

THE NINETY-FIVE THESES

In 2017 Lutherans are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Yet the Reformation continued throughout Luther's life and beyond; in fact, we hope it is continuing still today. What happened five hundred years ago, in 1517, was the event that sparked it all: Luther's writing and publicizing of the Ninety-Five Theses.

Most of us have heard of the Ninety-Five Theses, but few of us have read them or even have a clear idea of what they say. And many other writings of Luther are more significant, including his "Sermon on Indulgences and Grace," written to explain his views to nonscholars. Yet the Theses have historical value, and they are reproduced here in a translation by noted Reformation scholar Timothy Wengert.

The best way to read them is in context with a reliable guide. For that reason, Fortress Press has recently published *Martin Luther's 95 Theses* with commentary and introduction by Timothy J. Wengert, and with two accompanying documents by Luther (the October 31, 1517, letter to Archbishop Albrecht and the 1518 *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*). This short book (978-1-4514-8279-9) includes a study guide and is recommended for both group and individual use. In it you will learn what an indulgence is, how Luther moved from preaching indulgences to preaching against them, and the discussion around whether the Ninety-Five Theses were ever nailed to the church door.

Luther didn't, of course, intend to start a split with the Roman Catholic Church. He merely drew up a list of points for discussion. But those points struck chords that were both theological and nationalistic, were viewed as threatening by the church hierarchy, and the rest is, well, the Reformation!

[THE NINETY-FIVE THESES OR] DISPUTATION FOR CLARIFYING THE POWER OF INDULGENCES

Out of love and zeal for bringing the truth to light, what is written below will be debated in Wittenberg with the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and regularly-appointed lecturer on these subjects at that place, presiding. Therefore, he requests that those who cannot be present to discuss orally with us will in their absence do so by letter. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying "Do penance . . .," wanted the entire life of the faithful to be one of penitence.
2. This phrase cannot be understood as referring to sacramental Penance, that is, confession and satisfaction as administered by the clergy.

3. Yet it does not mean solely inner penitence—indeed such inner penitence is nothing unless it outwardly produces various mortifications of the flesh.
4. And thus, penalty remains as long as hatred of self (that is, true inner penitence) remains, namely, until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.
5. Pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own discretion or that of the canons.
6. The pope cannot remit any guilt except by declaring and confirming its remission by God or, of course, by remitting guilt in [legal] cases reserved to himself. In showing contempt regarding such cases, the guilt would certainly remain.
7. God remits the guilt of absolutely no one unless at the same time God subjects in all things the one humbled to God's vicar, the priest.
8. The penitential canons were imposed only on the living, and, according to the canons themselves, nothing should be imposed on those about to die.
9. Accordingly, the Holy Spirit through the pope acts in a kindly manner toward us in papal decrees by always exempting the moment of death and the case of necessity.
10. Those priests act ignorantly and wickedly who, in the case of the dying, reserve canonical penalties for one's time in purgatory.
11. Those "tares" about changing the canonical penalty into the penalty of purgatory certainly seem to have been "sown" while the bishops "were sleeping."
12. Formerly, canonical penalties were imposed not after, but before absolution, as tests of true contrition.
13. Through death, those about to die are absolved of all [such penalties] and are already dead as far as canon laws are concerned, in that by right they have release from them.
14. Imperfect purity or love on the part of the dying person necessarily brings with it great fear. The smaller the love, the greater the fear.
15. This fear or horror is enough by itself alone (to say nothing of other things) to constitute the penalty of purgatory, since it is very near the horror of despair.
16. It seems that hell, purgatory, and heaven differ from each other as much as despair, near despair, and assurance.
17. It seems necessary that, for souls in purgatory, as the horror decreases so love increases.

