
Protestant Reformation

Part 3: Protest

As Narrated by Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.

The Protestant Reformation is dated from a specific event that happened 500 years ago this coming October. On Sunday, October 31, 1517 Martin Luther publicly published his list of 95 criticisms of the Catholic practice of selling Indulgences. This document is referred to as the 95 Theses.

The 95 Theses are a list of 95 specific criticisms about the corrupt and unscriptural practice of selling indulgences.

Indulgences were marketed as product the Catholic Church could provide that transferred virtue from an available reservoir of excess blessings acquired from the Saints which could be allocated for the benefit of others. This could free a soul from purgatory earlier. This right to allocate was part of the “keys of St. Peter” held by the Pope.

This marketing of salable virtue was done as a blatant money raising venture, authorized by the Pope, sold by John Tetzel, a monk, with the proceeds shared by a local nobleman and Pope Leo X.

Martin Luther faced a dilemma: If he was to criticize the church while the church had claimed since 1302 that there was no salvation outside the Catholic church, was he consigning his soul to damnation.

Martin Luther had to solve the dilemma about his personal salvation before he confronted and called the church to repent of its sins. He resolved the conflict through meditation on Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verse 17: “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” From this statement Luther concluded he could trust the Bible alone to obtain faith, and faith was the means for obtaining salvation.

This meant he needed to and safely could reject the Pope's 1302 claim that salvation outside the Catholic Church was impossible. That was a bold step, especially for someone as sincere and devoted as Martin Luther was to his religion.

When Martin Luther took the leap of faith and publishing the 95 Theses, he set in motion changes that no one could control.

Luther's original purpose was to reform Catholicism. But things were quickly outside of his control.

The reaction of the Church to his criticism, the local political German environment, widespread discontent with Catholic domination of society, and other people who saw hope for their own salvation independent of a hierarchy of men, were forces waiting for the chance for change. Luther provided a rationalization for rebellion against Rome. The fact that the Roman church owned so much of the land throughout Europe tempted political leaders to reject Rome's control so they could seize the land and divert the resources to local nobility instead of exporting their value to the distant rulers of the church in Rome. Local leaders could get a new revenue stream taken directly from the Catholic Church.

Many things came together to produce a groundswell following Martin Luther's brave act to allow the Protestant Reformation to succeed. Martin Luther was chased, threatened, hounded, and he went into exile. He was given protective custody by Frederick the Wise, a local political leader who favored Luther's view.

In time there was a new church, the Lutheran church – an accomplishment that was never the original objective of Martin Luther in criticizing Indulgences. He wanted a reform, but provoked outright protest because of the widespread acknowledgment that Catholicism was corrupt. Once the fire was lit, it could not be contained.

Luther's act continued like a stone cut out of the mountain without hands to roll down and to gain steam, and to produce the Protestant Reformation.