

from the
NINETY-FIVE THESES
1517

Martin Luther

In the early 1500s, a German monk and university teacher named Martin Luther began to feel that reforms were needed in the Roman Catholic Church. One practice that Luther especially hated was the selling of indulgences—church officials could release a person from punishment for sin in return for money. In 1517, Luther made a list of his objections to church practices, called the Ninety-Five Theses, and then, according to legend, nailed the list to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. Although the Catholic Church disagreed with Luther and eventually excommunicated him, the Ninety-Five Theses sparked widespread criticism of the Church and started the Reformation.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Summarizing

Summarize Luther’s main ideas in his Ninety-Five Theses.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in saying “Repent ye,” etc., intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence.
6. The Pope has no power to remit any guilt,¹ except by declaring and warranting it to have been remitted by God; or at most by remitting cases reserved for himself; in which cases, if his power were to be despised, guilt would certainly remain.
21. Thus those preachers of indulgences are in error who say that, by the indulgences of the Pope, a man is loosed and saved from all punishment.
31. Rare as is a true penitent, so rare is one who truly buys indulgences—that is to say, most rare.
32. Those who believe that, through letters of pardon, they are made sure of their own salvation, will be eternally damned along with their teachers.
37. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has a share in all the benefits of Christ and of the Church, given him by God, even without letters of pardon.
40. True contrition seeks and loves punishment; while the amplex of pardons relaxes it, and causes men to hate it, or at least gives occasion for them to do so.

1. **remit any guilt:** to cancel a punishment for sins

42. Christians should be taught that it is not the wish of the Pope that the buying of pardons is to be in any way compared to works of mercy.
43. Christians should be taught that he who gives to a poor man, or lends to a needy man, does better than if he bought pardons.
44. Because by a work of charity, charity increases, and the man becomes better; while by means of pardons, he does not become better, but only freer from punishment.
45. Christians should be taught that he who sees any one in need, and, passing him by, gives money for pardons, is not purchasing for himself the indulgences of the Pope, but the anger of God.
46. Christians should be taught that, unless they have superfluous wealth, they are bound to keep what is necessary for the use of their own households, and by no means to lavish it on pardons.
50. Christians should be taught that, if the Pope were acquainted with the exactions of the Preachers of pardons, he would prefer that the Basilica of St. Peter should be burnt to ashes, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.
84. Again; what is this new kindness of God and the Pope, in that, for money's sake, they permit an impious man and an enemy of God to redeem a pious soul which loves God, and yet do not redeem that same pious and beloved soul out of free charity, on account of its own need?
86. Again; why does not the Pope, whose riches are at this day more ample than those of the wealthiest of the wealthy, build the one Basilica of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with that of poor believers?
92. Away then with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ: "Peace, peace," and there is no peace.
94. Christians should be exhorted to strive to follow Christ their head through pains, deaths, and hells.
95. And thus trust to enter heaven through many tribulations, rather than in the security of peace.

Source: *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, Volume 2, no. 6, edited by J. H. Robinson and M. Whitcomb (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1897), pp. 6–12.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Answers may include the following ideas: punishment for sins is a good thing; the church doesn't have the power to take away people's punishments for sins; people can't be saved through indulgences; people should give money to the poor instead of giving money to the sellers of indulgences; St. Peter's Church should not be built with indulgence money.