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The Ninety-five Theses

Martin Luther (1483 - 1546)

Read by: Leon Mire
 Length: 35 minutes
 Style: Solo

Language: English
 Genre(s): Non-Fiction, Religion, History

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The practice of issuing public decrees to establish the doctrines of the Catholic Church dates back to the 6th century. By the late 13th century the decrees came to be called “papal bulls”, so named for the seal, or bulla, affixed to the bottom of the document to signify its authenticity. A 14th century papal bull held that the pope could use the treasury of merit and deeds of past saints to forgive temporal punishments for sins. By the early 16th century the practice of the clergy selling plenary indulgences to persons of means to reduce their time in purgatory for sins committed by the buyers or their loved ones had become widespread. Martin Luther, a professor of moral theology at the University of Wittenberg in Germany, believed the practice had become abusive and developed a list of propositions intended for academic debate on the subject, arguing that monetization led to the avoidance of true repentance and also inhibited acts of charity and mercy.

The list, which came to be known as *The Ninety-five Theses* or *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences*, was sent to the Bishop of Mainz on October 31, 1517 and is also thought to have been posted on the door of the All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg and other churches. The Theses were immediately controversial and “went viral”, being reprinted, translated and distributed throughout Europe within two months. The resulting schism is now considered the tipping point that became the Reformation.

Martin Luther (November 10, 1483 – February 18, 1546) was a German monk, priest, composer, and professor known for his leading role in the Protestant Reformation. He was born the eldest son of a mine operator who wanted him to become a lawyer. He earned a masters degree in 1505, studied law briefly and pursued philosophy before turning to faith. He became a monk in 1505, was ordained, earned his Doctor of Theology degree and joined the faculty of the University of Wittenberg in 1512 as chair of theology. He came to reject certain beliefs and practices, particularly indulgences, and called for an academic discussion of the topic in *The Ninety-five Theses* in 1517, which spread throughout Europe in two months. The ensuing controversy led to Luther being declared a heretic; he was excommunicated in 1521 after refusing to renounce his writings. Declared an outlaw, he was taken by supporters to the safety of Wartburg Castle, where he translated the New Testament into German and issued a torrent of doctrinal and polemical writings that began to challenge core church doctrines. He secretly returned to Wittenberg in 1522 to deliver a famous series of eight sermons during a time of unrest. He developed a clear summary of the new faith in the form of the Small and Large Catechisms, completed his translation of the Old Testament into German and composed numerous hymns; all these are still in use. His many contributions are too numerous to mention here. Perhaps the knowledge that he was the most popular writer of his day and the brains behind the most important revision of Christian doctrine in history will give an idea of his genius and influence.