

PARAPHRASE OF MARTIN LUTHER'S "95 THESES"

by A.D.Aardsma, May 2007

Martin Luther's "95 Theses", which he posted, in Latin, on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, 490 years ago, were against Indulgences - the "paper pardons" authorized by Pope Leo X to be sold to the people for the remission of the temporal punishment of their own, or their deceased loved ones', sins.

The sale of Indulgences deeply troubled Luther because it taught the people that money could remove the penalty for their sins and that there was, therefore, no need for true repentance and salvation. It is also clear that he was strongly opposed to the way the Pope was "fleecing the sheep", poor though they were to begin with, to increase his own immense wealth and to build yet another cathedral, St. Peter's Basilica, in Rome.

If you should desire to read a more literal translation, there are many English versions of Luther's ninety-five point thesis available today. Those that I've read, possibly because they are word-for-word translations from the Latin, fail, in my opinion, to make the meaning of many of the points clear, and, I suspect, obscure Luther's original tone, as well.

In places where I've deviated from a more literal translation, I have used what I know about Martin Luther to imagine how he felt in 1517 and how he might express himself today; he is well known not to have minced words. Throughout my paraphrase, I have tried to articulate what I think he was implying. My less than diplomatic paraphrase, therefore, is based on my understanding that Luther had no respect, at all, for Indulgences nor for those who sold them; that he did not have a great deal of respect for the Pope; that he realized that, simply by posting his propositions on the door of the church, he would be forfeiting his life (Thesis 94) so he need not be too coy in his wording; and that he was, already at this early time in his life (34 years old. He lived to be 62.), firmly convinced from Scripture that Indulgences, Purgatory, and paying for our own sins or meriting forgiveness for them in any way, were all false doctrines.

Like the rest of us, not everything about Martin Luther is commendable. But we justly honor and respect this great man for a number of historic achievements, not the least of which was the courage he showed in challenging the Catholic Church single-handedly. He could not have known the magnitude of the furor he would spark nor of the Reformation conflagration which would follow upon the posting of his 95 Theses (Thanks to the rather recent - 1453 - invention of the printing press, translations of the 95 Theses spread throughout Germany in two weeks and throughout Europe in two months!), but he must certainly have known he would be branded a heretic by the Church, would cause a great stir within the Church, and might lose his life over it all. In the years that followed, he certainly proved that he was ready and willing to finish what he started on October 31, 1517.

THE DISPUTATION OF MARTIN LUTHER
ON THE POWER AND EFFICACY OF INDULGENCES

OCTOBER 31, 1517

Out of love for the truth and a desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be the subject of a public discussion at the University of Wittenberg, led by the reverend father Martin Luther, Augustinian, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and duly appointed Lecturer on these subjects in that place. He requests that those who are unable to be present to debate these things orally, will do so by letter. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ spoke of repentance (Matt. 4:17), He meant that believers should turn away from sin.
2. He never intended repentance to mean confessing one's sins to a priest and doing the penance assigned by the priest.
3. Nor did He mean simply an invisible, inner "repentance", for repentance which does not result in a changed life is not true repentance.
4. Sin, with its guilt and consequences, will continue until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.
5. The Pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties for sins other than those which he, himself, has imposed either by his own authority or by the rules of the Church.
6. The Pope has no power to forgive any sin, except by declaring and warranting that which has already been forgiven by God. To be sure, he may grant remission of penalty in cases in which he, himself, has pronounced judgment. In these cases, when he chooses not to grant remission, the guilt and penalty remains.
7. True repentance from sin is always accompanied by humility and an attitude of submission to God's ordained authorities.
8. Penance are imposed only on the living, and, according to the Church's rules, are not to be imposed upon the dying.
9. In this regard, the Pope is correct, because in his decrees he always makes exceptions for those who are dying or who are, for some other reason, unable to perform the penance.

