徒的自由》，赎罪券，新教，神圣罗马帝国，查尔斯五世

The Reformation is one of the most pivotal periods in human history, which had ramifications in politics, religion, and culture. Unlike the Renaissance, the start of the Reformation can be traced back to a singular event. History marks the posting of *Ninety-five Theses* by Martin Luther as that starting point. While this event is an excellent mark to begin the Reformation, the events the immediately followed should be considered and included as part of that beginning. Europe did not begin to accept Protestantism once the *Ninety-five Theses* was posted, but

instead were largely divided by it. The Church, referred to afterwards as the Catholic Church, saw this as an affront to their authority while others took up arms to defend a new way of thinking. However, initially no one really knew what to do about Luther, and those first few years after posting his theses truly reveal the type of world Europe was in the early sixteenth century.

The Reformation is generally considered to have started with the posting of Martin Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the castle church

in Wittenberg, within the Holy Roman Empire, on October 31, 1517.¹ However there were several events that were key to preparing the world for the start of the Reformation. As early as the fourteenth century, people began to oppose the apparent corruption of the Church and clergymen. We know that Petrarch sent a letter to a friend indicating how repulsed he was at the extravagance of a church in France, which was in contrast to his idea of what a church should look like.² As dissent grew, some became more vocal—John Wycliff was one of these individuals. In many ways, John Wycliff was the spiritual predecessor to Martin Luther. Wycliff condemned the excesses of the church by the lavish lifestyle lived by many clergymen.³ He also advocated for a translation of the Bible into English or other local languages, as the Bible had until that time been exclusively reproduced in Latin. This brought him in conflict with Rome, and specifically with Pope Gregory XI. Gregory rebuked Wycliff, claiming that what Wycliff said amounted to heresy.⁴ Though he died in 1384, the Council of Constance declared Wycliff a heretic in 1415 and banned the various ideas he espoused along with all his writings. This foreshadowed the politics Martin Luther faced 150 years later.

Jan Hus was another early reformer who opposed church authority over the same reasoning as Wycliff and Luther. Hus was accused by the same council that denounced Wycliff but, as Hus was still alive, the Council condemned Hus to be burned at the stake. This sentence was carried out almost immediately and set a deadly prece-

dence for opposing the Church. Both Wycliff and Hus died believing that they were supporting the Church instead of disregarding it.⁵ Martin Luther felt the same way—that he was trying to save the Church, not divide it into factions.

There were also some technological developments that aided in the dissemination of Luther's ideas. Specifically, the printing press became a critical asset in the Reformation that allowed Luther's messages to reach the general populace in ways that Wycliff and Hus could not. The printing press made it easy for Luther to disseminate his sermons to a wide variety of audiences. This was accomplished because he could have his sermons printed in both Latin and German. Furthermore, printers throughout the Holy Roman Empire reproduced his sermons and spread his message even further. The reproductions were possible due to the relatively lax printing laws in the Holy Roman Empire.⁶ Other nations had more stringent laws that held printers accountable for the information they produced, which limited the spread of Reformation information in areas such as France.

Martin Luther was a theologian and priest in the Holy Roman Empire whose disillusion with the Church began in the early sixteenth century. In 1516, Johann Tetzel arrived in the Holy Roman Empire, in what is now Germany, to sell indulgences in order to raise funds for the rebuilding of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.⁷ Indulgences were penances were performed by Christians in order to receive forgiveness of a par-

ticular sin, thereby reducing the amount of punishment in the afterlife. These indulgences were initially the commission of a good work, but evolved into a cash donation to absolve oneself of sin. Pope Leo X had granted the use of indulgences to fund the rebuilding of the Basilica and, in so doing, made the selling of redemption a church policy.⁸

Martin Luther saw the sale of indulgences as immoral and a sign of corruption within the church's administration. To protest, he wrote a letter to Archbishop Albrecht in which he enclosed a copy of his sermon "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" which later became known as the *Ninety-five Theses*. Legend states that Luther nailed the *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Church. Luther believed that the selling of indulgences prevented Christians from experiencing the meaning behind true repentance.

The letter itself was not meant as a secession from the Church, but rather a beginning to scholarly debate with a wide variety of scholars—not just the Archbishop or the Pope. Luther begins the theses by declaring that he is willing to defend his theses and invites others to dispute him.⁹ He makes the initial statements of disputing what the meaning behind repentance is and should be. Luther then takes the issue of the relationship between punishment and guilt. The Pope was only responsible for releasing parishioners from the punishments of the Church but not absolve them from the guilt of sin. He believed that the concept of providing a letter absolving one of sin without knowing if

the person was repentant or not was a dangerous concept.

