

Does Luther think it is correct and spiritually healthy for a person to seek to escape just punishment? (What evidence can you give for your answer?) What is the proper attitude to take towards the suffering that results from Original Sin? What elements of it are we under an obligation to resist? What elements of it are we under an obligation to accept -even to affirm?

The force of your answer will come home to you to the degree that you explicitly recall for yourself what the effects of Original Sin are, according to the theology we constructed in the spirit of Augustine upon the Genesis account of the Fall of Mankind.

Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences

More commonly known as

“*The Ninety-Five Theses*”

by Dr. Martin Luther, 1517



STUDY GUIDE

*English 233: Introduction to Western Humanities -
Baroque & Enlightenment*

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52-56.

Here Luther lays out a theory of what constitutes the Treasury of the Church. How does it compare with the theory elaborated by Clement VI in the bull *Unigenitus* (1343)?

62.

Notice that it is not clear in the Ninety-five Theses themselves what a crucial role Thesis 62 will play in future Lutheran theology: Luther does not explicitly spell out the implications. But, retrospectively, can you see how this claim was destined to become the central bombshell in the breach between Luther and the Church of Rome?

65.

What does Luther mean here by the phrase "men of riches"? Is he referring to people with lots of money and property? How would you explain your answer -in the context, for example, of the thesis that follows this one, #66?

83.

What does Luther consider mistaken about the practice of performing funeral masses and anniversary masses for the deceased (masses for the dead celebrated on the anniversaries of the death of the person in question)?

What is the purpose of these ceremonies? (What is prayed for in them?)

In what sense is it a confidence game to accept money for performing such services?

(Is the issue of simony also at stake here, i.e., separately and distinctly?)

86.

Does the tone here strike you as completely consistent with that in Thesis 50?

93.

If we read this thesis carefully in the context of #92, which immediately precedes it, and which is couched in grammatically parallel form, what are we to understand as the sense of the included claim that "there is no cross"?

94.-95.

Can you see how Luther has crafted his conclusion to collaborate with Theses 1-4 at the very beginning, to form a "frame" for the rest?

33. The *inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to God* is the divine grace conveyed in the blood of Christ shed in the Crucifixion.
35. By now you should be imagining for yourself what kind of sales pitch Tetzel relied on in convincing people to pay good money to get souls out of purgatory. Whose souls would he be pointing to? How would he paint them?

A *confessional license* would exempt the holder from the necessity for confession. Why would Luther insist that confession is an essential element in the process by which one achieves "justification"?

36. *Compunction* is a synonym for "contrition," "regret," "repentance." (See note on "penitence" at Thesis 1.) Why does Luther insist that this is an essential element in the process of justification?

42. Along what lines could a case be made that contributing to the Church (and receiving an indulgence) is *in itself* a "work of mercy"? (What, supposedly, would the Church be using the contribution to support? [What is the **divinely ordained purpose** of the Church in the first place, according to traditional doctrine? What is its **role in history**?])

43. Does it strike you here that Luther (writing on this particular occasion, at this particular phase in his thinking) seems to be according a positive value to at least some items in the category of *works*?

What do you understand to be Luther's ultimate position on the value and effect of works in the salvational scheme? Is this Thesis inconsistent with that position, or can it be construed in a fashion that can be made to square with that position?

50. Here we find a claim that must have resonated strongly with those who resented the flow of capital from the German North to Italy.

The indulgence being marketed by Tetzel distressed Luther because he saw it as misinforming lay people (i.e., non-clerics) about crucial aspects of God's plan for redeeming fallen humanity - about, in other words, the whole purpose of history, and about the nature (specifically, the Will) of God. To be misinformed in essentials about the nature of God means that what one ends up obeying is a false image of God. This constitutes a "mortal sin" (see the note to Thesis 2), and leads (if not corrected) to damnation. Specifically, Albert's indulgence (as represented by Tetzel) encroached on the sacrament of penance.

The numbers to the left refer to the respective theses that comprise the document as a whole.

