



2-18-2017

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Recommended Citation

Hege, Brent A. R., "Luther Goes Viral: Mass Communication in the Lutheran Reformation" / (2017): -. Available at https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/981

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Luther Goes Viral: Mass Communication in the Lutheran Reformation

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Indiana Association of Historians Annual Meeting
February 18, 2017
Lafayette, Indiana

As we enter the 500th year since the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, we will certainly be enjoying a wealth of new studies of Luther and the Lutheran Reformation. There are countless stories to tell from innumerable angles and perspectives, and we will surely discover new stories, new angles, this year and beyond. If the 400th anniversary is any indication, we could also be embarking on a sea change in Luther studies that will reverberate down through the years. As a Lutheran historical theologian, I am practically giddy with anticipation and excitement.

One of the fundamental tasks of the historian is to interpret the past for the sake of the present (there are other tasks, to be sure, but perhaps none is so basic to the discipline of history as this). And so each of us here today is at least somewhat interested in what significance for us those events set in motion five hundred years ago might have. Even though my own interests are primarily theological, I want to take a different approach to the question of the significance of the Lutheran Reformation for us today, with a focus on one particular aspect of that movement that allowed it to succeed where similar, earlier efforts at reform failed. It also happens to be a topic that generates intense interest and debate today, especially on the heels of one of the most bizarre presidential election campaigns in modern American history.

My question for today is a straightforward one: what role did social media play in the Lutheran Reformation? If that question sounds slightly anachronistic, that is only because we have become accustomed to thinking of social media as a digital phenomenon, something we associate with walls and posts and shares and tweets and memes. And yet, as we will see, each of these acts

of communication has a long history, and we can see the same forces at work in the mass communication that proved to be a decisive factor in the success of the Lutheran Reformation.

Let's begin with posting something on a wall (or, in Luther's case, a door). Many of us have heard the famous legend of a young professor at a backwater German university striding confidently to the door of the university church to nail a list of grievances to the door, firing a shot across the bow of the most powerful institution on the planet. The vast majority of Reformation scholars agree that Luther's 95 Theses serve as a convenient benchmark for the beginning of the

Reformation, but there is considerable debate about what precisely Luther did to set off the storm that soon engulfed much of Europe in the sixteenth century and beyond. For a very long time it was assumed that Luther really did nail the theses to the door of the Wittenberg Schloßkirche, until in 1961 the Catholic Luther scholar Erwin Iserloh declared definitively that Luther did no such thing. There are

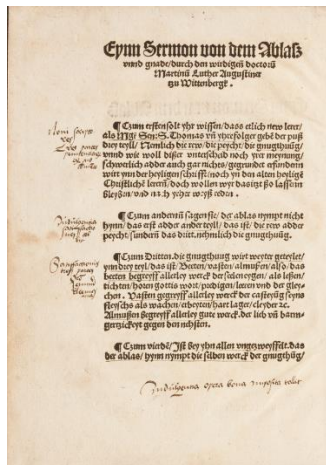


significant questions about the veracity of later accounts of Luther nailing the theses to a door, but more recent research, especially by Andrew Pettegree, suggests that Iserloh may have been mistaken and that the legend is in fact true.

Regardless of the truth or fiction of the legend of nailing the theses to the church door, the more important question is how theses for a routine academic disputation at a minor university in an insignificant corner of the Holy Roman Empire managed to catapult their author to international fame and infamy in a few short months. No copies of the original theses survive, which is not surprising, considering no one had any idea of what was about to transpire, and no one at the time

gave this young professor a second thought. But soon after the 95 Theses were published in a very small run in Latin, Luther preached a sermon that he later published in German as *Eynn Sermon von dem Ablass und Gnade*: in English, *A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*. The shift from Latin to German is the key here, as far more people were able to read (and hear read) a short text in German. The pamphlet saw fourteen reprints in 1518 alone, and this sermon, rather than the 95 Theses, was Luther's introduction to the broader German public.

