

MARTIN LUTHER AND THE NINETY-FIVE THESES

October 31, 1517 is the date that Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses, a group of statements he wrote against the selling of indulgences. These theses, though not entirely “Lutheran”, sparked the Reformation, and so we commemorate this event every October 31st. Since we commemorated the Reformation today, we’ll look at a sampling of these momentous theses.

BACKGROUND

Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church, the church in the town where he taught at the university. He posted them on the doors because those doors typically served as the town bulletin board where many other announcements were placed. So it was not unusual for Luther to post something there. He intended these theses to spark debate within the church so as to cleanse the church of what he thought was wrong, namely the selling of indulgences. Indulgences were documents written to remit sins and take away punishment in purgatory. Indulgences were not uncommon in many towns for various reasons throughout Europe. Even Luther’s own homeland of Saxony had their own particular indulgences to raise money for building cathedrals and other maintenance within the church. However, after Pope Leo X (the extravagant pope elected during Luther’s lifetime) took power, he wanted to build grand cathedrals in Rome, namely St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. In order to build this extremely costly building, Pope Leo X issued a special indulgence to be sold across Europe. This was the main thing Luther objected to in his Ninety-Five Theses.

These theses spread more quickly than any other document up to that time, as the printing press had just been invented in Germany only years before. Not even Martin Luther expected them to travel as far nor as fast as they did.

As we read and discuss just a few sample theses, ask yourself these questions:

- 1) What errors was Luther still clinging to that were entirely Roman Catholic and went against Scripture?

- 2) What error(s) was Luther particularly attacking, and did he do an adequate job of revealing and correcting the error in love?

- 3) What practical advice (if any) for me as a Christian can I take away from this document today?

THE THESES

Out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following theses will be publicly discussed at Wittenberg under the chairmanship of the reverend father Martin Lutter, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and regularly appointed Lecturer on these subjects at that place. He requests that those who cannot be present to debate orally with us will do so by letter.

In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" [Matt. 4:17],³ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*
18. *Furthermore, it does not seem proved, either by reason or Scripture, that souls in purgatory are outside the state of merit, that is, unable to grow in love.*
26. *The pope does very well when he grants remission to souls in purgatory, not by the power of the keys, which he does not have,⁷ but by way of intercession for them.*
27. *They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.*
28. *It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone.*
29. *Who knows whether all souls in purgatory wish to be redeemed, since we have exceptions in St. Severinus and St. Paschal,⁸ as related in a legend.*
30. *No one is sure of the integrity of his own contrition, much less of having received plenary remission.*
35. *They who teach that contrition is not necessary on the part of those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessional privileges¹⁰ preach unchristian doctrine.*
36. *Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt,¹¹ even without indulgence letters.*
41. *Papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think that they are preferable to other good works of love.*
42. *Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy.*
43. *Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.*
44. *Because love grows by works of love, man thereby becomes better. Man does not, however, become better by means of indulgences but is merely freed from penalties.*
45. *Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath.*
46. *Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences.*
62. *The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.*
81. *This unbridled preaching of indulgences makes it difficult even for learned men to rescue the reverence which is due the pope from slander or from the shrewd questions of the laity,*
82. *Such as: "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial."*