10. But those priests are wrong and misinformed who teach that people must pay in Purgatory for sins which they did not pay for in this life.
11. The doctrine of Purgatory is obviously a tare which was sown while those who should have been guarding the Church were sleeping.
12. Until the coming of Indulgences, people were not granted absolution for their sins until after they had performed acts of penance as signs of true repentance.
13. The dying are freed by death from all penance; they are dead to all Church rules; the Church's authority does not extend to the dead.
14. The imperfect maturity of a dying believer, that is to say, his imperfect understanding and love for God, is accompanied, naturally, by great fear; and the smaller his understanding and love, the greater his fear.
15. This fear and horror of dying, to say nothing of other concerns at the time of death, is the only "Purgatory" a person will ever experience.
16. A person's despair, uncertainty, or the assurance of safety are related to his concept of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.
17. The idea of a place such as Purgatory where people pay for their sins and earn Heaven may sound good.
18. But the concept of Purgatory is supported neither by Scripture nor by informed reasoning.
19. The idea that, once in Purgatory, people can pay for their sins and therefore eventually merit eternal life in Heaven is unscriptural. The Bible teaches that this life is the only opportunity we have to be saved.
20. Therefore, since there is no such place as Purgatory where one can pay for his own sins, the Pope is wrong in claiming to be able to grant "full remission of all sins" to those in Purgatory by the sale of Indulgences. He is able only to remit to the living those penalties imposed by himself.
21. Therefore those who promote and sell Indulgences are in error, who say that "by the Pope's Indulgences a man is loosed and saved from all punishment".
22. The Pope is able neither to assign nor to remit punishment to the dead.
23. The Pope's power to grant remission of sins and the absolution of punishment is only sufficient to be applied to a perfect person - and there aren't any of those around.
24. It is, therefore, clear that people are being deceived by the indiscriminate and high-sounding promise of release from sin's penalty by purchasing Indulgences.

25. And, just as the Pope has no power to remit sins for those in Purgatory, neither has any bishop or priest this power within his own diocese or parish.

26. The most that the Pope can do for a deceased person is pray for him.

27. They are foolish who say that "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs".

28. It is certain that when the coin jingles into the money-box, gain and avarice are increased, but the power to forgive sins belongs to God, alone.

29. Who even knows whether all the souls in Purgatory wish to be bought out of it, as we learn from the legend of Saints Severinus and Paschal? (Note: Paschal I, pgs. 817-824. The legend is that Severinus and Paschal were willing to endure the pains of purgatory for the benefit of the faithful.)

30. No one can be sure that his own repentance is sincere; much less that he has attained full remission of the penalty of sin for somebody in Purgatory.

31. Rare as is the man that is truly repentant, so rare is also the man who buys a true Indulgence. i.e., neither thing exists.

32. They will be condemned in Hell eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation simply because they have purchased a letter of pardon from priest or Pope.

33. We must be on our guard against those who say that the Pope's Indulgences are "an inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to Him".

34. For these "graces of pardon" can apply only to the penalties decreed by man.

35. They preach no Christian doctrine who teach that sin can be paid for by purchasing Indulgences.

36. Full forgiveness of the guilt and penalty of sin is given to every truly repentant Christian by God without purchasing Indulgences.

37. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has part in all the blessings of Christ and the Church; and these are all given to him by God without the purchasing of Indulgences.

38. Nevertheless, remission of sins and participation in the blessings of the Church which are granted by the Pope are in no way to be despised, for they are, as I have said, the Pope's declaration of what God has already made available.

39. It is most difficult, even for the very keenest theologians, to promote the purchase of Indulgences and at the same time to preach true repentance of sin.

40. True repentance desires and loves to prove its sincerity by righteous living, but the sale of Indulgences only leads to the diminishing of righteousness and causes repentance to be despised, or at least, furnishes an occasion for despising it.