I mentioned that far more people were able to read or to hear read texts in German than in Latin. Most estimates place the literacy rates in German-speaking Europe at around 5 to 10 percent.



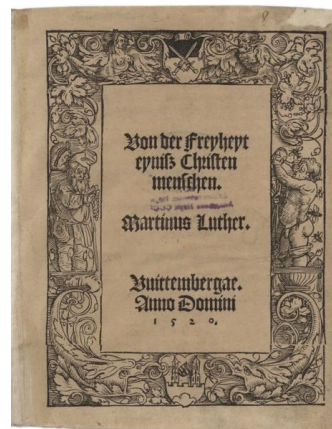
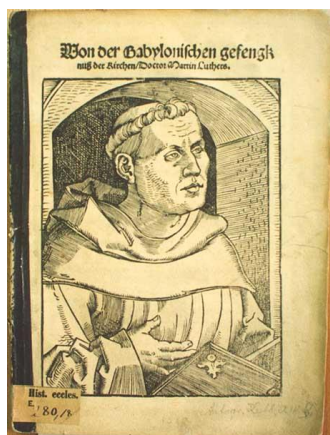
Most of those literate people were urban elites, many of whom also would have been able to read and perhaps also to write in Latin. However, there is ample evidence that pamphlets were shared widely and often read aloud in public settings, so that a text in German would have the potential to reach a far, far wider audience than a text in Latin. As Luther wrote long before the first copyright laws, local publishers

were free to reprint his works without fear of sanctions or reprisals, and in fact many of the Reformers counted on these reprints to spread their message.

Once Luther's sermon on indulgences and grace became a best-seller, German publishers quickly produced German translations of the 95 Theses, which also flew off the shelves. These viral German editions were too incendiary to ignore, so theologians loyal to the papacy were compelled to respond in defense of the traditional faith. However, they did so in Latin rather than in German, believing that the vernacular was beneath the dignity and sanctity of theological discourse. As we can easily imagine, the vernacular writings of Luther and his colleagues far

outsold the Latin writings of the loyalists, and it took the loyalists several years before they succumbed to the pressure of writing in German. But by then it was too late.

The public had an insatiable appetite for Luther's writings, and in 1520 he embarked on what would be one of the most prolific years of his publishing career, including three of his most famous works: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*, the first originally written in German and the others written in Latin but immediately translated into German, all published first in Wittenberg and then reprinted across German-speaking Europe, and all seeing astronomical sales. In these short treatises, published as affordable and easily transported pamphlets, Luther addressed spiritual versus temporal authority, the priesthood of all believers, the nature and efficacy of the sacraments, and the proper ground and goal of the Christian life. What distinguishes these texts from Luther's Latin writings was his intention to speak directly to the common people, to offer pastoral advice on issues of immediate, concrete concern and to stake out the contours of what would become Lutheranism. It was in 1520, then, that he made the most intentional and effective efforts of his early career to shape the outline of Lutheran theology and practice, and it was these three texts, above all else, that prompted his summons to the Imperial Diet at Worms in 1521 and his subsequent excommunication.



The content of these texts has been the subject of countless historical and theological studies, and deservedly so (I still count *The Freedom of a Christian* among the most meaningful and influential texts in my own life), but today I am more interested in the *form* of these texts. Each of these texts is a short treatise, published as a pamphlet featuring Luther's name prominently displayed on the title page surrounded by an expertly produced woodcut from Wittenberg studios. And while *Babylonian Captivity* and *Freedom of a Christian* were both composed first in Latin, they were quickly translated into German and it was the German editions that were most widely published and shared throughout the Empire and beyond.

The ease, efficiency, and affordability of publishing pamphlets is a key ingredient in the success of the Lutheran Reformation, an ingredient that has often been overlooked in histories of the Reformation. Before Gutenberg's moveable-type printing press, any publication was a long, labor-intensive and expensive process. Most books were produced for a small market, typically universities, monasteries, and the private libraries of the literate nobility. The image of precious manuscripts chained in medieval monastic libraries is not only an accurate indication of the high cost of producing books, but it is also a symbol of the inaccessibility of education and literacy to all but a few elites.

