

95 Theses

Dr. Martin Luther

Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany at All Saints Eve, October 31 (Old calendar) 1517

95 Theses
(To Be Nailed)
CET

Out of love and concern for the truth, and with the object of eliciting it, the following heads will be the subject of a public discussion at Wittenberg under the presidency of the reverend father, Martin Luther, Augustinian, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and duly appointed Lecturer on these subjects in that place. He requests that whoever cannot be present personally to debate the matter orally will do so in absence in writing.

In 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, there was great need for reformation in a religious establishment run amok. It has seemed not inappropriate to revisit this concept which issued in Luther's prophetic act. A diverse company of sometime ethicists, theologians, historians, prophets, priests, malfeasants, miscreants, and malcontents were invited to contribute to the enterprise. Their names are safely locked away in a vault in Zurich lest they be turned in to the IRS and subsequently chained in a bottomless pit for a thousand years. So here I stand. God help me.

1. When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said "Repent", He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
 2. The word cannot be properly understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, i.e. confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.
 3. Yet its meaning is not restricted to repentance in one's heart; for such repentance is null unless it produces outward signs in various mortifications of the flesh.
 4. As long as hatred of self abides (i.e. true inward repentance) the penalty of sin abides, viz., until we enter the kingdom of heaven.
 5. The pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties beyond those imposed either at his own discretion or by canon law.
 6. The pope himself cannot remit guilt, but only declare and confirm that it has been remitted by God; or, at most, he can remit it in cases reserved to his discretion. Except for these cases, the guilt remains untouched.
 7. God never remits guilt to anyone without, at the same time, making him humbly submissive to the priest, His representative.
1. In his passionate tirade "Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist" in 1520, Martin Luther's defiance of religious authorities of his time may have exhibited certain parallels for our times.
 2. Diligent effort to cover our sins with good works and generous gifts may not be the problem for us that Luther found it to be in his world.
 3. A Diet of Worms would probably not go down with today's baby boomers.
 4. If the dour monk of 1520 thought indulgences were bad in his day he ought to hang out in a modern urban mall the Saturday before Christmas.
 5. Corruption, greed, lust, tyranny, materialism, perversion, strife, and heresy were not fully and finally wiped out with Reformation.
 6. Martin Luther did not nail to his door the complete words and music to "There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in This Place."
 7. Prophetic passion may exist in inverse proportion to preoccupation with retirement benefits.

8. The penitential canons apply only to men who are still alive, and, according to the canons themselves, none applies to the dead.
9. Accordingly, the Holy Spirit, acting in the person of the pope, manifests grace to us, by the fact that the papal regulations always cease to apply at death, or in any hard case.
10. It is a wrongful act, due to ignorance, when priests retain the canonical penalties on the dead in purgatory.
11. When canonical penalties were changed and made to apply to purgatory, surely it would seem that tares were sown while the bishops were asleep.
12. In former days, the canonical penalties were imposed, not after, but before absolution was pronounced; and were intended to be tests of true contrition.
13. Death puts an end to all the claims of the Church; even the dying are already dead to the canon laws, and are no longer bound by them.
14. Defective piety or love in a dying person is necessarily accompanied by great fear, which is greatest where the piety or love is least.
15. This fear or horror is sufficient in itself, whatever else might be said, to constitute the pain of purgatory, since it approaches very closely to the horror of despair.
16. There seems to be the same difference between hell, purgatory, and heaven as between despair, uncertainty, and assurance.
17. Of a truth, the pains of souls in purgatory ought to be abated, and charity ought to be proportionately increased.
18. Moreover, it does not seem proved, on any grounds of reason or Scripture, that these souls are outside the state of merit, or unable to grow in grace.
8. The moral imperative is a door through which the Lord bids his graced people to go, following righteousness and pursuing peace.
9. I complained because I had no fax machine until I met a man who had no cellular phone.
10. You can measure the character of an individual by the way he or she treats a defenseless person.
11. There is nothing so disgusting as a politician throwing a moral fit just before an election.
12. Before you kill yourself consider how many of your enemies it would make happy
13. A grown human being who has not made some enemies is a miserable failure.
14. If there is just cause for anger and you don't get angry and then act, it is sin.
15. If you try to change the world, get ready to suffer and die; and if you don't believe it, just try it in the county seat town.
16. I can argue more forcefully if you won't confuse me with the facts.
17. The living Church of God in Christ is about the only good idea the world has left.
18. The world keeps stoning its prophets, crowning its clowns, and housebreaking its deities.

