

Luther and the 95 Theses: Newfound Desire to Help the Poor

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1517 will forever be a year that went down in history as well as theology. This was the year that Martin Luther put up the 95 Theses on the doors of the [Castle Church](#) in Wittenberg, Germany. The main purpose of Luther doing this was to reform against the Catholic church and let everyone know that he didn't like what was going on. Luther's major objection of the Catholic Church that caused the 95 theses was the sale of [indulgences](#). Luther's critique of indulgences in the 95 Theses motivated a desire all across Europe to help the poor. Some of the main ideas that came from this new-found motivation was the fact that if someone was poor, they shouldn't be spending their money on indulgences anyway, they should be using it to help their sick or dying family members.[\[1\]](#) Because not everyone at this time could afford to buy indulgences in the first place, they weren't promised minimal time in [purgatory](#).[\[2\]](#) However, looking on the other side of things as far as motivation to help the poor, if people had spare money they would tend to spend it all on more indulgences and other selfish reasons instead of using the money to help the poor.



Martin Luther showing the poor the 95 Theses

Right around the time of Luther's arrival in Wittenberg, the Roman Catholic Castle Church had finished being built. During this time, the Catholic priests, also known as indulgence preachers, were selling indulgences to everyone in the towns. One of the most widely known indulgence preacher was [Johannes Tetzel](#). These indulgences were said to be ways that one could minimize their time in purgatory, but not necessarily be completely free of hell.[\[3\]](#) This is what sparked Luther's protest against the Catholic church. He did not believe that indulgences should be sold. He claims that they should be free and for everyone no matter what sins they've committed. So on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther went to the Castle Church in Wittenberg and nailed 95 different theses onto the doors focusing on what he disagrees with in the Catholic church and why indulgences should never be sold. On top of the sale of indulgences, Luther points out in his theses that the buying and selling are "only the tip of a much larger issue" [\[4\]](#).



[Johann Vogel](#), *Johannes Tetzel and his indulgence chest*

These actions are only the beginning of what the Reformation looks like. It was because of Luther's theses that there was a Reformation to begin with. His objection to the sale of indulgences paved the way for Protestants for years and years to come. Had he not expressed his concerns at this particular time, where religion and government in the medieval times had already been changing rapidly, the outcome would have been extremely different. One of his main points that he is trying to get across so that people help the poor is that the

money people have should not even be spent on indulgences in the first place. The 43rd thesis states that “Christians are to be taught that the one who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than one who buys indulgences” [5]. Since Luther was against the selling of indulgences, he makes a point to emphasize the fact that there is no true goodness that comes from buying indulgences.[6] Luther wants everyone to spend that money on what’s truly important, their families, or sick and dying loved ones. He thinks that will prove to be more beneficial in the long run.

During this time period, almost all of Germany was considered poor. This leads to a very unfair advantage to the people who were not poor. If someone was not able to buy an indulgence for themselves or their family, then they just automatically got more time in purgatory. In *Luther and the Hungry Poor* by [Samuel Torvend](#), it is mentioned that there were people of this time that would not be able to pay for any indulgences. He asks the question, “What then would be the eternal fate of the working poor, the landless poor, the destitute, the homeless, and the chronically ill who would find it almost impossible to assist themselves or their dead relatives?”[7]. This, indeed, is a very important questions to ask, as it seems as though the indulgence preachers were excluding all of the poor people as a whole from the Kingdom of Heaven. It is also noted how almost half of the population of Germany in the sixteenth-century were “on the edge of subsistence”[8]. This is just of the reasons why Luther was completely against the selling of indulgences. It isn’t fair that just because someone is physically or financially unable to pay for these indulgences that they don’t get the same afterlife as others do.[9] Johannes Tetzel was also not helping in this particular situation with his selling of indulgences. According to Torvend, Tetzel says “Do you not hear the voices of your dead parents and other people, screaming and saying: ‘We are suffering severe punishments and pain [in purgatory], from which you could rescue us with few alms, if only you would.’” [10]. In saying this, Tetzel is not only leaving out the poor people, but he’s trying to get them to still spend their money on indulgences even though they may not have the money for it. The idea of the poor not being treated fairly has been happening since way before Luther’s time. This helped shape the Reformation greatly, however. Torvend says that “Luther demonstrated that he was mindful of social realities as well as theological claims” throughout this time period [11]. So he knew what was happening on the poverty-stricken side of things. Had Luther not been aware of what was going on with the lack of indulgences sold to the poor people, he would not have become so adamant on making things change so swiftly. So because there was an issue with not only the selling of indulgences, but the unfair selling of indulgences and giving people the

wrong ideas about afterlife, this sparked up the Reformation from the Catholic church in 1517.



[David Deuchar](#), *Death comes for a poor German child**If you want to learn more about social welfare in Germany, see [Sarah Steffen's blog](#)*

One of the final points that Luther is trying to make in terms of a desired motivation to help the poor is that the people were being selfish and were spending their spare money on indulgences instead of going around and helping out the poor. According to Tolvend, Luther's 43rd thesis was not necessarily supposed to be directed toward the analysis of hunger and poverty, but instead it was intended to highlight the manner in which indulgences were purchased by means of mercy[12]. In this case, the mercy that Luther and Tolvend are referring to is the fact that people in this time period will walk right past the poor and not help them out, yet they will go out and buy indulgences without any struggle. In the 45th thesis, Luther states that "Christians are to be taught that the one who sees a needy person and passes by, yet gives money for indulgences does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath"[13]. This thesis is just reiterating the fact that there is no real significance to buying the indulgences and that if you're willing to be selfish and ignore the poor as you see them, then you will just deal with God's wrath anyway. Tolvend says that "God desires to forgive humans who are truly repent, who manifest a genuine conversion of life, a turning toward God" and emphasizes that God is focused on forgiveness no matter what[14]. Tolvend talks about this because he is backing up what Luther

is saying about people being selfish with spending their money on indulgences and how they aren't worth it because in the end God will forgive us.

Over the last five hundred years, the church has undergone many new and different changes and reformations. Of those changes and reformations, the most impactful one was the reformation from the Catholic church. Martin Luther did not agree with what the Catholic churches ways of selling indulgences, so he wrote 95 theses that explained in great detail about why the indulgences were wrong and what he would do to fix them. What started off as just a way for scholars and theologians to discuss the points he made, turned into a worldwide phenomenon, thus creating the new Christian faith of Protestantism. After some looking deeper into the effects of the 95 Theses, *Luther and The Hungry Poor* by Tolvend, and *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* by Lull, one can come to the conclusion that Luther's critiques of indulgences in the 95 Theses motivated a desire to help the poor. There were three main points that one can take away from this, the first one being that the money people were spending on indulgences should have been spent on family who were sick or dying instead of pieces of paper with indulgences on them. To add on to that point, most of Germany at the time was very poor, meaning that not everybody could afford to buy indulgences whenever they wanted to, thus causing a lot of unfairness throughout the country. Now focusing on wealthier groups of people, there were many people who would constantly walk right past begging poor people and not do a single thing, but once it came down to buying indulgences, they would be at the front of the line. Luther's, Tolvend's, and Lull's writings have all come together and express not only how selfish the people could be during the time period, but the fact that the 95 Theses made everyone aware of the fact that the indulgences didn't actually mean anything in the eyes of God in the first place.