Pamphlets, on the other hand, were cheap to produce, easy to transport, and able to be

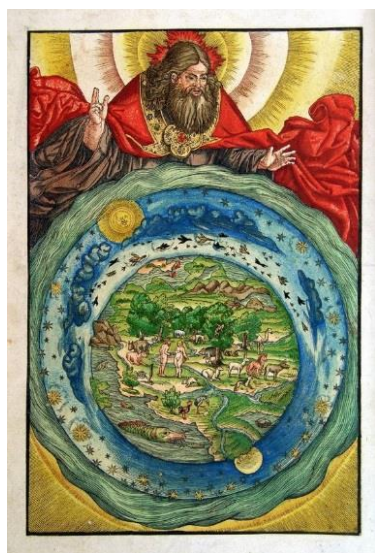
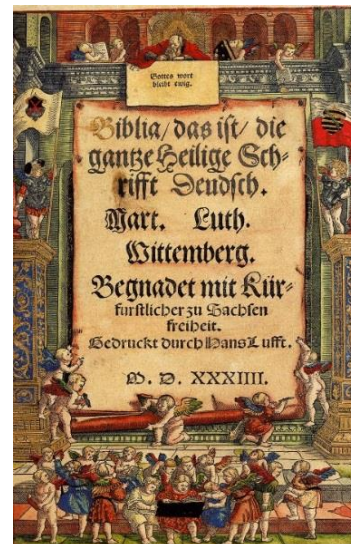


shared widely. In fact, the German name for a pamphlet is a *Flugschrift*, literally a “flying text,” indicating both its rapid dissemination as well as its often ephemeral quality. (The resonances between *Flugschrift* and “tweet” are too obvious to ignore!) The Latin name for the same document is *libellus*, from

which we get our word “libel,” an indication of the typical tone of these short texts. Pamphlets

were typically extemporaneous writings, intended to respond to issues of immediate and often local concern; rarely were they intended to reach a wide audience or to weigh in on matters of universal importance. However, Luther and his colleagues in the university and the German printing industry quickly realized how effective the medium could be for disseminating the message of reform.

By the middle of the 1520s Luther had become the best-selling European author of all time, outpacing all of the classical Latin authors as well as the most recent holder of that distinction, Desiderius Erasmus. The pamphlets from 1520 and the following years played an important role, but perhaps even more important was the publication in 1522 of Luther's translation of the New Testament into German, completed while he was in hiding at the Wartburg Castle after the Diet of Worms. Interestingly, Luther did not wait



rather, he released individual books on their own to be published in pamphlet form, as buyers could then sew the pamphlets together into one complete volume when the last text had been published and purchased. His translation of the Old Testament took considerably longer, for a number of reasons not worth getting into here, but the complete edition of the German Bible was finally published in 1534 in six parts, with 117 accompanying woodcuts from the workshop of Wittenberg artist and publisher Lucas Cranach the Elder.

The Luther Bible was revolutionary in a number of respects, but I want to focus on just two areas here. First, Luther's translation was largely responsible for the standardization of *Hochdeutsch*, or the High German dialect that is still the standard German language spoken today throughout German-speaking Europe. There are stories of Luther slipping out of the Wartburg to mingle with townspeople at the market, where he could gain a better sense of speech patterns, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, all with the hope of making his translation as accessible as possible to the common people.