- * In the note to Thesis 6, you will find some suggestions about how to think of the organizational strategy Luther follows in listing his first 52 theses.
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1. **Poenitentiam agite:** "Do penance." **Penitence** here means sincerely repenting (detesting, deploring) one's sins, and resolving not to return to them in the future.
2. **This word:** refers to the Christ's word in the saying quoted in the previous thesis, and in particular to the term "penitence" (*poenitentia*). **Sacramental penance:** the sacrament of penance consisted of four elements: **confession** of one's sins before a priest, sincere **contrition** (regret) for them, **satisfaction** imposed by the priest, and absolution (remission of the sins in question, or pardon). Luther confines himself to citing here the two elements of action (confession and satisfaction) that were to be carried out by the penitent (the person undergoing or receiving the sacrament). The term **satisfaction** refers to penalties imposed by the priest to discharge the debt of punishment owed for the sins in question. (When carried out, these "satisfy" or fulfill the justice of God. [Compare the language of the honor code regulating duels among the European aristocracy: an insult to one's honor requires "satisfaction," and the insultee acquires the right to choose what that shall be, within the limits of the prevailing code.]) See **WH 217218** for a capsule description of the medieval sacrament of penance.

Two categories of sin are recognized. **Mortal sins** involve turning away from the eternal good, or God. (The breach of Faith committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden constituted mortal sin. So did what Cain did to Abel.) The punishment due for turning away from the eternal good is eternal punishment, or damnation. **Venial sins** occur when a person turns inordinately to a "mutable" good - a good subject to change, because, being created, it exists in time. (Such goods are thus also called "temporal" or "earthly" goods.) Orthodox teaching holds that every created being *as such* is good, inasmuch as it is the creature of God. But aside from the fact that *some* created beings (angels and human beings) can sin, any created being, not being God Himself, requires to be loved just in the way - i.e., in the degree and circumstances - that God ordains. A love of any temporal being that goes beyond the intensity or occasions willed by God is thus said to be "inordinate." Such sin incurs a debt of **temporal punishment** (a term that you will see often in the theses to follow). The priest (via his ordination by a bishop appointed in turn by the pope) is a designated representative of the pope. (We meet here the general concept of **vicars and vicarage**, which will become a focus of even more fundamental dispute when Luther a few years later comes to attack the even more fundamental notion that the pope is Christ's own designated vicar.) Hence when a priest administering the sacrament of penance imposes satisfaction on the penitent, he is acting on behalf of the pope. This explains why Luther speaks interchangeably of "penalties...imposed by [the pope's] own authority" (Thesis 5), or of "those imposed by himself" (Thesis 20), or of "penalties of sacramental satisfaction, which are of human appointment" (Thesis 34).

3. Can you see the connection with **asceticism** here, and in Thesis 4? (Of course there are ascetics and ascetics! Remember, Pelagius was an ascetic, too. In what points of doctrine would Luther and Pelagius part company?)

5. **"Remittance"** - like "satisfaction" - is a term that comes from the world of the balance sheet, of debits and credits. Both guilt and punishment due are conceived as debts that must be paid. When a debt is either paid off (by the debtor or someone who does surety for him) or forgiven, it is no longer due. When the creditor or injured party signifies (directly or through his authorized agent) that the debt is no longer due, he is said to "remit" the sin. (The term "remit" comes from the Latin word meaning "to send back." The custom persists in banking today: when you pay off your house mortgage,

How does Luther stand with respect to the bull *Salvator Noster* (1476)?

Note that Luther's tactic in the Ninety-five Theses is to assume that the Pope is unaware of the doctrinal errors being preached in his name by a "mad" servant, who is betraying his master. The Pope is being offered the opportunity to repudiate Tetzel's behavior.

Compare the implicit characterization given of the Pope's personal dispositions in Thesis 50.

23. Note that Luther concedes here that it is possible for some rare individuals to pass directly to heaven. But he does not go so far here as to claim what the Church had long insisted on, namely, that the saints die in a state of excess of merit, which then passes into the Treasury of Merit, out of which merits can be drawn to substitute for the temporal penalties that would otherwise be due for sin.

How does this re-definition of the concept of "saint" square with the particular theory of the Treasury of Merit set forth in Pope Clement VI's bull *Unigenitus* (1343)?