18. It neither seems proved—either by any logical arguments or by scripture—that souls in purgatory are outside a state of merit, that is, unable to grow in love;
19. nor does it seem to be proved that these souls, at least not all of them, are certain and assured of their own salvation—even though we ourselves are completely certain about [their destiny].
20. Therefore, the pope understands by the phrase “plenary remission of all penalties” not actually “all penalties” but only “penalties imposed by himself.”
21. And so, those indulgence preachers err who say that through the pope’s indulgences a person is released and saved from every penalty.
22. On the contrary, to souls in purgatory he remits no penalty that they should have paid in this life according to canon law.
23. If any remission of all penalties whatsoever could be granted to anyone, it would certainly be granted only to the most perfect, that is, to the very fewest.
24. Because of this, most people are inevitably deceived by means of this indiscriminate and high-sounding promise of release from penalty.
25. The kind of power that a pope has over purgatory in general corresponds to the power that any bishop or local priest has in particular in his diocese or parish.
26. The pope does best in that he grants remission to souls [in purgatory] not by “the power of the keys,” which he does not possess [here], but “by way of intercession.”
27. They “preach human opinions” who say that, as soon as a coin thrown into the money chest clinks, a soul flies out [of purgatory].
28. It is certain that when a coin clinks in the money chest profits and avarice may well be increased, but the intercession of the church rests on God’s choice alone.
29. Who knows whether all the souls in purgatory want to be redeemed, given what is recounted about St. Severinus and St. Paschasius?
30. No one is secure in the genuineness of one’s own contrition—much less in having attained “plenary remission.”
31. As rare as a person who is truly penitent, just so rare is someone who truly acquires indulgences; indeed, the latter is the rarest of all.
32. Those who believe that they can be secure in their salvation through indulgence letters will be eternally damned along with their teachers.

33. One must especially beware of those who say that those indulgences of the pope are “God’s inestimable gift” by which a person is reconciled to God.
34. For these indulgent graces are only based upon the penalties of sacramental satisfaction instituted by human beings.
35. Those who teach that contrition is not necessary on the part of those who would rescue souls [from purgatory] or who would buy confessional privileges do not preach Christian views.
36. Any truly remorseful Christian has a right to full remission of guilt and penalty, even without indulgence letters.
37. Any true Christian, living or dead, possesses a God-given share in all the benefits of Christ and the church, even without indulgence letters.
38. Nevertheless, remission and participation [in these benefits] from the pope must by no means be despised, because—as I said—they are the declaration of divine remission.
39. It is extremely difficult, even for the most learned theologians, to lift up before the people the liberality of indulgences and the truth about contrition at one and the same time.
40. The “truth about contrition” seeks and loves penalties [for sins]; the “liberality of indulgences” relaxes penalties and at very least gives occasion for hating them.
41. Apostolic indulgences are to be preached with caution, so that the people do not mistakenly think that they are to be preferred to other good works of love.
42. Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend the acquiring of indulgences to be compared in any way with works of mercy.
43. Christians are to be taught that the one who gives to a poor person or lends to the needy does a better deed than if a person acquires indulgences,
44. because love grows through works of love and a person is made better; but through indulgences one is not made better but only freer from penalty [for sin].
45. Christians are to be taught that anyone who sees a destitute person and, while passing such a one by, gives money for indulgences does not buy [gracious] indulgences of the pope but God’s wrath.
46. Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must set aside enough for their household and by no means squander it on indulgences.
47. Christians are to be taught that buying indulgences is a matter of free choice, not commanded.

48. Christians are to be taught that the pope, while granting indulgences, needs and thus desires their devout prayer for him more than their money.
49. Christians are to be taught that papal indulgences are useful [for them] only if they do not put their trust in them but extremely harmful if they lose their fear of God because of them.
50. Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the demands made by the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the Basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than that it be constructed using the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.
51. Christians are to be taught that the pope ought to give and would want to give of his own wealth—even selling the Basilica of St. Peter if necessary—to those from whom certain declaimers of indulgences are wheedling money.
52. It is vain to trust in salvation by means of indulgence letters, even if the [indulgence] agent—or even the pope himself—were to offer his own soul as security for them.
53. People who forbid the preaching of the Word of God in some churches altogether in order that indulgences may be preached in others are enemies of Christ and the pope.
54. An injustice is done to the Word of God when, in the very same sermon, equal or more time is spent on indulgences than on the Word.
55. It is necessarily the pope's intent that if indulgences, which are a completely insignificant thing, are celebrated with one bell, one procession, and one ceremony, then the gospel, which is the greatest thing of all, should be preached with a hundred bells, a hundred processions, and a hundred ceremonies.
56. The treasures of the church, from which the pope distributes indulgences, are not sufficiently discussed or known among Christ's people.
57. That [these treasures] are not transient worldly riches is certainly clear, because many of the [indulgence] declaimers do not so much freely distribute such riches as only collect them.
58. Nor are they the merits of Christ and the saints, because, even without the pope, these merits always work grace for the inner person and cross, death, and hell for the outer person.
59. St. Laurence said that the poor of the church were the treasures of the church, but he spoke according to the usage of the word "treasure" in his own time.
60. Not without cause, we say that the keys of the church (given by the merits of Christ) are that treasure.
61. For it is clear that the pope's power only suffices for the remission of [ecclesiastical] penalties and for [legal] actions.

62. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.
63. But this treasure is deservedly the most hated, because it makes “the first last.”
64. In contrast, the treasure of indulgences is deservedly the most acceptable, because it makes “the last first.”
65. Therefore, the treasures of the gospel are nets with which they formerly fished for men of wealth.
66. The treasures of indulgences are nets with which they now fish for the wealth of men.
67. Indulgences, which the declaimers shout about as the greatest “graces,” are indeed understood as such—insofar as they promote profits.
68. Yet they are in truth the least of all when compared to the grace of God and the goodness of the cross.
69. Bishops and parish priests are bound to admit agents of the Apostolic indulgences with all reverence.
70. But all of them are much more bound to strain eyes and ears intently, so that these [agents] do not preach their own daydreams in place of the pope’s commission.
71. Let the one who speaks against the truth of the Apostolic indulgences be anathema and accursed,
72. but let the one who guards against the arbitrary and unbridled words used by declaimers of indulgences be blessed.
73. Just as the pope justly thunders against those who, in whatever way they can, contrive to harm the sale of indulgences,
74. much more so does he intend to thunder against those who, under the pretext of indulgences, contrive to harm holy love and the truth.
75. To imagine that papal indulgences are so great that they could absolve a person even for doing the impossible by violating the mother of God is insanity.
76. On the contrary, we have said that papal indulgences cannot take away the very least of venial sins, as far as guilt is concerned.
77. That it is said that even St. Peter, if he were now pope, could not grant greater graces is blasphemy against St. Peter and the pope.

78. On the contrary, we say that even the present pope, or any pope whatsoever, possesses greater graces—namely, the gospel, “deeds of power, gifts of healing . . .”—as in 1 Cor. 12[:28].
79. To say that the cross, emblazoned with the papal coat-of-arms and erected [in the church where indulgences are preached], is of equal worth to the cross of Christ is blasphemy.
80. The bishops, parish priests, and theologians who allow such sermons free course among the people will have to answer for this.
81. This unbridled preaching makes it difficult even for learned men to defend the reverence due the pope from slander or from the truly sharp questions of the laity:
82. Namely, “Why does the pope not empty purgatory for the sake of the holiest love and the direst need of souls as a matter of the highest justice, given that he redeems countless souls for filthy lucre to build the Basilica [of St. Peter] as a completely trivial matter?”
83. Again, “Why continue funeral and anniversary masses for the dead instead of returning or permitting the withdrawal of the endowments founded for them, since it is against the law to pray for those already redeemed?”
84. Again, “What is this new piety of God and the pope that, for the sake of money, they permit someone who is impious and an enemy to redeem [from purgatory] a pious, God-pleasing soul and yet do not, for the sake of the need of that very pious and beloved soul, redeem it purely out of love?”
85. Again, “Why are the penitential canons—long since abrogated and dead in actual fact and through disuse—nevertheless now bought off with money through granting indulgences, as if they were very much alive?”
86. Again, “Why does the pope, whose riches today are more substantial than the richest Crassus, not simply construct the Basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of the poor faithful?”
87. Again, “What exactly does the pope ‘remit’ or ‘allow participation in’ when it comes to those who through perfect contrition have a right to full remission and a share [in the church’s benefits]?”
88. Again, “Could any greater good come to the church than if the pope were to bestow these remissions and participation to each of the faithful a hundred times a day, as he now does but once?”
89. “Since, rather than money, the pope seeks the salvation of souls through indulgences, why does he now suspend the documents and indulgences previously granted, although they have equal efficacy?”

90. To suppress these very pointed arguments of the laity by force alone and not to resolve them by providing reasons is to expose the church and the pope to ridicule by their enemies and to make Christians miserable.
91. Therefore, if indulgences were preached according to the spirit and intention of the pope, all of these [objections] would be easily resolved—indeed, they would not exist.
92. And thus, away with all those prophets who say to Christ’s people, “Peace, peace,” and there is no peace!
93. May it go well for all of those prophets who say to Christ’s people, “Cross, cross,” and there is no cross!
94. Christians must be encouraged diligently to follow Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell,
95. and in this way they may be confident of “entering heaven through many tribulations” rather than through the [false] security of peace.