19. Nor does it seem proved to be always the case that they are certain and assured of salvation, even if we are very certain ourselves.
 20. Therefore the pope, in speaking of the plenary remission of all penalties, does not mean "all" in the strict sense, but only those imposed by himself.
 21. Hence those who preach indulgences are in error when they say that a man is absolved and saved from every penalty by the pope's indulgences.
 22. Indeed, he cannot remit to souls in purgatory any penalty which canon law declares should be suffered in the present life.
 23. If plenary remission could be granted to anyone at all, it would be only in the cases of the most perfect, i.e. to very few.
 24. It must therefore be the case that the major part of the people are deceived by that indiscriminate and high-sounding promise of relief from penalty.
 25. The same power as the pope exercises in general over purgatory is exercised in particular by every single bishop in his bishopric and priest in his parish.
 26. The pope does excellently when he grants remission to the souls in purgatory on account of intercessions made on their behalf, and not by the power of the keys (which he cannot exercise for them).
 27. There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of the purgatory immediately the money clinks in the bottom of the chest.
 28. It is certainly possible that when the money clinks in the bottom of the chest avarice and greed increase; but when the church offers intercession, all depends in the will of God.
19. Of all the saints, Brother Francis of Assisi is the most admired and the least emulated.
 20. The greedy who corrupt themselves with avarice corrupt the rest of us by provoking envy.
 21. The TV channel flipper does not really want to know what is on TV; he wants to know what else is on TV.
 22. When Paul said in Romans 13:8 Phillips, "Keep out of debt altogether," he used Greek words that mean exactly what they do in English.
 23. Conventional wisdom now holds that Rush Limbaugh has conquered anorexia.
 24. We never heard a sermon we didn't get something out of: of course, we've had some mighty close calls.
 25. "There's no surer way to misread any document," Learned Hand observed, "than to read it literally."
 26. Everybody is hurting or fixing to hurt.
 27. Never dilute the oil of anecdote with too much of the vinegar of truth.
 28. It is nice to be introduced by a person with a glib tongue, a vivid imagination, and an elastic conscience.

29. Who knows whether all souls in purgatory wish to be redeemed in view of what is said of St. Severinus and St. Pascal? (Note: Paschal I, pope 817-24. The legend is that he and Severinus were willing to endure the pains of purgatory for the benefit of the faithful).
29. My Pastor's eyes I've never seen though light from them may shine, For when he prays he doses his and when he preaches mine.
30. No one is sure of the reality of his own contrition, much less of receiving plenary forgiveness.
30. Truth does not always come from the front of the room: Aristotle thought the brain was merely an organ for cooling blood and that women had fewer teeth than men; moreover, he was personally moderate to excess.
31. One who bona fide buys indulgence is a rare as a bona fide penitent man, i.e. very rare indeed.
31. The secular religion is not humanism but hedonism. walk it in, and then get in the pulpit and preach it out.
32. All those who believe themselves certain of their own salvation by means of letters of indulgence, will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.
32. One enthusiastic flea can worry a whole dog.
33. We should be most carefully on our guard against those who say that the papal indulgences are an inestimable divine gift, and that a man is reconciled to God by them.
33. The water won't clear up till you get the hogs out of the tank.
34. For the grace conveyed by these indulgences relates simply to the penalties of the sacramental "satisfactions" decreed merely by man.
34. Don't believe anything until it has been officially denied.
35. It is not in accordance with Christian doctrines to preach and teach that those who buy off souls, or purchase confessional licenses, have no need to repent of their own sins.
35. It is the nature of government to do as much harm as it can and as much good as it must to stay in power.
36. Any Christian whatsoever, who is truly repentant, enjoys plenary remission from penalty and guilt, and this is given him without letters of indulgence.
36. The world is wide in time and tide; then do not hurry. That one is blest who does his best and leaves the rest; then do not worry.
37. Any true Christian whatsoever, living or dead, participates in all the benefits of Christ and the Church; and this participation is granted to him by God without letters of indulgence.
37. Sound bites fall short of the glory of God.
38. Yet the pope's remission and dispensation are in no way to be despised, for, as already said, they proclaim the divine remission.
38. "Do I hear you saying" is a grave malady for which a state-of-the-art transistorized hearing aid might be considered.

39. It is very difficult, even for the most learned theologians, to extol to the people the great bounty contained in the indulgences, while, at the same time, praising contrition as a virtue.
40. A truly contrite sinner seeks out, and loves to pay, the penalties of his sins; whereas the very multitude of indulgences dulls men's consciences, and tends to make them hate the penalties.
41. Papal indulgences should only be preached with caution, lest people gain a wrong understanding, and think that they are preferable to other good works: those of love.
42. Christians should be taught that the pope does not at all intend that the purchase of indulgences should be understood as at all comparable with the works of mercy.
43. Christians should be taught that one who gives to the poor, or lends to the needy, does a better action than if he purchases indulgences.
44. Because, by works of love, love grows and a man becomes a better man; whereas, by indulgences, he does not become a better man, but only escapes certain penalties.
45. Christians should be taught that he who sees a needy person, but passes him by although he gives money for indulgences, gains no benefit from the pope's pardon, but only incurs the wrath of God.
46. Christians should be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they are bound to retain what is only necessary for the upkeep of their home, and should in no way squander it on indulgences.
47. Christians should be taught that they purchase indulgences voluntarily, and are not under obligation to do so.
39. New Dead Sea scroll discoveries do not prove that John the Baptist personally led his audiences in singing praise choruses about the sweet by and by
40. When John said, "Men agape darkness because their deeds are evil" (John 3:19), he created certain problems for untold thousands of teachers and preachers.
41. When Baptist theologian WT. Conner said, "The Bible doesn't mean what it says: it means what it means," he uttered an astounding word which might well get the great teacher fired in today's climate.
42. Also astounding was Dr. Conner's distressing observation that "the Bible doesn't say 'Believe on the virgin birth and thou shall be saved' but 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.'"
43. There are times and places when the spirit killeth but the letter giveth light.
44. It is a canny pastor destined for long tenure and great popularity who for his sermons regularly gets a good introduction and a good conclusion and then keeps the two close together.
45. Never squat down with your spurs on.
46. Power elites use remote control to keep the church house lights turned on for Sunday evening services.
47. There be three things which are too much for me, yea, four which I know not: the way of a preacher with last year's statistical records when he really wants to move; the way of a politician in feathering his own nest from the plumage of the public bird; the way of a committee in guaranteeing the absolute necessity of yet another meeting; and the way of extremists in rewriting history, shuffling the facts, and twisting the record to serve their ideological ends.

48. Christians should be taught that, in granting indulgences, the pope has more need, and more desire, for devout prayer on his own behalf than for ready money.
49. Christians should be taught that the pope's indulgences are useful only if one does not rely on them, but most harmful if one loses the fear of God through them.
50. Christians should be taught that, if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence-preachers, he would rather the church of St. Peter were reduced to ashes than be built with the skin, flesh, and bones of the sheep.
51. Christians should be taught that the pope would be willing, as he ought if necessity should arise, to sell the church of St. Peter, and give, too, his own money to many of those from whom the pardon-merchants conjure money.
52. It is vain to rely on salvation by letters of indulgence, even if the commissary, or indeed the pope himself, were to pledge his own soul for their validity.
53. Those are enemies of Christ and the pope who forbid the word of God to be preached at all in some churches, in order that indulgences may be preached in others.
54. The word of God suffers injury if, in the same sermon, an equal or longer time is devoted to indulgences than to that word.
55. The pope cannot help taking the view that if indulgences (very small matters) are celebrated by one bell, one pageant, or one ceremony, the gospel (a very great matter) should be preached to the accompaniment of a hundred bells, a hundred processions, a hundred ceremonies.
56. The treasures of the church, out of which the pope dispenses indulgences, are not sufficiently spoken of or known among the people of Christ.
48. The key to good preaching is to find a good text, get outside and walk in it, and then get in the pulpit and preach it out.
49. Human movements have two choices: they can institutionalize and die or they can refuse to institutionalize and die sooner.
50. It is the nature of most organisms to imagine that the rest of the universe revolves around them.
51. The first law of life is not self preservation but self sacrifice.
52. When the Bible says that righteousness and peace have kissed each other it is a way of saying that peace is always puckered when righteousness comes calling.
53. Separation of church and state is not a shibboleth of doctrinaire secularism but the very cornerstone of our liberties.
54. What this country needs regarding citizenship is not a short leap-year fit but a continuing commitment to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and leaven for the lump.
55. The key to the New Testament message is repentance which is mentioned at least 56 times in the New Testament.
56. am debtor for I have sat in the shade of trees I did not plant, eaten at tables I did not prepare, drunk from wells I did not dig, traveled on roads I did not grade, been sheltered under roofs I did not raise, and been warmed by fires I did not build.