Second, Luther had a straightforward theological motivation for translating the Bible into German, but this theological motivation also had profound social and cultural implications. If, as he tirelessly taught, scripture is the final source and norm of faith and life, then it was absolutely essential that all Christians have access to the Bible and also be able to read it in their own language. (The same was also true for the liturgy, which Luther insisted be conducted in the vernacular as well.) However, in order for his fellow Germans to be able to read the Bible for themselves, they first needed to learn how to read. As I mentioned earlier, in the late Middle Ages the literacy rates in the Holy Roman Empire hovered between 5 and 10 percent. To address this, the Lutherans proposed and secured funding for the establishment of schools throughout the Lutheran territories, open to boys and girls, to teach them, among other things, how to read and write. By 1550, five years after Luther's death, the literacy rate had almost doubled, and by 1650 it had doubled again, thanks in large part to the Lutherans' commitment to education and the accessibility and affordability of vernacular texts.

Despite the increasing literacy in Lutheran territories, the number of literate subjects was still quite low by modern standards. Other means were needed for the message of reform to reach those who could not read. In addition to pamphlets and the Luther Bible, northern German printing

presses also specialized in producing broadsheets featuring woodcuts intended for use as propaganda in support of the Lutheran cause. While woodcuts predate the invention of moveable type (all that was needed for a woodcut was a block of wood, a knife, ink, and paper), the rapid improvement of the publishing industry allowed for more sophisticated and refined production and dissemination of woodcuts and similar works of popular art. Woodcuts played a central role in reform from the very earliest days of the movement, beginning with a popular image of Luther that shaped public perception for years to come. Other images raised the stakes in provoking and satirizing opponents, and in this both Lutherans and Catholics engaged with a fervor and glee occasionally bordering on sadism. Some of these images shock us even today, as they were no doubt intended to do in their original context as well. These images, even more than the pamphlets, were cheap and easy to produce, widely consumed and even more widely shared, and they played an important role in shaping public opinion on the question of reform. We would certainly be justified in applying a term that is ubiquitous in our own social media world: they were an early example of memes.



The first image of Luther to be produced and widely disseminated was produced by Hans Baldung in 1521, at the height of Luther's conflict with the papacy. The image clearly takes a side in the controversy, presenting Luther as a modern-day saint, complete with nimbus and dove representing the Holy Spirit hovering over Luther's tonsured head. Luther wore his monastic habit

and held a Bible, additional signifiers of his piety and authority. Later versions of this same image deleted the nimbus, in keeping with Luther's rejection of the cult of the saints. But the impression made by the original image was difficult to eradicate, as many Germans came to view Luther as a prophet and holy man chosen by God to reform the church.

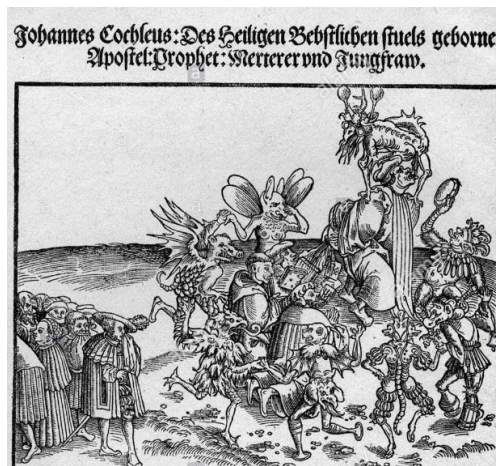
Unlike their tardy response to Luther's vernacular writings, the Catholics did respond relatively quickly with propaganda memes of their own. Perhaps the most famous is the "Seven-Headed Luther" produced by Hans Brosamer in 1529 to accompany a book by the anti-Lutheran polemicist Johannes Cochlaeus. In this image, Luther is presented as a deeply divisive figure who threatens to lure faithful Christians away from the one true church. The captions, from left to right, are "Doctor Martinus Lutther Ecclesiastes Suermerus Visitator Barrabas," with the heads



representing a doctor, a monk, a Turk, a preacher, a fanatic, a church visitor, and a wild man with a club. In Cochlaeus's text he expands on each of these: the doctor represents Luther's false teaching, the monk represents Luther's rejection of monastic life, the Turk represents the threat of the Ottoman imperial armies aided and

