

The Road to the Reformation

Step One

The Ninety-Five Theses

October 31, 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. We use that date because that is the date that Martin Luther presented his Ninety-Five Theses to Catholic Church officials and to his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg. It is important to understand, however, that it was not a case the Reformation being like a light being turned on--before the Ninety-Five Theses, the Reformation switch was off, after the Ninety-Five Theses the switch for the Reformation goes to on. Luther did not think, "Wow! I've started the Reformation." At the time nobody thought the Ninety-Five Theses was the start of a Reformation. It took years for people to realize that a Reformation was occurring and that the Medieval Church was breaking up. The beginning of the Reformation was not a single event, it was a process that consisted of a series of many events. Each event moved the process in the direction of the Reformation but that result was not inevitable, it was contingent on circumstances. Things could have gone differently but they didn't. It is the history that happened that should concern us since we live with its results. So let's start with the first step – the Ninety-Five Theses.

Luther wrote the Ninety-Five Theses because he objected to the crass way indulgences were being sold by the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel. He was not alone in that opinion. Many people felt that indulgences were being abused as were the many supposedly sacred relics held by many churches and nobles. Luther's circle of colleagues and friends in the Augustinian Order and at the University of Wittenberg agreed with him. They supported him because, like Luther, they wanted the focus of the doctrines concerning humanity's redemption and salvation to be returned back to Christ and the Gospel. Luther was not a lone wolf. He was also not a rebel against authority. His initial assumption was that the abuses of indulgences were an aberration of people like Tetzel. He thought that if the Pope only knew and if Albrecht, the Archbishop of Mainz and head of the church in Germany only knew, they would set things right. So Luther's Ninety-Five Theses were simply him letting them know that they had a problem that needed to be fixed. He sent letters to various senior clerical officials with copies of his theses detailing what he saw as the problems with indulgences.

Unfortunately Luther's Ninety-Five Theses were not viewed as a welcome heads-up by many officials of the Catholic Church including Pope Leo X. The Ninety-Five

Theses questioned an important source of revenue for the officials of the Medieval Church. Without them Pope Leo X could not build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and Albrecht of Mainz could not repay the loans he took out to become an archbishop. In addition, to question the sale of indulgences was to question papal authority. That was an even bigger threat to the status quo. Keep in mind, the papacy was none too popular in the German lands in 1517.

Luther was stepping on some big toes and did not realize it. But, even if he had, that would not have stopped him from protesting indulgences. Reading through the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther thought that he had a solid argument to make based on the facts of the Bible and a proper method of interpretation. So any reasonable and truly Christian person would agree with him. He would be disappointed in that expectation. All the church officials wanted was for him to shut up. Luther's disappointment would turn to righteous anger and a stubborn assertion of his religious views as we shall see later. And the Roman Church responded with denunciations and threats. The conflict accelerated and became more and more bitter.

For now, remember the Gospel point that Luther made in the first of the Ninety-Five Theses:

"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' he intended the entire life of believers to be repentance."

Indulgences were a distraction and were unnecessary for leading a life of repentance.

For a profound reflection and meditation on the significance of the Nine-Five Theses there is an excellent new book: *October 31 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World* by Martin Marty (Paraclete Press, 2017).

PS: One of the commonest images of the Reformation is that of Luther nailing a copy of the Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. It is a great story. What you may not know is that some historians have cast doubt on whether the nailing of the theses actually took place. So if you read a book that boldly asserts that Luther did not nail up the theses, don't take that as an absolutely proven historical fact. The truth is, historians don't know for sure. There is good evidence to suggest that the event did not take place and there is equally good evidence to suggest that it did. So we just don't know for sure one way or the other. That said, Luther nailing those theses to the church door is a pretty good story, so I am sticking with it.