41. Buying Indulgences has become more preferable to people than doing proper works of repentance and love.

42. Christians should be taught that the Pope does not intend the buying of Indulgences to take the place of works of repentance and love.

43. Christians should be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying an Indulgence;

44. Because, by doing works of love, love grows and man becomes a better man; but by purchasing an Indulgence man does not grow better, only more free from a sense of guilt and from the hesitancy to sin which the fear of penalty serves to provide.

45. Christians should be taught that he who sees a man in need, and passes him by, and, instead, spends his money for Indulgences, purchases not the Indulgence of the Pope, but the indignation of God.

46. Christians should be taught that unless they have more than they need, they have a solemn responsibility to keep back what is necessary for the proper care of their own families, and by no means to squander their money on Indulgences.

47. Christians should be taught that, though they are free to buy Indulgences if they want to do so, nowhere does God's Word teach them to do so.

48. Christians should be taught that the Pope, in promoting the unscriptural sale of Indulgences, has more need, and more desire, for their devout prayers for him than for their money.

49. Christians should be taught that the Pope's Indulgences are harmless as long as they do not believe in them, but altogether harmful if through them they think they can buy their way into Heaven.

50. Christians should be taught that if the Pope knew how much the purchasing of Indulgences was hurting his flock, he would rather that St. Peter's church should remain a pile of rubble, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep.

51. Christians should be taught that it is the Pope's wish, as it is his duty, to repay with his own money the multitudes from whom sellers of Indulgences have cajoled money, even though the church of St. Peter might have to be sold to do so.

52. Worthless is the assurance of salvation gained from the purchasing of Indulgences, even though the seller, nay, even though the Pope himself, were to stake his soul upon it.

53. They are enemies of Christ and of the Pope, who replace the preaching of the Word of God in some Churches, with the preaching of Indulgences.

54. It is an insult to the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or a longer time is spent on Indulgences than on the Word.

55. The Pope would certainly agree that if Indulgences, which are so worthless, are celebrated with the ringing of a bell, with a procession or a ceremony, then the preaching of the Gospel, which is the very greatest thing, should be accompanied by a hundred bells, a hundred processions, a hundred ceremonies.

56. The people of Christ do not know what is meant by the "treasures of the Church," which the Pope claims to bestow upon them when he grants Indulgences.

57. That they are not temporal treasures is certainly evident, for none of the many sellers of Indulgences ever lavishes out any such treasures upon the people, but only gathers them in.

58. Nor are they the merits of Christ and the Saints, for even apart from the Pope, these are always working grace in the inner man, and working the cross, death, and hell in the outer man.

59. St. Laurence used to teach that the "treasures" of the Church were the Church's poor, but it is obvious that the Pope doesn't feel this way today.

60. We do not speak rashly in asserting that the the "treasures of the church" includes the authority the Church has - bestowed upon the Church through the merits of Christ.

61. For it is clear that the Pope does have authority over penalties for sin in some cases.

62. But, in fact, the true treasure of the Church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

63. It is understandable that this true treasure, the Gospel, is so odious to people because it makes the first (the poor, repentant believer) to be last.

64. On the other hand, the treasure of Indulgences is so acceptable to people because it makes the last (the hardened sinner purchasing an Indulgence) to be first.

65. In former times, the riches of the Gospel were nets with which the Church fished for the treasure of mens' souls.

66. But now a days, the Church uses the allurements of Indulgences as nets with which to fish for mens' treasure.

67. The only way in which Indulgences are the "greatest graces" as the sellers claim them to be is that they are the greatest way of getting money for the Church.

68. They are in reality in no degree to be compared to the infinite grace of God and His boundless compassion as shown by the cross.

69. Bishops and Priests are obligated to the Pope to treat with proper respect his emissaries who visit their churches and towns selling Indulgences.

70. But they are under even greater obligation to their people to watch closely and listen carefully, lest these men preach their own fancies instead of what the Pope commissioned.

