



500TH
ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

Martin Luther

95 Theses

Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the
Power and Efficacy of Indulgences (1517)

with an introduction by
DR. KEN R. SCHURB

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English translation from the 1983 edition of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses
Edited by Scot A. Kinnaman

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INTRODUCTION

On January 15, 2009, a passenger jet left New York's LaGuardia Airport. Shortly after takeoff, it hit a flock of birds, disabling both of its engines. Despite the lack of thrust, the airliner's captain successfully guided his craft to a safe landing in the Hudson River. Few people had heard of that pilot, Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, before, but he became an overnight sensation.

Five centuries ago, something similar happened to a little-known Augustinian friar, Martin Luther. It occurred when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses, composed in Latin, to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

Quite a Sensation

Of course, electronic media did not exist during Luther's time. Yet through the cutting-edge communication technology of the day, printing via Gutenberg's movable type, Luther became well-known very quickly. Within a month or so, his Theses had been copied and translated into the language of the common people and were being discussed in other German cities. Luther, a thirty-four-year-old priest and professor of theology at the relatively new University of Wittenberg, was turning into quite a sensation.

Unlike Captain Sullenberger's nifty flying, Luther's posting of the Theses had not, in itself, been particularly heroic. The church door served as a sort of public bulletin board, especially for the university. Luther's Theses were propositions for academic discussion, the kind of thing that makes a lot of people yawn.

Luther never got the discussion he wanted. What followed was the Reformation. In fact, the Reformation is usually marked as beginning when Luther posted his Theses on October 31, 1517.

Indulgences

During the previous month, Wittenberg had seen a “Disputation against Scholastic Theology,” based on another set of theses by Luther. Many might indeed have yawned at this intellectual exercise. But people took notice when Luther turned to the very practical matter of indulgences.

Indulgences formed part of the penitential system. The church had defined the “sacrament of penance” as consisting of three elements:

1. Confession (resulting from contrition, sorrow over sin)
2. Absolution
3. Satisfaction through self-sacrificing deeds

Penitents needed to be freed not only from the guilt of their sin but also from temporal penalties incurred by their sin, and the church said these penalties would still have to be endured as satisfactions both in this world and beyond in purgatory. Purgatory was not hell, but a horrible, painful place of “purging,” where Christian souls were thought to remain for a time after death instead of immediately being with Christ in heaven (Luke 23:43). None knew just how long their own time of purgation was supposed to last.

Via indulgences, one could render satisfaction in a different way. Years before Luther, it became possible to buy indulgences as the third step in penance. The church had come to count on these payments of money as revenue sources, which struck disgruntled folk in German lands and elsewhere as no secret. They were getting tired of their money flowing to Rome.

The most sought after of all indulgences was the “plenary” (full) indulgence, which was claimed to remit all temporal punishments, even for Christians who had died and were putatively in purgatory. The idea had developed that the good works of Christ and the saints numbered more than they needed and formed a “treasury of merits,” and indulgence payments could transfer their surplus merits to people in purgatory. Purchase of a plenary indulgence for such a loved one was thought to spring that soul into heaven immediately.¹ Whether buying an indulgence for someone else or oneself, it became easy, Luther later recalled, to imagine that “the grace from indulgences was the same grace as that by which a man is reconciled to God.”²

These precise assertions were made by Johann Tetzel, a Dominican monk who was selling plenary indulgences not far from Wittenberg in the fall of 1517. Some proceeds of his sales went to building St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The sale had full approval from the pope and from Luther’s more immediate ecclesiastical superior, Archbishop Albert of Mainz, who also benefited from the proceeds.

Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses

Luther was convinced that the pope could never have authorized something like this. People in Wittenberg—his parishioners—were buying Tetzel’s indulgences and thinking that they no longer had to be sorry for their sins. Who needed contrition if they had already “paid in advance”?

Something must be done, Luther thought. He wrote the Ninety-Five Theses.

The Theses started with penance: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said ‘repent,’ intended that the whole life of believers should be one of repentance.”³ From his study of the Greek, Luther understood that repentance was more than participating in the formal sacrament of penance; it meant a life of penitential actions.

This put indulgences into perspective. They were not to take precedence over works of love for one’s neighbor, subsequent Theses went on to say, nor were they to eclipse the grace of God. As Luther eventually put it, “The gospel, which is, after all, the only true indulgence, had to keep silence in the churches in deference to the indulgence.”⁴

Yet in 1517, Luther still had much to learn about the biblical Gospel. By his own admission, at the time he did not want to take “a syllable from obedience to the pope.”⁵ Luther was challenging various aspects of indulgences, particularly indulgences for the dead, but he had not yet thoroughly rejected indulgences.⁶ Nor did his Theses question purgatory. Some of them actually ran contrary to the Gospel: “True contrition seeks and loves punishment” or “For by a work of charity, charity increases and man becomes better.”⁷ Even when he included the pointed query, “What does the pope remit or grant to those who by perfect contrition have a right to full

¹ See Thesis 27.

² LW 41:232

³ Thesis 1

⁴ LW 34:16

⁵ LW 34:328

⁶ See Theses 71, 73, and 91.

