

The Ninety-Five Theses

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The *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (Latin: *Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum*), commonly known as *The Ninety-Five Theses*, was written by Martin Luther in 1517 and is widely regarded as the primary catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. The disputation protests against clerical abuses, especially the sale of indulgences.

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Background

The background to Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* centers on practices within the Catholic Church regarding baptism and absolution. Significantly, the Theses reject the validity of indulgences (remissions of temporal punishment due for sins which have already been forgiven). They also view with great cynicism the practice of indulgences being sold, and thus the penance for sin representing a financial transaction rather than genuine contrition. Luther's Theses argued that the sale of indulgences was a gross violation of the original intention of confession and penance, and that Christians were being falsely told that they could find absolution through the purchase of indulgences.

The Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in the Holy Roman Empire, where the Ninety-Five Theses famously appeared, held one of Europe's largest collections of holy relics. These had been piously collected by Frederick III of Saxony. At that time pious veneration of relics was purported to allow the viewer to receive relief from temporal punishment for sins in purgatory. By 1509 Frederick had over 5,000 relics, purportedly "including vials of the milk of the Virgin Mary, straw from the manger [of Jesus], and the body of one of the innocents massacred by King Herod."^[1]

As part of a fund-raising campaign commissioned by Pope Leo X to finance the renovation of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, Johann Tetzel a

Protestant Reformation



Precursors

- Waldensians (I 12th century)
- Avignon Papacy (1309–77)
- John Wycliffe (E, 1320–84)
- Western Schism (1378–1417)
- Jan Hus (B, ~1369–1415)
- Hussite Wars (1420–~34)
- Northern Renaissance
- German mysticism

The Start of the Reformation

- The Ninety-Five Theses**
- German Peasants' War
- Schmalkaldic League
- Magisterial · Radical · Counter

Protestant Reformers

- Martin Luther
- Philipp Melancthon
- Thomas Müntzer
- Menno Simons
- Martin Bucer
- Olaus & Laurentius Petri
- Huldrych Zwingli
- John Calvin
- John Knox

Reformation by location

Czech lands · Denmark-Norway and Holstein · England
Germany · Italy · Netherlands · Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth · Scotland

finance the renovation of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, Johann Tetzel, a Dominican priest, began the sale of indulgences in the German lands.

Sweden · France · Switzerland

Albert of Mainz, the Archbishop of Mainz in Germany, had borrowed heavily to pay for his high church rank and was deeply in debt. He agreed to allow the sale of the indulgences in his territory in exchange for a cut of the proceeds. Luther was apparently not aware of this. Even though Luther's prince, Frederick III, and the prince of the neighboring territory, George, Duke of Saxony, forbade the sale thereof in their respective lands, Luther's parishioners traveled to purchase them. When these people came to confession, they presented their plenary indulgences which they had paid good silver money for, claiming they no longer had to repent of their sins, since the document promised to forgive all their sins. Luther was outraged that they had paid money for what was theirs by right as a free gift from God. He felt compelled to expose the fraud that was being sold to the pious people. This exposure was to take place in the form of a public scholarly debate at the University of Wittenberg. The Ninety-Five Theses outlined the items to be discussed and issued the challenge to any and all comers. The Ninety-Five Theses were written into a book.

Initial dissemination



A replica of the Ninety-five Theses in Schlosskirche, Wittenberg

On 31 October 1517, Luther wrote to Albert of Mainz, 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 *The Ninety-Five Theses*. Hans Hillerbrand writes that Luther had then 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."^[2] 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 Saint Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?"^[2]

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."^[3] 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.

On the eve of All Saint's Day, October 31, 1517, Luther posted the ninety-five theses, which he had composed in Latin, on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, according to university custom.^[4]

On the same day, Luther sent a hand-written copy, accompanied with honourable comments to the archbishop Albert of Mainz and Magdeburg, responsible for the practice of the indulgence sales, and to the bishop of Brandenburg, the superior of Luther. Within two weeks, copies of the Theses had spread throughout Germany; within two months throughout Europe.^{[5][6]} It was not until January 1518 that Christoph von Scheurl and other friends of Luther translated the *Ninety-Five Theses* from Latin into German, printed, and widely copied them, making the controversy one of the first in history to be aided by the printing press.^[7]

Reaction to the Ninety-Five Theses

On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X issued a rebuttal to Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, a papal encyclical titled

Exsurge Domine ("Arise, O Lord"), from its opening words. This document outlined the Magisterium of the Church's findings of where the pope believed Luther had erred.

Luther's Theses became a declaration of independence from Papal authority in Northern Europe, around which rallied enormous changes (both religious and social), such as the rejection of Papal rule over much of Europe, the decline of feudalism, and the rise of commercialism.

As early as October 27, 1521, the chapel at Wittenberg began to turn away from private Masses. In 1522, much of the city began celebrating Lutheran services instead of the Roman Catholic services. Luther's popularity grew rapidly, mostly due to the general Roman Catholic church members' dissatisfaction with the corruption and "worldly" desires and habits of the Roman Curia coupled with the preaching of what was perceived as Biblical truth as opposed to Catholic ideology.^{[8][9][10]}

See also

- The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards
- Andreas Karlstadt - another leader of the Protestant Reformation who in 1516 (prior to Luther's list) wrote a series of 151 theses.

References

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- ↑ *a* *b* Hillerbrand, Hans J., "Martin Luther: Indulgences and salvation," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2007
- ↑ Bainton, Roland, *Here I Stand: a Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 60; Brecht, Martin, *Martin Luther*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985–93), 1:182; Kittelson, James, *Luther The Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing House, 1986), p. 104
- ↑ Oberman, Heiko, *Luther, Man between God and the Devil* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 190; for the custom, see also Oberman, Heiko, *Werden und Wertung der Reformation: Vom Wegestreit zum Glubenskampf* (Tuebingen, 1989) p. 190-192 with note 89.
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- Palmer, R. R., *A History of the Modern World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002)

External links

- Full English Text: 95 Theses (<http://www.conradaskland.com/blog/2008/11/martin-luthers-95-theses-in-latin-and-english>)
- BELIEVE Religious Information Source (<http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/luther.htm>)

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