

LUTHER: THE NINETY FIVE THESES

In 1517 Johann Tetzel a Dominican friar, was authorized by the pope to distribute indulgences in the German principality of Saxony. Half the money he received was to go to Rome to help build St. Peter's Church. The other half was to go to the German prince of Saxony who owed great sums to the papacy and to a private banking house. Tetzel reportedly encouraged sales by proclaiming, "When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." To Luther who had long agonized over the means to his own salvation, indulgences corrupted the very meaning of Christianity. His Ninety-Five Theses attacked the sale of indulgences, although the Church denied selling them. It insisted that it only granted them. A selection of Luther's theses appears below:

1 When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent ye," he intended that the whole life of believers ought to be one of penance.

2 This kind of penance is not the same as sacramental penance in which the believer performs the ritual of confessing and atoning for his sins under the ministry of a priest.

3 At the same time, penance does not mean only an inner feeling of regret. This feeling of regret must also make the believer want to perform certain acts to atone for having done wrong.

5 The pope does not have the power to remove a man's obligation to pay a penalty for committing a sin except for those penalties which the pope himself has imposed.

21 The preachers of indulgences, who say that buying a certificate of indulgences from the pope or his representative frees a man from all punishment, are wrong.

27 Those who preach that the soul flies out of purgatory as soon as the money rattles in the chest preach man's values, not God's.

28 It is certain that when the money rattles in the chest, greed and gain may be increased, but forgiveness of sins can come from God alone.

43 Christians should be taught that he who gives to a poor man or lends to a needy man does better than if he used the money to buy an indulgence

44 By works of Charity, a man's charitable nature increases, but in buying an indulgence the man does not become better—only freer of punishment from the Church.

50 Christians should be taught that if the pope knew of the money his indulgences have taken from poor people, he would prefer that St. Peter's Church be burned to ashes rather than have it built with the flesh, bones, and skin of his people

86 Why does not the pope, who has enormous riches, build St. Peter's with his own money rather than the money of poor believers?

91 If those who preach the sale of indulgences in Germany would preach them in the spirit that I believe the pope intended them to be preached, all of these questions would be answered with ease. In fact, they would not even be asked.