⁷ Theses 40, 44

remission and participation?” Luther came to understand that he was granting too much to contrition while overlooking the forgiving Gospel of Christ as received through faith.⁸ By 1520, he wished all his booklets on indulgences would be burned.⁹ That would include his first writing on the subject, the Ninety-Five Theses.

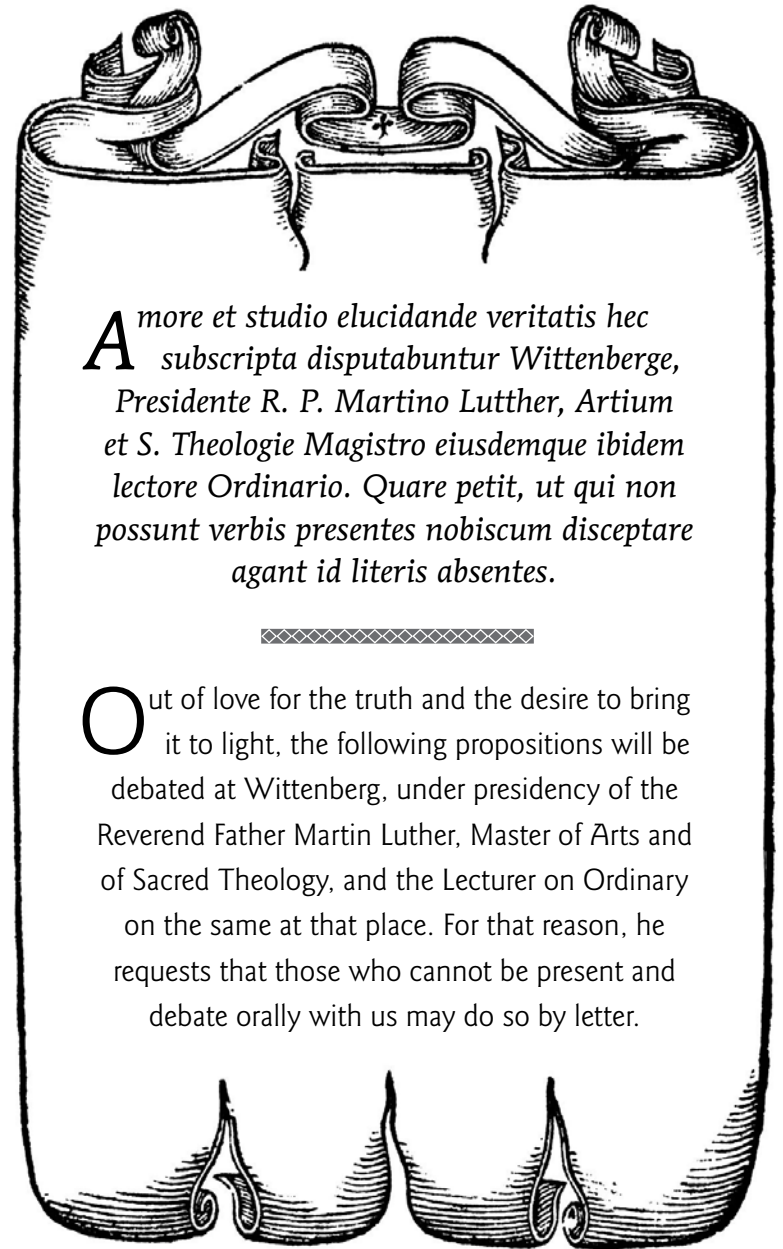
Enduring Value

Yet these Theses have enduring value. They began with attention to the biblical text, the word *repent*. In the ensuing controversy, Luther grew more and more to depend on God’s Word, the Bible (*sola Scriptura!*), against ecclesiastical authorities like popes or councils.

The diligent biblical study that moved Luther to write the Ninety-Five Theses both resulted from and served as fuel for his personal devotion, his professorial work, and his pastoral interest in the care of souls—starting with his own. The Theses reflected his concern for certainty of salvation. As stated in what has been called the noblest of these Theses, “the true treasure of the Church is the most Holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.”¹⁰

The Ninety-Five Theses formed a beginning. Luther went on to dig even further into his study of the biblical Gospel. Later he mused over how the Lord had been guiding him since the controversy over indulgences.

Luther had aimed to launch a discussion. To the extent that any discussion includes the genuine Gospel of Christ, it contains God’s saving power (Romans 1:16), which really cannot be contained. Not even after five hundred years!



A more et studio elucidande veritatis hec subscripta disputabuntur Wittenberge, Presidente R. P. Martino Lutther, Artium et S. Theologie Magistro eiusdemque ibidem lectore Ordinario. Quare petit, ut qui non possunt verbis presentes nobiscum disceptare agant id literis absentes.

Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be debated at Wittenberg, under presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and the Lecturer on Ordinary on the same at that place. For that reason, he requests that those who cannot be present and debate orally with us may do so by letter.

⁸ Thesis 87

⁹ LW 36:11-12

¹⁰ Thesis 62