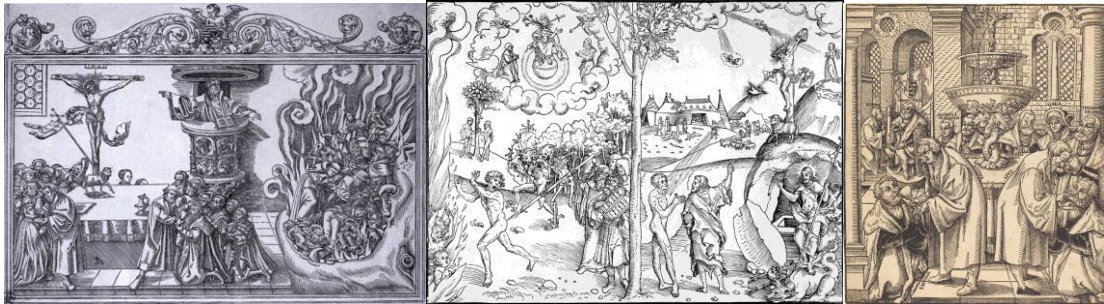
abetted by Luther's weakening of European unity, the preacher represents Luther's pandering to the mob, the fanatic with hornets in his hair represents the existential danger of Luther's teaching, the church visitor represents the weakening of parish life under Luther's reforms, and Barrabas represents the criminal the crowds insisted be freed in place of Jesus. The number of heads is likewise symbolically significant, as the Book of Revelation describes Antichrist as a seven-headed beast.

Not to be outdone, Lutheran propagandists responded in kind with a series of woodcuts appealing to the peasants and their “earthy” sensibilities. In response to Cocchlaeus, this woodcut with accompanying satirical poem was produced, featuring Cocchlaeus eating feces from a demon’s bowels while defecating his own anti-Lutheran works, which are eagerly snatched up by monks and doctors loyal to Rome. But while Cocchlaeus and other opponents were occasional subjects of inflammatory Lutheran propaganda, none compared to the pope himself as the target of Lutheran vitriol. Variouslly portrayed as an ass (itself based on an urban legend concerning a chimeric beast supposedly discovered in the Tiber River at the end of the 15th century – fake news is nothing new either!), the Whore of Babylon from the Book of Revelation, or subjected to scorn and ridicule by ordinary German peasants (who frequently react, shall we say, “scatologically” to the pope and his office), the pope and the papacy were subjected to particularly harsh representations in Lutheran propaganda in order to sway public opinion against the office and its dominance in religious and social affairs, as we can see in these images.



Images played positive pedagogical roles as well, although perhaps not as famously (or infamously) as the cruder satirical productions. Besides portraits of Luther and other important reformers, many woodcuts produced during the crucial years of the 1520s and 1530s intended to

teach fundamental Lutheran doctrine to the masses. In the following examples we can see several central themes of the Lutheran tradition: the centrality of the crucified Christ and the preached word, the law-gospel dialectic, and the administration and reception of the Eucharist under both bread and wine. Each of these images reinforced the Reformers' teachings in easily-digested images for mass distribution among the German people.



There were many factors shaping the success of the Lutheran Reformation where earlier efforts at reform had largely failed. Political, economic, and social factors each played a vital role in igniting and propelling reform. Above all, it was the ideas, the theology itself, that fueled the movement. But it was the quick and efficient publication and distribution of Luther's writings that disseminated those ideas far and wide. When we consider the impact of short treatises in the vernacular combined with powerful images meant for rapid replication and distribution, we gain a deeper appreciation for the pivotal role sixteenth-century social media played in spreading the Lutheran Reformation beyond its origins in an obscure university in a quiet corner of the Holy Roman Empire. What began as a single "post" and spread through "flying texts" fundamentally reshaped the religious, political, economic, and social world of Europe and beyond. Five hundred years later, we are still debating the promise and perils of social media, as posts, tweets, and memes continue to shape our thinking about politics and culture, for good and for ill.