

The Ninety-five Theses

Rev. Dr. Matt Richard

It was like a large rock thrown into a pond causing waves to crash ashore. No, it was much more violent. It was more like a massive explosion that occurred in the midst of buildings, resulting in shrapnel being scattered, walls tumbling down, and windows shattering.

What am I talking about?

I am referring to the sixteenth-century Reformation. Yes, I am talking about the great Reformation that happened in the 1500s when Martin Luther and the Reformers came into sharp conflict with the Roman Catholic Church of that time.

It all started October 31st of 1517 when the Ninety-five Theses hit the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. We can still hear the echo of the hammer today, as the nail was forced into the door hanging ninety-five concerns about church abuses. Like a wildfire, these Ninety-five Theses were distributed to all of Germany within two weeks and all of Europe within two months. Long story short, the Ninety-five Theses ignited what can only be described as an earth-shaking event, an explosion if you will. Booklets were published and exchanged; theological debate occurred in the marketplace, death threats were eventually made; people were finally burned at the stake, and so forth.

But what was so significant about the Ninety-five Theses that ignited the whole Reformation? Simply stated, the Ninety-five Theses attacked the church's indulgences.

What is an indulgence?

Indulgences were sold to people for an exchange for a reduction off of the amount of punishment a person would have to undergo for sins. Simply stated, a fee was given for an indulgence (i.e., a written paper issued by the church), which then would allow for the remission of sins. Yes, forgiveness was bought and sold. Therefore, when Luther's Ninety-five Theses attacked indulgences, Luther was primarily attacking a source of 'income' for the church. In other words, no sale of indulgences equals a reduced revenue income for the church.

When a person's pocket book is picked at, anger tends to rise, which was the case for the Romans Catholic Church – they lashed out at Luther. Furthermore, this is why Luther's Ninety-five Theses were so popular among the laity; they exposed a deep corruption in the church.

To get a feeling of how the Ninety-five Theses functioned during the sixteenth-century, please check out the various paraphrases of 'some' of the Ninety-five Theses that Luther wrote. These paraphrases are 'not' a translation by any means, but merely a way for you to understand the 'flavor' and 'aim' of Luther in his theses:



500 Years of the Lutheran Reformation
Southeast Circuit North Dakota District

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1. When Jesus said "repent" he meant that believers should live a whole life of repenting
2. This life of repentance happens not by a priest, for only God give salvation.
4. Sin will always remain until we enter Heaven; therefore, we will always be repenting.
5. The pope only has power with canon law – he is not God.
6. Only God can forgive -the pope can only reassure people that God will do this.
11. The church is currently producing a 'human crop of weeds.'
21. An indulgence will not save a man.
22. A dead soul cannot be saved by an indulgence.
24. Therefore most people are being deceived by indulgences.
27. It is nonsense to teach that a dead soul in Purgatory can be saved by money.
28. Money causes greed – only God can save souls.
29. Do we know if the souls in Purgatory want to be saved?
32. People who believe that indulgences will let them live in salvation will always be damned – along with those who teach it.
33. Do not believe those who say that a papal indulgence is a wonderful gift which allows salvation.
34. Indulgences only offer Man something which has been agreed to by Man.
35. We should not teach that those who aim to buy salvation do not need to be contrite.
36. A man can be free of sin if he sincerely repents – an indulgence is not needed.
37. Any Christian – dead or alive – can gain the benefit and love of Christ without an indulgence.
39. The most educated theologians cannot preach about indulgences and real repentance at the same time.
42. Christians should be taught that the buying of indulgences does not compare with being forgiven by Christ.
43. A Christian who gives to the poor or lends to those in need is doing better in God's eyes than one who buys 'forgiveness.'
46. A Christian should buy what is necessary for life not waste money on an indulgence.
47. Christians should be taught that they do not need an indulgence.
52. It is vain to rely on an indulgence to forgive your sins.
54. It is blasphemy that the word of God is preached less than that of indulgences.
55. The pope should enforce that the gospel – a very great matter – must be celebrated more than indulgences.
61. It is clear that the power of the church is adequate, by itself, for the forgiveness of sins.
62. The main treasure of the church should be the Gospels and the grace of God.
63. Indulgences make the most evil seem unjustly good.
65. The treasured items in the Gospels are the nets used by the workers.
66. Indulgences are used to net an income for the wealthy.
72. Blessed are they who think about being forgiven.
75. It is wrong to think that papal pardons have the power to absolve all sin.
76. You should feel guilt after being pardoned. A papal pardon cannot remove guilt.
77. Not even St. Peter could remove guilt.
84. Evil men must not buy their salvation when a poor man, who is a friend of God, cannot.
86. The pope should re-build St. Peter's with his own money.
92. All those who say there is no problem must go. Problems must be tackled.
93. Those in the church who claim there is no problem must go.
94. Christians must follow Christ at all cost.

*Paraphrase of Ninety-five Theses Source: Norm Fisher, "The 95 Theses - a Modern Paraphrase," Steadfast Lutherans, <http://steadfastlutherans.org/2013/10/the-95-theses-a-modern-translation/> (accessed January 27, 2017).

Next Week: The Heidelberg Disputation —Rev. Aaron Hambleton

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