71. He who speaks against the truth of Biblical pardon, let him be accursed!

72. But he who guards against the lust and license of the pardon-preachers (i.e., those that sell Indulgences), let him be blessed!

73. It is understandable that the Pope thunders against those who, by any means, decrease the selling of Indulgences.

74. But much more ought he to thunder against those who, through the sale of Indulgences, decrease the true expressions of Christian love and truth.

75. It is foolish to believe that papal Indulgences have such power that they are able to absolve a man even if he commits the impossible sin of "violating the Virgin Mary".

76. We assert, to the contrary, that papal Indulgences are not able to remove even the very least of venial sins, so far as their guilt and penalty is concerned.

77. It is said that "even St. Peter, if he were now Pope, could not bestow greater graces than the sale of Indulgences". This is blasphemy against St. Peter and against the Pope.

78. We assert, to the contrary, that the present Pope, and any Pope at all, has far greater graces at his disposal than the selling of Indulgences; namely, the Gospel, spiritual powers, gifts of healing, etc., as it is written in I Corinthians 12.

79. It is blasphemy to say that the cross, emblazoned with the papal arms, which is set up by the preachers of Indulgences, "is of equal power with the Cross of Christ".

80. The bishops, priests and theologians who allow such assertions to be made to the people will have to answer to God for it some day.

81. The irresponsible preaching of Indulgences makes it no easy matter, even for learned men, to rescue the reverence due to the Pope from slander, or even from the shrewd questionings of the laity.

82. For instance: - "If the Pope has the power to free any number of souls from Purgatory for the sake of filthy lucre with which to build a Church, why does he not empty

Purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there? The latter motive would be most commendable; the former is most objectionable.”

83. Again: - “Why are funeral and anniversary masses for the deceased encouraged since it is wrong to pray for those who are already dead? The Pope should return all the moneys the Church has taken in from these masses.”

84. Again: - “What is this new “compassion” on the part of the Pope, that, for money, a man who is a sinner and an enemy of God is able to buy out of Purgatory a devout soul, a friend of God, while yet that devout and beloved soul is not able to be redeemed without payment, for pure love’s sake?”

85. Again: - “Why are the church laws of repentance, which have long been disregarded, now being used to determine the prices of Indulgences as if they were still operative?”

86. Again: - “Since the Pope makes more money than the wealthiest of wealthy men, why doesn’t he use his own money to build even just this one church of St. Peter, rather than the money of the poor?”

87. Again: - “What is it that the Pope is able to give or add to those who, by their sincere repentance, have already been granted full remission and acceptance by God?”

88. Again: - “What greater blessing could the Pope give to the Church than to do a hundred times a day what he now does only once, and bestow his remissions and blessings on any believer whatsoever, whether they buy an Indulgence, or not?”

89. “Since the Pope claims that, by his Indulgences, he seeks the salvation of souls rather than money, why did he cancel the Indulgences granted heretofore, forcing people to purchase them over again? Weren’t they just as efficacious as the current Indulgences?”

90. To repress these arguments and concerns of the laity by force alone, and not to resolve them by giving Scriptural reasons, is to expose the Church and the Pope to the ridicule of their enemies, and to lose the respect and support of Christians.

91. If Indulgences were preached according to what the Pope says he believes about these things, all these doubts and questions would be readily resolved; in fact, they wouldn’t even exist.

92. Away, then, with all those false prophets - sellers of Indulgences - who promise to the people, “Pardon! Pardon!,” when there is no pardon!

93. Blessed be all those prophets who plead with the people, “Repent! Repent!” for there is great need of repentance!

94. Christians are to be exhorted to diligently follow Christ, their Head, rather than the Pope or any false teachings of the Church, even though it may mean penalties, torture and death.

95. People can be confident of entering Heaven if they are trusting in the pardon for sin that Christ purchased with His blood, rather than trusting in a false promise of pardon from purchasing an Indulgence.

Martin Luther