



Martin
Luther's

Ninety-Five Theses

Introduced and Annotated by

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

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Scripture quotations marked *ASV* are taken from the American Standard Version (1901).

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INTRODUCTION

Tradition has it that one evening Martin Luther, while walking the streets of Wittenberg, happened on a parishioner lying drunk in the gutter. As Luther rebuked him for public drunkenness, his parishioner fumbled around in his coat. Finally his hand emerged holding a piece of paper. He waved it before his priest, proclaiming that Brother Tetzel had issued him an indulgence that offered “complete forgiveness of all sins—past, present and future.” Such a scene, as depicted in the 1955 classic, black-and-white film *Martin Luther*, may be difficult to verify. It illustrates, however, the dilemma facing the young parish priest and theologian. In response, Luther retreated to his study, wrote a list of arguments to address this problem, and the next day, October 31, 1517, nailed his list to the church door at Wittenberg.

Little did Luther realize the outcome of his action. By confronting the medieval Roman Catholic Church, he was challenging one of the largest political and ecclesiastical machines the world has ever seen. His action on that last day in October set the stage for a century of upheaval in Germany and across Europe. In fact, repercussions of Luther’s actions still ring out today. All who call themselves Protestants trace their roots to this protest in the *Ninety-Five Theses*.

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Martin Luther intended that these arguments, written in Latin, be directed toward church scholars for debate. He prefaced his arguments with a request that “those who cannot be present to debate orally with us will do so by letter.” That debate never materialized. The arguments, titled *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* and known popularly as the *Ninety-Five Theses*, were translated into German, printed (the printing press had been developed relatively recently), and rapidly circulated throughout the cities and villages of Germany. This was only the beginning: by posting the *Ninety-Five Theses*, the young Augustinian monk set in motion one of the most significant events of western history, the Protestant Reformation.

The *Ninety-Five Theses* is a text that everyone knows of, most refer to, but few actually read. Such a crucial text, though, deserves to be read widely. Today’s readers might be surprised that the arguments lack the crystallized expression of the later Reformation doctrines, such as justification by faith alone. Also, Luther assumes his readers are aware of medieval theology, as well as events of the first two decades of the sixteenth century. Consequently, this edition offers explanatory notes to help readers to navigate the text. To set the *Ninety-Five Theses* in its historical context, we begin with a brief look at the life of Martin Luther and the events in and around 1517.

I Will Become a Monk

One of the best ways to understand Luther is through the German word *Anfechtung*. This daunting



Woodcut of Martin Luther (1520)

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word refers to an inner struggle, temptation, or even attack. In Luther's case it applies to his spiritual struggle, the soul anxieties that filled him with intense unrest. Luther's spiritual struggles began before he entered the monastery. On one occasion, returning home from his studies at the University of Erfurt, he encountered a violent thunderstorm. He looked for shelter and in desperation called out to St. Anne, the patron saint of mining (his father's occupation), to save him. "Help me, St. Anne," Luther cried, "and I will become a monk." As historian Roland Bainton remarked, she kept her promise and he kept his. At the monastery, however, he continued to live under the clouds of a spiritual tempest.

Luther dedicated himself wholly to the church and the regimen of monastery life. In his own later reflection, he claimed he was such a good monk that "if ever a monk could get to heaven by monkery, I would have gotten there." But his spiritual unrest continued as he failed to find the forgiveness and salvation he so earnestly desired. He wrote in despair, "I hoped I might find peace of conscience with fasts, prayer, vigils, with which I miserably afflicted my body; but the more I sweated it out like this, the less peace and tranquillity I knew."

He also became increasingly aware of the hypocrisy and inefficacy of the institution he so revered. Anticipating a spiritual haven on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1510, Luther found the city to be more like Vanity Fair in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He reached a crisis point on the steps of Pilate, which had been relocated to Rome. Crawling up and down these steps on his hands and knees, Luther uttered the Lord's Prayer on every step

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and on every step felt himself drifting further and further from Christ's salvation.

Disillusioned, Luther returned to Wittenberg. His compulsive confessing nearly drove his confessor and mentor, Johann Von Staupitz, mad. Staupitz thought Luther needed a distraction, so he sent Luther to gain his academic degrees and become a theologian and professor. This did not work—Luther's study only intensified his anxiety. On one occasion he went so far as to say that he hated God. He hated God because he lived in utter fear of him and his righteousness. The church offered him no remedy. He tried, probably as hard as anyone in history, but he could not attain the standard that God's righteousness demands. He could find no forgiveness of his sins and no deliverance from God's wrath.

Indulgences and the Sistine Chapel

Luther's contemporaries were not so vexed. They accepted the church's remedy: indulgences. Not new to the church, indulgences were first instituted during the time of the Crusades. The church considered those who went on the Crusades worthy of certain merits and graces, and it dispensed such blessings upon them. But not every person wanted to go, or for that matter could go, on the Crusades. The church made it possible for such people to receive these blessings by sending money instead. So began the buying of indulgences.

The selling of indulgences grew out of the medieval sacrament of penance, which entailed four steps: contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution.