

What was the content of the 95 Theses of Martin Luther?

Martin Luther's *95 Theses* are often considered a charter, a bold declaration of independence for the Protestant church. But when he wrote nearly 100 points of debate in Latin, Luther was simply inviting fellow academics to a "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," the theses' official title. The debate never was held, because the theses were translated into German and distributed widely, creating an uproar.

In the *95 Theses*, Luther did not attack the idea of indulgences. But Luther strongly objected to the abuse of indulgences—most recently under the salesmanship of Johann Tetzel. And in the process, Luther, though probably not fully aware of it, knocked down the pillars supporting many practices in medieval Christianity. Here are 13 samples of Luther's theses:

27. They preach human folly who pretend that as soon as money in the coffer rings a soul from purgatory springs.
32. Those who suppose that on account of their letters of indulgence they are sure of salvation will be eternally damned along with their teachers.
36. Every Christian who truly repents has plenary [full] forgiveness both of punishment and guilt bestowed on him, even without letters of indulgence.
37. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has a share in all the benefits of Christ and the Church, for God has granted him these, even without letters of indulgence.
45. Christians should be taught that whoever sees a person in need and, instead of helping him, uses his money for an indulgence, obtains not an indulgence of the pope but the displeasure of God.
51. Christians should be taught that the pope ought and would give his own substance to the poor, from whom certain preachers of indulgences extract money, even if he had to sell St. Peter's Cathedral to do it.
81. This shameless preaching of pardons makes it hard even for learned men to defend the pope's honor against calumny or to answer the indubitably shrewd questions of the laity.
82. For example: "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love ... for after all, he does release countless souls for the sake of sordid money contributed for the building of a cathedral? ..."
90. To suppress these very telling arguments of the laity by force instead of answering them with adequate reasons would be to expose the church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies and to render Christians unhappy.
94. We should admonish Christians to follow Christ, their Head, through punishment, death, and hell.
95. And so let them set their trust on entering heaven through many tribulations rather than some false security and peace.

Within two months, Johann Tetzel fired back with his own theses, including: "Christians should be taught that the Pope, by authority of his jurisdiction, is superior to the entire Catholic Church and its councils, and that they should humbly obey his statutes."

While Martin Luther wanted to debate the abuses of a theological idea he himself accepted, Tetzel turned the conversation to one of power and prestige.