

It's time to take a closer look at the *95 Theses*. Your job is to look over the document in the sidebar, pick 5 that interest you and discuss them in a paragraph or two per Theses (so 5-10 paragraphs total.) You need to evaluate them in regards to what may have motivated Luther to include it, what it can tell us the pre-Reformation period, and your response to/analysis of them. Remember Luther wrote these as a means of debate - it is your turn to debate them. Please submit your analysis when complete.

## **95 Theses: (5)**

### **13**

In Martin Luther's thirteenth thesis, he states that "the dying are freed by death from all penalties, are already dead as far as the canon laws are concerned, and have a right to be released from them." Luther most likely included this in his 95 theses referring to all penalties conferred upon a man for his sins by the Pope and the Church; such penalties were of the human world, and as a man departed the human world, he was freed of those responsibilities. This challenges the Church's authority as a representative of God's will; it is a worldly institution solely.

By implying the Church's penalties to be only applicable in this life, Martin Luther legitimizes Church authority and the papal indulgence system. Before the reformation, Church authority was absolute; it was the link between worlds, and it had to be accepted as such. Martin Luther offered an alternative belief, and with enough people backing him, a legitimate one. His argument somewhat legitimizes the authority of any religious institution even his own, but what mattered for him at the time, I suppose, is how he could detract from the Church's power, even if his own argument could be applied to the institutions he established. And really, he offers a logical conclusion, as the Church is a worldly institution run by men, and it is questionable, depending on your belief system, as to what authority it holds over life in the next world.

### **20**

Martin Luther likely intended to criticize the Pope and the Church and highlight the fallaciousness of Church arguments with this thesis. In Thesis 20, Martin Luther argues that the Pope's remission of 'all penalties' means "only those imposed by himself," indicating both Martin Luther's strong belief that the Church was not representative of God's will, and also his remarkable disdain for Church authority. Further, it is also indicative of a general resentment that existed in Christian communities prior to the Reformation. The Church had continuously expanded its power for the past centuries, growing and growing, and there were at least some people who were well aware of it. The Church instituted a system by which Christians could pay the Church and were essentially promised a way out of Hell. Martin Luther believed that sure, such a system worked, but it was applicable only to transgressions against the Church and only the Church; sins against God himself could not be forgiven by payment to

the Church. Luther wished to inform the people of the illegitimacy of the Church's system on religious grounds.

It can be argued that the Church, and the Pope, are extensions of God's will, so to speak. The Pope is meant to be the representative on Earth who is closest to the voice of God. Logically, if this were the case, and the Church was indeed simply an extension of God's will manifest in our world, then plenary remissions of all penalties would apply to all penalties and not just the Pope's. If the Church was a legitimate extension of God's will, then it should possess the power to bestow such a gift upon one who has generously 'donated' to the Church. However, discounting devotion to the Church, it is but a man-made institution intended to organize the Christian faith and maintain order in the Christian world. The Church is an institution that seeks to maintain itself and its power, and by offering plenary indulgence/plenary remissions of all penalties for sins, it was incentivizing remaining with the Church, so to speak, and attempting to solidify its hold upon the people by demonstrating its power as an important part of the Christian faith. Martin Luther and many others believed the Church was growing too powerful, and so it was necessary to call them out on exactly what they were advertising to halt their continued growth.

## 21

If Martin Luther was correct in his position in thesis 20, this would of course implicate that all priests and preachers in Europe who professed the legitimacy of the papal indulgence system were illegitimate in their statements and in error. By including this in his 95 theses, Luther doesn't absolve the common priest of blame for the perpetuation of the perceived lie of papal indulgences. The priests, even though they are not necessarily of the same institution as the Church in Rome, are incorrect to lead good Christian folk astray, by Martin Luther's estimation. The people must be made aware to not only mistrust the Church and associated institutions, but the priests and preachers who continue to adhere to Catholic Church doctrine. In pre-Reformation Europe, preachers ran local institutions, and simply adhered to the word of the Church and did as they were told. They likely had little reason to argue, for the Church held great authority at this time.

Is the priest truly at fault and in error to say that a man can be freed of the penalties of his sins by papal indulgences? Nay, it can be argued similarly that they are not should the Church be vested with as much religious authority as is claimed, and should they truly be an extension of God's manifest will. But in all fairness, the priest is simply a voice of the Church who strives to shepherd the people as he believes is right. A priest likely does not possess the same malicious intentions as those with true power--and thus, true luxury--within the Church itself would possess. Yes, the priest can be said to be in error for saying what he has said, but he can not truly be considered to be in error as a man, for he has simply acted on his best and most honest judgement.

## **32**

Luther's thesis thirty-two is clearly intended to be used as a way of scaring people into believing his word. At this time in Europe, the common man or woman would greatly fear eternal damnation, and by linking the idea of that eternal damnation with the Church's papal indulgence system, Luther successfully disincentivized participation in that system and in the Catholic institution as a whole. Thesis 32 is a grave warning of the folly of believing in the Church and the Church's word, especially promises of salvation in exchange for currency, for indulgence letters, in Luther's mind, were simply slips of paper that absolved a man of only the penalties for transgressions against the Pope. Martin Luther not only warns of the folly of believing the Church to galvanize action against the Church, but he also professes to the people the future damnation of the Church leaders (the 'teachers' of the common man), further disinclination for continued participation in Catholic institutions.

It may seem somewhat harsh to condemn those who simply believe in the papal indulgence system, as they likely adhere to such beliefs for the simple fact that the Church is the Church, and therefore the be-all end-all religious authority. The Church has credibility, and is the only real Christian institution at this time, and as such it is logical for the common European to believe them. That was how things just worked in pre-Reformation Europe. Perhaps Martin Luther has good reason for condemning the Church leaders to eternal damnation, but his judgement of the common man is somewhat harsh. It is understandable in the context of what he was attempting to do, but looking back on it, it is not entirely reasonable.

## **45**

Martin Luther, in this thesis, highlights the hypocrisy of paying for a papal indulgence over giving alms to the poor. In pre-Reformation Europe, stratification remained high in the European social structure. As such, it was great strain to go through the Christian service of giving alms to the poor for most people. Papal indulgences, as such, were out of reach for many, and that money could have been better spent elsewhere. By highlighting this, Luther highlights the greed of the Church and the greed of the nobility, again trying to gain the people's support.

This is one point I must somewhat agree with Martin Luther upon. It is indeed hypocritical for a Christian institution to demand payment for a man to be forgiven of sins, when if that same payment is conferred upon charity to the poor, it does little to offer him a remission of all penalties. However, there is merit in arguing that as the Church, which manages charitable deeds, such payments will eventually find their way to positive causes that further charity and the cause of the Church. Despite this, Martin Luther makes a good point in that it invites God's wrath to be hypocritical and to commit to the Church, a worldly institution, over one's Christian duty.