He concludes the *Ninety-five Theses* with noting the contrary nature of selling indulgences in that it will only create greed and not salvation.¹⁰ He supports his total argument with a number of questions he claims were asked of him by those who attended his church. The *Ninety-five Theses* would appear to be more of an open invitation to public debate than a revolutionary declaration. Even the act of supposedly posting the theses would not have necessarily been taboo as it was common to do so in order to hold a disputation.

The *Ninety-five Theses* was then translated into German and widely reproduced using the printing press. The more copies purchased, the more printers eagerly awaited printing more material for Luther. This essentially turned Luther into a celebrity, as peoples from all over Europe descended on Wittenberg to hear him preach. Galvanized churchgoers listened to Luther and passed on his messages, which ran contrary to some of what church officials had dictated.

However, the Archbishop who initially received Luther's letter was not impressed. He immediately reviewed the document for heresy and forwarded his findings to Pope Leo X. The Pope began a series of criticisms against Luther instead of directly attacking him at first. Then, in 1518, Luther was summoned to Rome on charges of heresy, but the Pope was convinced to allow his hearing in Augsburg. The hearing devolved into a shouting match between Martin Luther

and Cardinal Cajetan. Though the *Ninety-five Theses* was at the center of the debate on heresy, Cardinal Cajetan and Luther focused their speeches on the matter of the Pope selling indulgences.

Eventually the Cardinal concluded that Luther was guilty of heresy and ordered his arrest. Fortunately for Luther, the Imperial Diet did not have him arrested and Luther was able to escape Augsburg.¹¹ The following year others began to pursue Luther to discredit or capture him. One such person was Johann Eck, who baited Luther into debates to gain evidence of heresy that he could bring to Pope Leo. Eck eventually got his opportunity in Leipzig when Luther asserted that the Pope was not the sole authority on the Bible, and church officials could err on matters of Christianity.¹² The fact that so many within the church were trying to discredit Luther indicates that they believed his teachings were a genuine threat to the Church as an institution and its authority.

After the Leipzig incident, Luther refocused himself on creating several new theological writings. He was able complete his commentary on the Psalms as well as begin a book of sermons.¹³ During this time he also retained his professorship and priesthood, indicating that his efforts were fully focused on the dissemination of his message. During the Winter of 1519, Luther published a treatise called *On Good Works*, which reemphasized that the primacy of the Christian faith and transforming that into good works. Despite the significantly large number of publi-

cations Luther produced, those loyal to the Pope or simply Luther's opponents continued to view Luther as a threat to the Church. Some of those opponents felt that it was Luther's disrespectful attitude to the Church, and especially the Pope, that made him dangerous.

Some theologians of the time did attempt to defend the Church in the same manner as Luther's condemnation of it. Coincidentally, this was precisely what Luther had originally requested—a written dissent of his *Ninety-five Theses*. One theologian out of Leipzig, Augustin von Alveld, wrote a book in May 1520 defending the Pope's authority within the Church and therefore over the Christian world. This text gained Luther's attention as it had angered him. He immediately responded with the pamphlet *On the Papacy at Rome*, which denounced the Pope usurping Christian values and challenged the belief that the Church of God could only be the Church of Rome.¹⁴ The important aspect of this text was its departure from civil tones that Luther had used communicating with the Pope. There were no attempts to find a middle ground, and *On the Papacy at Rome* marks an increase in aggressive posturing and speech.

During the summer of 1520 Martin Luther wrote three additional treatises that would come to summarize not only his position, but that of the future Reformation movement. *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation for the Reform of the Christian* was the first of three, in which Luther sounded a call to arms in opposition

to Rome. Its strong tone follows that of *On the Papacy of Rome* and continues the escalation of words between Luther and papal authority. It is believed that this text took this tone as, at this point, Martin Luther no longer believed that the Pope or Church would reverse its position.¹⁵ In total, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation for the Reform of the Christian Church* denounced the Pope's exclusive claim to summon a general council, denied the Pope's authority of a nation's ruler, and renounced the Pope's position as the sole authority on the scripture. The denunciation of the Pope's authority of a secular ruler would give a justification, though not the primary justification, in King Henry VIII's split from Rome and the start of the Anglican Church.

The treatise was also important as a rallying cry for the German people that energized support throughout the Holy Roman Empire. In this region there was already a large support for the idea of denouncing corruption within the Church, but these treatises helped focus that sentiment.¹⁶ The people of Germany were looking for someone to rally behind in their desire to eliminate corruption within the church and found that person in Martin Luther. Between these desires, the distribution of his sermons, and the ideals he espoused Luther became a sixteenth-century celebrity in a relatively short period of time.

