



# *Martin Luther and his 95 Theses*

Why, 500 years later is the Reformation still such a historically significant event worthy of celebration not only in the Lutheran Church but also in other denominational churches? To understand that is to know something about the times in which Martin Luther lived (1483-1546), the position of the medieval Catholic church on indulgences, and the basis for Luther's arguments or dispositions inviting debate (the 95 Theses) about the abuse of indulgences and other church practices.

Many of you may have some familiarity that what became known as the Reformation or Protestant Reformation began when Martin Luther affixed or posted his 95 Theses on a church door (Castle Church) in Wittenberg, Germany on All Saints Eve, October 31, 1517. If you are like members of the planning team that pulled together materials for CCPC Bible study groups to use for the Reformation study, you may not have read the 95 theses, titled: "Dispositions on Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" or have much understanding of the context in which this act occurred. This summary, and another short piece on the Life of Martin Luther, provides some context and an introduction to why, 500 years later, the Protestant Reformation is still cause for commemoration.

As the story unfolds it is not clear from notes left by Luther that he physically posted the Theses on a church door. If he did, it was not likely that he nailed those to the door, but rather would have used candle wax or some other means to affix them. But, we do know from those who have studied Luther's writing and notes that he mailed a copy of those theses to Archbishop Albrecht (Luther had written the Archbishop on previous occasions asking him to temper the behavior of the "indulgence preachers".) The Archbishop circulated that document to his church council and forwarded a copy to the Papal court in Rome. That decision to forward a copy of Luther's 95 Theses started a process that led to the Papal Bull or Luther's eventual excommunication from the Catholic Church.

Posting of theses, or arguments, was a rather standard practice in those days among academic faculty and other learned representatives of the church. Such postings were an invitation to debate. If that was Luther's intention, no one responded to his call for debate. The length and manner of writing the theses was not typical and it appears from reading them that Luther was interested in more than just an academic debate. Importantly, Luther's friends took advantage of the recent advent of the printing press (@1440) to distribute Luther's theses widely, thus bringing them to the attention of many people both close at hand and in distant lands.

So what led to Luther's demonstrative act? Did something or someone pique him? The answer is, yes. Luther was very concerned about the medieval church's practice of indulgences and the sale of indulgences to presumably shorten the time period that a deceased would be remanded to Purgatory. It was not unlike a "get out of jail free card" from the Monopoly game. Pope Leo X was desirous of funds to complete the Basilica in Rome. Archbishop Albrecht wanted to secure his power and pay off debts that he had incurred when seeking the position of a Cardinal. The sale of

indulgences was one way to raise those funds, and one Dominican monk, Johann Tetzel, was particularly adept at selling indulgences and raising funds for the Pope and the archbishop.

Tetzel was an ardent, creative, and persistent salesperson. As he began to sell indulgences close to the Saxony area in Germany, Luther became more concerned. He feared that those in the church would not look to Christ for redemption, but instead just focus on the purchase of indulgences. Martin Luther didn't seem to voice objection to the original practices of indulgence such as visiting religious and holy sites, acts of service and prayer, or contributions to purchase of church property as a form of indulgence that a priest could assign. But Luther saw no scriptural basis for the practice for the living to build credits in the so-called, "Treasury of Merit and Grace", or that family and friends could purchase those merits through gifts and donations to the church for those who had died. The practice of selling indulgences became more widespread and abused. It lined the coffers in Rome and elsewhere. Tetzel's ability to hawk indulgences apparently was the straw that broke the camels back and led Martin Luther to post his 95 Theses, many of which directly spoke to his concerns about selling indulgences.

It may be instructive to list a few of the Theses and invite your reflections as to their meaning and possibly Luther's intentions. As you read them, consider Luther's arguments. Did he intend to start a revolution in the church? Do you think he was attacking the Pope? What did they imply for church practices at that time, for the "indulgence preachers", and why might posting them have raised concerns to a level that it set the wheels in motion for reform?

*Thesis 5: The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own discretion or that of the cannon."*

*Thesis 10: Those priests act ignorantly and wickedly who, in the case of the dying, reserve canonical penalties for one's time in purgatory."*

*Thesis 28: It is certain that when a coin clinks in the money chest profits and avarice may well be increased, but the intercession of the church rests on God's choice alone."*

*Thesis 32: Those who believe that they can be secure in their salvation through indulgence letters will be eternally damned along with their teachers."*

*Thesis 43: Christians are to be taught that the one who gives to a poor person or lends to the needy does a better deed than if a person acquires indulgences."*

*Thesis 54: An injustice is done to the Word of God when, in the very same sermon, equal or more time is spent on indulgences than on the Word."*

*Thesis 62: The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."*