

Facts about the 95 Theses or the Disputation Against Indulgences

by Dr. Richard P. Bucher

1. On Oct. 31, 1517, Martin Luther mailed the 95 Theses to local bishops that they might take action against indulgences. According to Luther's co-worker, Philipp Melancthon, Luther also posted the Theses to the Castle church door on this same day, though that is the only source that we have that mentions it. It was customary to post public notices on the Castle church door.
2. Inside the Castle church at this time were seen aisles full of relics (the bones of saints and other supposedly holy items) to be adored the next day. Duke Frederick the Wise, was very high on relics. His Castle church housed 19,000 pieces, worth more than 1,900,000 days of indulgence. The relic collection supposedly had a piece of the burning bush, soot from the fiery furnace, milk from Mary, and a piece of Jesus' crib, to name a few.
3. The purpose of the 95 Theses was to invite local scholars to a disputation on indulgences. It was no academic exercise. The subtitle read, "Out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following theses will be publicly discussed at Wittenberg under the chairmanship of the reverend father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and regularly appointed Lecturer on these subjects at that place. He requests that those who cannot be present to debate orally with us will do so by letter. In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen." That disputation took place in Wittenberg two weeks later. Luther did not intend the Theses to be a program for reform, an attack on the Pope, etc. He was simply questioning indulgences, something he had done ever since his first lectures on the Psalms (1513-14).
4. Luther was not the only one to question indulgences. Many throughout Europe had complained and were complaining about them. This explains in part why the Theses spread so rapidly and found such enthusiastic support. Luther was the first to think through a Scriptural response to indulgences so thoroughly.
5. Indulgences were part of the Church's teaching of penance. By Luther's time it was taught that there were three parts to penance: a) confession and sorrow for sin, b) absolution/forgiveness spoken by the priest, and c) satisfaction, some good work done to pay for the temporal punishment of sin. Visiting the relics, pilgrimages to holy places, the praying of the rosary, and the purchasing of indulgences were all examples of satisfaction.
6. What prompted Luther to write the 95 Theses was a special jubilee indulgence instituted by Pope Leo X. The purpose of this indulgence was to build St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. This indulgence was a plenary indulgence, which meant that all sin and eternal punishment would be forgiven to those who purchased them.

(50% of the money went to Archbishop Albrecht to assist paying off the loan he had taken out to purchase his position.)

7. The jubilee indulgence was claimed to give four chief graces: a) the complete forgiveness of all sin; b) the possibility to receive a confessional letter which would grant one the right to twice receive absolution for all sins; c) purchasers of the indulgence and their dead relatives would participate in all the pious works and merits of the church; d) the full forgiveness of punishment for those already in purgatory when one bought an indulgence for someone already there.
8. Though Luther's prince, Duke Frederick, had prohibited the sale of the jubilee indulgence in his Saxon territory, they were being sold across the river. John Tetzel, a Dominican, was the chief salesman and preacher. He had been hired by Archbishop Albrecht.
9. When Indulgence salesmen came to town, they would set up inside the local church. While they were there, regular preaching was suspended and forbidden. Actual drafts of indulgence sermons from this time exist. One sermon reads: You should know— whoever has confessed and is contrite and put alms into the box, as his confessor counsels him, will have all of his sins forgiven, and even after confession and after the jubilee year will acquire an indulgence on every day that he visits the cross and the altars, as if he were visiting the seven altars in the Church of St. Peter, where the perfect indulgence is granted. So why are you standing about idly? Run, all of you, for the salvation of your souls...Do you not hear the voices of your dead parents and other people, screaming and saying: " 'Have pity on me, have pity on me...for the hand of God has touched me' (Job 19:21)? We are suffering severe punishments and pain [in purgatory], from which you could rescue us with a few alms, if only you would." Open your ears, because the father is calling to the son and the mother to the daughter (Oberman—1992).
10. How much did this indulgence cost? It depended on one's station in life. Kings and Queens: 25 gulden; high counts and prelates: 10 gulden; low counts and prelates: 6 gulden; merchants and townspeople: 3 gulden; artisans: 1 gulden; others: .5 gulden; the indigent were to fast and pray.
11. The main topic of the 95 Theses are repentance and good works. However, Luther makes several startling statements about the Pope, which later brought him into conflict with the Roman Church. Many viewed this document as an attack on the papacy, which was not Luther's intent.
12. Luther later tells us that within two weeks the Theses had been translated into German and spread through Germany. Prior to this Luther was only known locally. The Theses catapulted him into international fame.
13. John Tetzel died in 1519, a disgraced and broken man.