57. That these treasures are not temporal are clear from the fact that many of the merchants do not grant them freely, but only collect them.
58. Nor are they the merits of Christ and the saints, because, even apart from the pope, these merits are always working grace in the inner man, and working the cross, death, and hell in the outer man.
59. St. Laurence said that the poor were the treasures of the church, but he used the term in accordance with the custom of his own time.
60. We do not speak rashly in saying that the treasures of the church are the keys of the church, and are bestowed by the merits of Christ.
61. For it is clear that the power of the pope suffices, by itself, for the remission of penalties and reserved cases.
62. The true treasure of the church is the Holy gospel of the glory and the grace of God.
63. It is right to regard this treasure as most odious, for it makes the first to be the last.
64. On the other hand, the treasure of indulgences is most acceptable, for it makes the last to be the first.
65. Therefore the treasures of the gospel are nets which, in former times, they used to fish for men of wealth.
66. The treasures of the indulgences are the nets which to-day they use to fish for the wealth of men.
67. The indulgences, which the merchants extol as the greatest of favours, are seen to be, in fact, a favourite means for money-getting.
57. Christian faith is not believing something in spite of the evidence; it is living life under the lordship of Christ in scorn of consequence.
58. Without a vision there can be no venture, and without a venture there can be no victory.
59. The goads of self-discipline never prod like the whips of necessity.
60. The Bible which says that God is (Exod. 3:14 and Heb. 11:6) says further that (1) God is One (Mark 12:29; Deut. 6:4; 1 John 5:7), (2) God is Spirit (John 4:24), (3) God is Holy (1 Peter 1:16), (4) God is Peace (Judges 6:24 RSV), (5) God is Light (1 John 1:5), (6) God is Truth (1 John 5:6), (7) God is Love (1 John 4:8, 16), and (8) God is Word (John 1:1).
61. Wisdom leads us not to put asunder what God has joined together and not to join together what God has put asunder.
62. Native intelligence, natural gifts, and a good education are raw materials from which good judgment can grow.
63. When the Bible says that "the stars from their courses. ..fought against Sisera" (Judges 5:20) it is a way of saying that this is a moral universe.
64. Trust your fellowman but when you park your car always take the keys with you.
65. If I am having a hard time it is someone else's fault; but if my neighbor is having a hard time, it is his own fault.
66. A thick theology does not issue in a thin ethic.
67. What unites the human family, said Paul Freund (who was for five decades a professor at the Harvard Law School), "is our common ignorance of the central questions posed for us by the universe: whence, and why and whither."

68. Nevertheless, they are not to be compared with the grace of God and the compassion shown in the Cross.
69. Bishops and curates, in duty bound, must receive the commissaries of the papal indulgences with all reverence.
70. But they are under a much greater obligation to watch closely and attend carefully lest these men preach their own fancies instead of what the pope commissioned.
71. Let him be anathema and accursed who denies the apostolic character of the indulgences.
72. On the other hand, let him be blessed who is on his guard against the wantonness and license of the pardon-merchant's words.
73. In the same way, the pope rightly excommunicates those who make any plans to the detriment of the trade in indulgences.
74. It is much more in keeping with his views to excommunicate those who use the pretext of indulgences to plot anything to the detriment of holy love and truth.
75. It is foolish to think that papal indulgences have so much power that they can absolve a man even if he has done the impossible and violated the mother of God.
68. The fog makes London beautiful.
69. Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint; therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness." (Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of Amen can History*)
70. If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap;
If you want happiness for a day, go fishing;
If you want happiness for a month, get married;
If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune;
If you want happiness for a lifetime, help someone else.
Chinese Proverb quoted in *Give to Love* by Douglas M. Lawson
71. Sodom was not destroyed because the politicians had created a horrible public debt, the poor were on welfare, or sodomites were roaming the streets but because God could not find ten righteous ple in the city.
72. A vital component of character is outrage at injustice.
73. The great problems of humanity are essentially insoluble; and what appear to be solutions are only small shots of adrenaline which pump enough courage in us to try again.
74. Don't let it all hang out; it has taken us thousands of years to begin to get a little of it tucked in.
75. God has made us closer to the ants than to the butterflies; and useful work is both an inalienable right and a prerequisite to mental health.