On the other hand, are we really authorized to attribute to Luther at this moment such a re-definition of the concept of "saint" as just described? Consider Thesis 58.

27. One of the jingles attributed to Tetzel went like this. (The rhymes, incidentally, are basically the same in German and English.)

"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from Purgatory springs."

32. **Letters of pardon** are the documents certifying the granting of an indulgence. (See also Thesis 52.)

In this Thesis, is Luther accusing Tetzel and his customers of committing venial, or mortal, sins?

the bank will give back to you the loan certificate, now marked paid, along with the deed to the property, both of which it kept in its physical possession until you paid off your debt.)

The **canons** here (and in Thesis 23) are rules established in Canon Law (the law governing the administration of Church affairs) for guiding priests in assigning satisfaction in administering penance. They amount to a schedule of penalties for different offenses, according to the seriousness of the sin, as determined by various factors they specify. (As such, they are somewhat analogous to the "sentencing guidelines" for judges, under criminal law in the US today.)

6.

Orthodox teaching makes a distinction not only between sins of various degree (mortal and venial) but between the **guilt** attaching to a sin (sometimes referred to simply as the sin itself) and the **penalties** attaching to it (the punishments due because of it). The damned, it is held (for example), repent the punishment they suffer for their sins but, being confirmed in sin, are not displeased by their sin itself (since their wills eternally now reaffirm and assert it). Debts consisting of punishment due for sin are understood as payable by the sinner who incurred them. The debt of guilt (the debt of sin *per se*) is not. It can be discharged only when one of two things occurs: either it is either "forgiven" (by God the Father) or it is taken on and paid off by another (the Son) whose wealth is sufficiently great to do so. (Can you see the connection to what is referred to in Thesis 33).

Theses 5 and 6 together turn on this distinction. (So does Thesis 76, later on.) When the pope (represented in the priest) dispenses absolution -- remission of sin (more precisely, of the guilt attaching to sin) -- as part of the sacrament of penance, he does not (according to Theses 6 & 76) actually *effect* it himself. Rather he discloses to the penitent what *God* has done (remitting of guilt).

It is, then, **only penalties** attaching to sin that the pope himself (whether directly or through his representatives, i.e., priests) can remit. Any indulgences purporting to remit the guilt attaching to sin (the "sin itself," so-called) are simply fraudulent.

Moreover, *within* the category of penalties, it is only those that have been prescribed by canon law or that he had the authority to impose in the first place and did indeed go on to impose (again, whether directly

7.

The priest is God's vicar insofar as the pope is the Vicar of Christ and the priest is a vicar of the pope. See note 5 above.

Thesis 7 says, then, that remission of guilt, though it is done only by God, is something God has for his own reasons chosen to do only for those who submit themselves to the Church, and, as part of doing this, participate in the sacraments (here, specifically, the sacrament of penance, though communion is also a part of what is comprehended here). In other words, there is no salvation outside the Church. (Cf. Thesis 38.)

Later, Luther doesn't abolish the priesthood. Rather, he declares the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers." (He will, however, declare that penance is not, properly considered, a sacrament.)

20.

Plenary remission means *full* remission. (In Thesis 23 the synonymous formula "entire remission" is used.) Luther concedes the power of the Pope to remit *all* penalties of *only* the restricted class of temporal penalties imposed in the sacrament of penance or due under the canons of governing the assignment of satisfactions in penance (in the case of sins committed but not yet dealt with by receiving the sacrament of penance).

22.

Neither *other* penalties (for example, those actually due for souls in purgatory) nor *guilt* attaching to sins (even venial sins - Thesis 76) are within the power of the Pope to remit. But all indulgences are issued by the Pope. Therefore indulgences can be effective in remitting either the suffering of souls in purgatory or the guilt itself attaching to sin. Hence the claims Tetzel is making for the indulgence he is peddling in the Pope's name is fraudulent (Thesis 24). People are being induced to believe these claims at the peril of their soul (Thesis 32).