Martin Luther's second treatise during the summer of 1520 was called *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and it was released shortly after the previous one. While the pre-

vious treatise addressed many aspects of church corruption *On the Babylonian Captivity* was a direct assault on the clerical system of the church. In it, Luther strips the Roman Church of its sacramental system and ecclesiastical structure.¹⁷ The Reformation is generally considered to have started with the publications of *Ninety-five Theses*, but there was no real schism between Luther and the Church initially. The Pope had dealt with challenges before and there was still a note of civility between the two. However, the publishing of these treatises cemented the schism between the Holy See and the growing Reformation Movement.

The final of the three treatises is a book called *On the Freedom of a Christian*, which summarized and solidified Luther's biblical theology. This text is central to the theological beliefs of Protestants and its effects are evident in today's Protestant religions. *On the Freedom of a Christian* declares that a Christian is rendered free by faith which is the sole justification for salvation.¹⁸ While the previous two treatises were more overt in their attacks on papal authority, this treatise was designed to be read by a wider audience and is more in line with that of a sermon. It is in this treatise that Luther declares "A Christian man is the most free of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."¹⁹ Though Luther acknowledges that this statement is contradictory, he is able to provide justification of his claim while using corroborating proof that supports the position of the treatise.

Previous treatises and theses' outlined a rudimentary support base for the opposition of church practices, specifically the practice of indulgences. In *On the Freedoms of a Christian*, Luther finally is able to fully explain his opposition. The Roman Church believed that a person would have to perform a great work in order to absolve themselves of a sin. However, Luther was advocating the belief that faith in Jesus Christ was the only prerequisite for salvation much less completing an earthly task. Luther also makes the statement that God's law is the only law that matters in relation to spiritual salvation. Therefore, man's laws can do nothing to ensure the absolution of sin to God.

On the Freedoms of a Christian did have one significant difference compared to the other two treatises he released that summer. This one took a completely different tone and became much more formal. The previous two were direct attacks on Rome and the church while this one only attacked the practices—not the institution per se. *On the Freedoms of a Christian* was also sent by Martin Luther directly to Pope Leo X, accompanied by a letter.²⁰ In the letter Luther claims that his treatises are directed at his critics and not the Pope himself. Luther repeatedly conveys that he bears no ill-will to the Pope and only wishes to help him see his position, which he defines as being in opposition to enemies of the Church, or within the Church.

This indicates that Luther only viewed himself as a friend to the Pope and, by attacking the Church institution,

he was in fact defending the Church. There are also some other possibilities such as that he was trying to repair his relationship with the Pope as he had become overly aggressive. Another possibility was that he was attempting to address the Pope in a manner befitting his position as he had previously treated clergymen with very high respect. This can be seen three years prior in his initial letter to Archbishop Albretch.²¹ However the letter also directs a large amount of criticism at Cardinal Cajetan and call his character into question.



German Translation of the Old Testament
<https://www.loc.gov/item/00650809/>

While Luther was writing his treatises, the Church was preparing to counter the growing Reformation influence. Despite the correspondence between Pope Leo X and Martin Luther, Leo knew very little about Lu-

ther, therefore Leo summoned Eck for more information. Given Eck's previous challenge to Luther, he was more than willing to assist the Pope. In addition, the Roman Consistory renewed their case against Luther. A new commission was established and this one would be headed by Cardinal Cajetan with Eck serving as a member. Eck's drive to oust Luther would overshadow Cajetan's approach for compromise making the confrontation between Rome and Luther inevitable.²²

Their first step was to draft a papal bull which denounced Martin Luther and his teachings. This bull, called *Exsurge Domine*, was delivered by Eck in July of 1520. The bull was more warning than action in that it warned Luther that if he continued down his current course of action he would be excommunicated. *Exsurge Domine* demanded that Luther recant his *Ninety-five Theses*, which was presented by Leo in the bull as forty-one theses.²³ Each thesis details why the Pope believed Martin Luther was in error. In the end, Pope Leo gave Luther sixty days to recant or face excommunication. Luther did not seem disturbed by the letter once he received it, but rather seemed to be encouraged by it in conjunction with the support he was receiving from the German people.²⁴ Therefore, Luther did not intend to recant his *Ninety-five Theses*.