76. We assert the contrary, and say that the pope's pardons are not able to remove the least venial of sins as far as their guilt is concerned.
77. When it is said that not even St. Peter, if he were now pope, could grant a greater grace, it is blasphemy against St. Peter and the pope.
78. We assert the contrary, and say that he, and any pope whatever, possesses greater graces, viz., the gospel, spiritual powers, gifts of healing, etc., as is declared in I Corinthians 12 [:28].
79. It is blasphemy to say that the insignia of the cross with the papal arms are of equal value to the cross on which Christ died.
80. The bishops, curates, and theologians, who permit assertions of that kind to be made to the people without let or hindrance, will have to answer for it.
81. This unbridled preaching of indulgences makes it difficult for learned men to guard the respect due to the pope against false accusations, or at least from the keen criticisms of the laity.
82. They ask, e.g.: Why does not the pope liberate everyone from purgatory for the sake of love (a most holy thing) and because of the supreme necessity of their souls? This would be morally the best of all reasons. Meanwhile he redeems innumerable souls for money, a most perishable thing, with which to build St. Peter's church, a very minor purpose.
83. Again: Why should funeral and anniversary masses for the dead continue to be said? And why does not the pope repay, or permit to be repaid, the benefactions instituted for these purposes, since it is wrong to pray for those souls who are now redeemed?
76. Authentic Christian ethics issues from authentic Christian evangelism.
77. "Christianity is essentially a social religion; to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it." (John Wesley, Works, 1872 ed., V: 296)
78. He who speaks the truth should leave his car's engine running.
79. Occasional flashes of silence can make a conversation truly delightful.
80. Writing is easy You just sit and stare at a piece of blank paper until drops of blood start to form on your forehead.
81. It is better to embrace the honest dourness of John Bunyan and John Knox than the facile claptrap of today's health and wealth gurus.
82. The pruning and spraying, the digging and dunging, of the Christian's fruit tree of life require far more effort, discipline, and attention than the planting of the seed.
83. To ask which comes first, evangelism or ethics, is to inject into revealed religion a prickly individualism that fractures the gospel and fragments the New Testament.

84. Again: Surely this is a new sort of compassion, on the part of God and the pope, when an impious man, an enemy of God, is allowed to pay money to redeem a devout soul, a friend of God; while yet that devout and beloved soul is not allowed to be redeemed without payment, for love's sake, and just because of its need of redemption.
85. Again: Why are the penitential canon laws, which in fact, if not in practice, have long been obsolete and dead in themselves,—why are they, to-day, still used in imposing fines in money, through the granting of indulgences, as if all the penitential canons were fully operative?
86. Again: since the pope's income to-day is larger than that of the wealthiest of wealthy men, why does he not build this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of indigent believers?
87. Again: What does the pope remit or dispense to people who, by their perfect repentance, have a right to plenary remission or dispensation?
88. Again: Surely a greater good could be done to the church if the pope were to bestow these remissions and dispensations, not once, as now, but a hundred times a day, for the benefit of any believer whatever.
89. What the pope seeks by indulgences is not money, but rather the salvation of souls; why then does he suspend the letters and indulgences formerly conceded, and still as efficacious as ever?
90. These questions are serious matters of conscience to the laity. To suppress them by force alone, and not to refute them by giving reasons, is to expose the church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies, and to make Christian people unhappy.
91. If therefore, indulgences were preached in accordance with the spirit and mind of the pope, all these difficulties would be easily overcome, and indeed, cease to exist.
84. A weak doctrine of sin needs only a puny perception of grace; but grave sin needs great grace.
85. Unless our Lord is allowed to crush this serpent's head, the subtlest beast of the field, Pride, will live on under the floor of the church like a temple snake in Greek antiquity.
86. Boredom is a grave sin because it is leveled against God for having created a world that is not interesting.
87. To be converted to Christ is to be thrown from the saddle of unbelief onto the firm ground of loving God with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves.
88. What madness would possess Baptists to be willing to sell freedom, that pearl of great price, for the thin mess of portage that is credalism?
89. Commitment to the ethical enterprise with its social involvement is not a matter of moral obedience but a condition of being in communion with God at all.
90. Christianity is the most worldly of all the great world religions; and this is so whether William Temple said it or not.
91. Only those who obey can believe and only those who believe can obey.

92. Away, then, with those prophets who say to Christ's people, "Peace, peace," where in there is no peace.
93. Hail, hail to all those prophets who say to Christ's people, "The cross, the cross," where there is no cross.
94. Christians should be exhorted to be zealous to follow Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hells.
95. And let them thus be more confident of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through a false assurance of peace.
92. "I find more profit in sermons on either good tempers or good works than in what is commonly called 'gospel sermons.' That term has now become a mere cant word; I wish none of our society would use it. It has no determinate meaning. Let but a pert, self-sufficient animal that has neither sense nor grace bawl out something about Christ or his blood or justification by faith and the hearers cry out: 'What a fine gospel sermon.'" John Wesley
93. Cheap grace justifies sin but not the sinner, preaches forgiveness but does not call for repentance, hurries to baptism but does not demand discipline, provides communion but does not hear confession, and offers a crown but does not insist on a cross; but God's way is the way of costly grace.
94. The best way to get liberty is to take it.
95. A journey of a thousand miles ends with a single step.

Source:

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ninety-Five_Theses
2. <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/history/95theses.htm>