For the doctrine of **purgatory**, and its connection with the medieval system of penance, see **WH** 218 (paragraph 3). Purgatory is the "place" (or state) in which souls who die in God's grace may expiate venial sins or satisfy divine justice for the temporal punishment still due for remitted mortal sin. The term comes from the past participle of the Latin verb *purigare*, which means "to purge" (to purify by getting rid of defilement).

or through the priesthood) that he can remit. *All other penalties are remittable only by God.* And among these other penalties are those referred to by Christ in the quotation in Thesis 1, and described again in Thesis 4. Since this "true inward repentance" that consists in "hatred of self" for having committed the sin "continues until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven," it continues to be suffered by souls in purgatory.

Conclusion: *these penalties of sin -- the remorse suffered by souls in purgatory on their way to heaven -- are outside the power of the pope to remit.* Any indulgences purporting to remit the suffering of souls in purgatory (penalties for sin being experienced by them, namely, their remorse for having committed them) are likewise fraudulent.

But even among the living, *this* sort of penalty for sin cannot be remitted by the pope -- for Christ has commanded us to undergo it as long as we live (Thesis 1). Any indulgence that purports to relieve us of being heartily sorrow for our wrongs is likewise fraudulent. Worse, it encourages us to violate Christ's express command. (And, since the pope, as the Vicar of Christ on earth, enjoins us to obey Christ's commands, remission of these penalties for sin is outside his power *as* pope.)

What remains are those penalties imposed by the pope or the canon law, in the context of the sacrament of penance, as administered by priests. [This is the language of Theses 5 and 20. Thesis 34 uses the formula "appointed by man" (since the pope and the priests are not God) to describe "sacramental satisfaction" -- i.e., penalties of the sort the priest declares the penitent to owe.)] Coming at this category from still another point of view, authorities described them as "temporal punishment." (See the note to Thesis 2.) Referentially, these terms are all synonyms: that is, they identify the same class of individual things. Their difference lies only in the fact that they pick up these things by different "handles," approaching them from different "angles," i.e., via different relationships they have with other things.

Theses 7-8 focus on Tetzel's claim that the indulgence he was selling was issued by the pope and had the power to remit guilt for sins.

Luther circles back to this theme later on, in Theses 75-76.

Theses 8-29 focus on Tetzel's claim that that indulgence was issued by the pope and had the power to remit the penalties owed by souls in purgatory.

Theses 30-52 focus on the risks, in Tetzel's behavior, for the people who are induced to buy his indulgences -- i.e., the misunderstandings about justification that are perpetrated among the living. (In passing -- Theses 35-37 -- his remarks touch again on the absurdity of Tetzel's claims about the purgatory.) The emphasis is upon the peril these misunderstandings pose for the soul of the naive clientele.

In **Theses 30-40**, the chief emphasis here is the necessity, for sinners, of a proper understanding of the requirement for genuine **contrition**, and the way in which indiscriminate peddling of indulgences implicitly preaches the contrary.

In **Theses 41-46**, the emphasis shifts the risks that lie in presenting purchase of pardons as instances of good works, when, in their effect on the soul, or what they signify about the condition of the soul, is far inferior to what is accomplished by **works of charity**.

Thesis 52 sums up this line of attack.

[??**Thesis 47**: does it fit in this organizational scheme? Or does it belong with **Theses 48-51**??]

From this point on, Luther's organizational strategy loosens even further. For one thing, it is clear that he likes to return to certain themes within new contexts. Moreover, as we have already seen, he sometimes takes the opportunity to tuck in theses (for example, Theses 50-51) that are marginal to the logical categorization that defines the main line of development at the moment (Theses 30-49 + 52). Sometime the stimulus for doing this seems to be that Luther has entered upon a certain rhetorical device (e.g., the repetition of an opening formula, like "Christians are to be taught that") which carries its own power of suggestion for what could be usefully included at a given moment.

After Thesis 52, there does not seem to be a definite overall pattern of organization at work, although there are clearly stretches within which Luther is focusing on a particular theme (e.g., what are the true Treasures of the Church? [**Theses 56-68**]) or a rhetorical turn (e.g., **Theses 81-91**, where the move is to point out how the pardons being sold by Tetzel bring the pope into disrepute with the laity by stimulating them to sarcastic impieties that nevertheless seem plausible on the false assumption that the pope supports the sale of such pardons).