Luther instead wrote a dissension for the papal bull called *Against the Accursed Bull of the Antichrist*, which thoroughly responded to each of Leo's forty-one theses. Luther returned the threat of excommunication with a threat of his own to the Pope. He

claimed that if the Pope did not alter the Church's practices, he would claim that the antichrist was in possession of the Holy See. This would have been tantamount to treason and the beginning of a Christian uprising against Rome. At the sixty-day mark Luther burned the papal bull he received along with some books written by Eck. These acts cemented Luther's position against papal authority. Despite attempts to be civil in *On the Freedoms of a Christian*, Luther would no longer be cordial as he was fixed in an antagonistic role against Rome. On January 3, 1521, Pope Leo X issued a papal cull of excommunication named *Decet Romanum*, which was considered the Pope's final word on the matter.²⁵

The confrontation with Pope Leo was not the only confrontation that Martin Luther would have to face. His conflict with the Church eventually drew in the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V. Charles V was a close ally of Leo's and enjoyed the support of Rome. When Luther was excommunicated, Charles convened an Imperial Diet to confront Luther on his teachings. The location chosen was Worms, Germany, giving the name of the event the Diet of Worms. Prince Frederick III, also known as Frederick the Wise, acted as Luther's protector and ensured that Luther would have safe passage both to and from the Diet of Worms. This was agreed to by both sides, as it ensured that Luther would attend and that a repeat of Jan Hus' execution did not occur.

The Diet of Worms began on April 16, 1521, with Johann Eck acting as the spokesman for Emperor Charles

V and Jerome Schurff as the defendant's lawyer. Martin Luther was ordered to recant his *Ninety-five Theses* and pledge his fidelity to the Roman Church.²⁶ Eck began the *de facto* trial by demanding that Luther denounce all his writings, but Schurff insisted on Eck reading out all the titles that Luther had authored. In the three years since Luther published *Ninety-five Theses*, he drafted an additional twenty-four texts that ran counter to church policies. However, once complete, Luther requested a delay so that he could properly meditate on what his answer should be. The following day Luther answered Eck's question, though not directly.

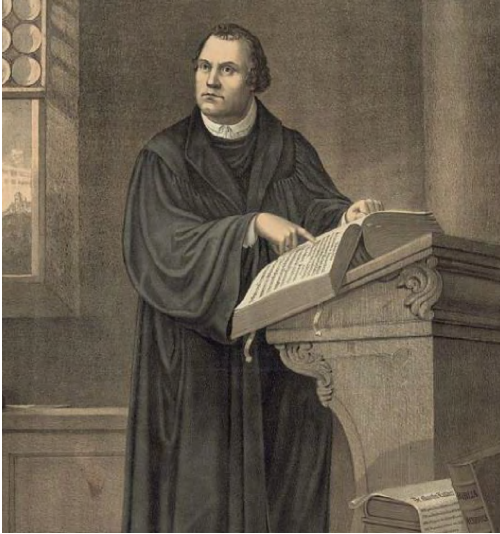
Luther went on to say that not all of his writings could be grouped together in one answer. He then divided his works into three categories, which he then provided answers for. He claimed one group of writings was well received by everybody, including his critics, and therefore would not renounce these texts. The next group were books which directed criticism at the Church and Pope, which he felt he could not renounce as it would not be safe and would encourage various abuse of authority to continue or worsen. The final group of books were those that had directed attacks on specific individuals, which he also refused to recant. He did apologize if some took offense to the harsh tones within and offered to renounce them if it could be proven through scripture that they were in error. Martin Luther concluded his testimony by saying, "I cannot and will not retract anything, since to act against one's conscience is neither

safe nor right. God help me, Amen!"²⁷ No materials researched in this article proved a common belief that Luther stated, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

Eck attempted to respond that his conscience was leading him astray and that he was behaving like a heretic. Eck claimed that Luther was unable to prove any of what he said or claimed, but Luther was reported to have shouted back that he could via scripture. The speeches from Eck and Luther were ultimately at the mercy of Charles, who faced a political decision as much as it was a religious decision. Charles' position as emperor was not absolute and he needed the support of powerful people, whether that was the German nobles or the Pope. The princes would have looked favorably on siding with Luther due to the rising popularity of the Reformation movement. However, Charles' religious conviction overruled the potential political benefit.

