The Ninety-Five Theses
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The Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences (Latin: Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum), commonly known as The Ninety-Five Theses, was written by Martin Luther in 1517 and is widely regarded as the primary catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. The disputation protests against clerical abuses, especially the sale of indulgences.

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Background

The background to Luther's Ninety-Five Theses centers on practices within the Catholic Church regarding baptism and absolution. Significantly, the Theses reject the validity of indulgences (remissions of temporal punishment due for sins which have already been forgiven). They also view with great cynicism the practice of indulgences being sold, and thus the penance for sin representing a financial transaction rather than genuine contrition. Luther's Theses argued that the sale of indulgences was a gross violation of the original intention of confession and penance, and that Christians were being falsely told that they could find absolution through the purchase of indulgences.

The Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in the Holy Roman Empire, where the Ninety-Five Theses famously appeared, held one of Europe's largest collections of holy relics. These had been piously collected by Frederick III of Saxony. At that time pious veneration of relics was purported to allow the viewer to receive relief from temporal punishment for sins in purgatory. By 1509 Frederick had over 5,000 relics, purportedly "including vials of the milk of the Virgin Mary, straw from the manger [of Jesus], and the body of one of the innocents massacred by King Herod."[1]

As part of a fund-raising campaign commissioned by Pope Leo X to finance the renovation of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, Johann Tetzel, a
A replica of the Ninety-five Theses in Schlosskirche, Wittenberg

On 31 October 1517, Luther wrote to Albert of Mainz, protesting against the sale of indulgences. He enclosed in his letter a copy of his "Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," which came to be known as The Ninety-Five Theses. Hans Hillerbrand writes that Luther had then no intention of confronting the church, but saw his disputation as a scholarly objection to church practices, and the tone of the writing is accordingly "searching, rather than doctrinaire."[2] Hillerbrand writes that there is nevertheless an undercurrent of challenge in several of the theses, particularly in Thesis 86, which asks: "Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of Saint Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?"[2]

Luther objected to a saying attributed to Johann Tetzel that "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory [also attested as 'into heaven'] springs."[3] He insisted that, since forgiveness was God's alone to grant, those who claimed that indulgences absolved buyers from all punishments and granted them salvation were in error. Christians, he said, must not slacken in following Christ on account of such false assurances.

On the eve of All Saint's Day, October 31, 1517, Luther posted the ninety-five theses, which he had composed in Latin, on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, according to university custom.[4]

On the same day, Luther sent a hand-written copy, accompanied with honourable comments to the archbishop Albert of Mainz and Magdeburg, responsible for the practice of the indulgence sales, and to the bishop of Brandenburg, the superior of Luther. Within two weeks, copies of the Theses had spread throughout Germany; within two months throughout Europe.[5][6] It was not until January 1518 that Christoph von Scheurl and other friends of Luther translated the Ninety-Five Theses from Latin into German, printed, and widely copied them, making the controversy one of the first in history to be aided by the printing press.[7]

**Reaction to the Ninety-Five Theses**

On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X issued a rebuttal to Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, a papal encyclical titled...
Exsurge Domine ("Arise, O Lord"), from its opening words. This document outlined the Magisterium of the Church's findings of where the pope believed Luther had erred.

Luther's Theses became a declaration of independence from Papal authority in Northern Europe, around which rallied enormous changes (both religious and social), such as the rejection of Papal rule over much of Europe, the decline of feudalism, and the rise of commercialism.

As early as October 27, 1521, the chapel at Wittenberg began to turn away from private Masses. In 1522, much of the city began celebrating Lutheran services instead of the Roman Catholic services. Luther's popularity grew rapidly, mostly due to the general Roman Catholic church members' dissatisfaction with the corruption and "worldly" desires and habits of the Roman Curia coupled with the preaching of what was perceived as Biblical truth as opposed to Catholic ideology.[8][9][10]

See also

- The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards
- Andreas Karlstadt - another leader of the Protestant Reformation who in 1516 (prior to Luther's list) wrote a series of 151 theses.

References

5. Krämer, Walter and Trenkler, Götz, "Luther," in Lexicon van Hardnekkige Misverstanden (Bert Bakker, 1997), 214-216
6. Ritter, Gerhard, "Luther (Frankfurt, 1985)

Bibliography


External links