

Martin Luther (8):

95 Theses Nailed to the Door

“As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Such had become of the sale of indulgences. It was a scandal.

Martin Luther set out to do something about them. A year ago Luther had warned the people of Wittenberg about indulgences in a sermon on the eve of All Saints Day. On All Saints Day it was believed that one could earn quite large indulgences for coming to the Castle Church in Wittenberg, contributing money, and viewing all the relics on display there—thousands of them: bones, hair, teeth, and more. The elector of Wittenberg had worked hard to acquire such a collection. Wittenberg was the Rome of Germany—Luther’s own Wittenberg!

All Saints Day was soon approaching again and the situation was only getting worse. This time Luther decided to write down a set of theses, or statements, to discuss with his fellow professors about indulgences. He wrote 95 of them! Clearly Luther was upset and had much to say. He wrote them in Latin and nailed the placard onto the door of the Castle Church. It was the eve of All Saints Day, October 31, 1517. Many people would be visiting the Castle Church to see the relics there, including theologians and priests who would be able to read the Latin statements. He sent a copy of them to the archbishop of Germany, too. Luther did not intend all people coming to church that day to read his theses. And they all did not. Most people knew only German.

So why is this day so important to us almost 500 years later?

Because in a few weeks all the people *were* reading his theses. Someone translated them into German. In the providence of God, the printing press was a new invention and thousands of copies were soon printed. Now not just a few professors in Wittenberg were discussing Luther’s statements, but all of Germany, and Europe!

Many people already disliked the sale of indulgences. They felt they were being robbed by them. This was not new. But what was new was understanding *why* indulgences were wrong. This is what Luther’s theses began to explain. Indulgences not only robbed people of hard-earned money and robbed deacons of alms for the poor, much worse, they robbed God’s people of the comfort that comes from trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. Here was the heart of the matter.

Understanding this was significant. Christ alone, Scripture alone, faith alone—with these truths the people were finally brought out of the darkness and into the light. As the first rays of dawn are swiftly and surely followed by bright morning sun, the truth could no longer stay hid. The people began to understand. The Reformation was begun.

(This series of articles was primarily based on Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther by Roland Bainton)