Charles responded by reinforcing his already strong devotion to the Church. He wrote a short judgement stating that one would have to be wrong if he were standing in opposition to the Church since the Church could not be wrong, otherwise the church would have been wrong its entire existence.²⁸ The Emperor decided against Luther and ordered that he be allowed to safely return to Wittenberg per his agreement. However, Charles demanded that he no longer be allowed to preach, and he could no longer espouse his heretical ideas. The electoral commission then voted to enforce Luther's ban. In the aftermath of the trial, a group of learned

men attempted to reason with Luther to help reconcile him with the Church. Their attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, as Luther refused to change his position due to his belief that the opposing argument was not supported by scripture.²⁹



Martin Luther lithograph
<https://www.loc.gov/item/00650809/>

The Edict of Worms was finalized on May 8, 1521 after only a week of debate.³⁰ It cautioned about the dangers of heresy and falsehoods which would split the church. To defend itself from criticism, the edict outlined the various steps the Church took to make Luther see the error of his ways and teachings. It described Martin Luther as an evil and rebellious man no longer worthy to be considered a Christian. His books were banned outright in that they could no longer be sold, bought, or read, and all existing copies as well were to be burned.³¹ Punishment for breaking the edict would result in the forfeit of all worldly goods with half going to the

church and the other half to whomever reported the transgression. This would have been a blow to the print industry in Germany, as Luther's sermons had been a source of profit for several years.

Charles V did not immediately sign the edict, fearing that the populace would turn against him.³² He first ensured that he had the support of the nobility at least in respects to a forthcoming war with France. An immediate enforcement of the punishments in the edict would have resulted in a significant portion of his subjects becoming destitute or jailed, thereby reducing the available manpower for the war with France. An additional problem with instituting it came from the papal bull on Luther's excommunication, as it had not been formally delivered. As such, there were many of the council that still supported Luther, at least partially. However, an outbreak of the plague caused many of the members to flee Worms, which dwindled the number of members present to vote. By May 23, there were few members left but the ones who remained sided with the emperor.

On May 25, 1521, the final meeting took place and an agreement on the Edict was formalized. Charles V signed the Edict of Worms the following day in both Latin and German.³³ From there it was disseminated throughout the Holy Roman Empire with an imperial letter that provided the necessary legality of the Edict. It was to be publicly read upon threat of the same penalty as owning a copy of Luther's sermon. So much emphasis was placed on the Edict that distribution of it began before

Charles could affix his seal to the original document. The following month it was translated into both French and Flemish.³⁴

Though Luther was now a criminal, he was able to escape capture by remaining at Wartburg Castle in central Germany for several months thanks to Frederick III. It is there Luther continued his translation of the bible into German as well as several other treatises. He left Wartburg Castle for Wittenberg in March of 1522, where he began to refine Protestant practices in the wake of social unrest. He also married Katharina von Bora in 1523 while retaining his priesthood.³⁵ This set the precedence for clergymen to be married, which was forbidden in the Catholic Church. However, Luther found himself pulled into a popular revolt amongst the German peoples in what became known as the German Peasants' War, which took place from 1524 to 1526. One of the primary leaders of the revolt was a German preacher and theologian, Thomas Muntzer, who stood in opposition of both the church and Martin Luther. The Reformation had heavily influenced the peasantry who incorporated some of the Reformation ideals but added some more radical ideas to their demands. Muntzer reportedly helped the peasants refine their demands. Luther, as well as the majority of reformers, condemned the revolt and sided with the nobility.

In response Luther wrote *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, in which he denounced the violence occurring. In it he claimed that the peasants had abandoned their oath

of allegiance that violence was contrary to the Christian faith, and that violence committed in the name of God was blasphemous. Luther's support of the nobility reinforced the belief in the divine right of kings. However, Luther also includes in the text a minor portion in which it showed he was concerned that he might have played a part in instigating the revolt.

The events that ranged from the posting of Martin Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* to the Diet of Worms, as well as the events shortly after, became a significant turning point in human history. The schism that developed between Luther and the Church evolved into a schism that would divide Christianity into two sects: Catholic and Protestant. Protestantism also split into several different denominations whose origin can be traced back to Luther's questioning of papal authority. His actions defined a new religion and sparked a series of conflicts across Europe as people fled to support this new religion mainly due to the corruption seen within the church. The Reformation set the precedence for King Henry VIII to split from Rome and founded the Anglican Church, and smaller denominations facing persecution would seek to start their own communities in the newly discovered North America. Martin Luther's end came due to illness in 1546, and he was buried in Wittenberg. Shortly after Charles V retook Wittenberg, but as a testament to the influence Martin Luther had in his lifetime, Charles ordered that Luther's grave remain undisturbed.

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Notes

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- 26 Mullett, *Luther*, 291.
- 27 Jensen, *Confrontation*, 52-56.
- 28 Ibid., 57.
- 29 Ibid., 61.
- 30 Ibid., 65.
- 31 Ibid., 77.
- 32 Ibid., 66.
- 33 Ibid., 69.
- 34 Ibid., 70.
- 35 Wyatt North, *Martin Luther: A Life Inspired*. (Monee, IL: Wyatt North Publishing, 2021), 85.