

## THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION: MARTIN LUTHER'S 95 THESES

Read some background information about the Protestant Reformation. Then answer the questions below.

### What was the Protestant Reformation?

The Protestant Reformation, often simply called the Reformation, was a period in European history that challenged and redefined religious practices throughout Christianity. Before the Reformation, most people in Europe followed Roman Catholicism. The powerful leader of the Roman Catholic Church was called the pope.



*Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses in Wittenburg, Germany, in 1517 | Painting by Ferdinand Pauwels, 1872*

The Reformation began in 1517, when a German monk named Martin Luther publicly called for Catholic leaders to reform their teachings and practices. The practice Martin Luther criticized most strongly was selling indulgences. **Indulgences** were letters people bought from the Catholic Church to decrease punishment for their sins. Martin Luther wrote a list of criticisms against the sale of indulgences. This list was called the *95 Theses*. He posted these attacks against the pope and the Catholic Church on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany.

#### 1 | What group was the main focus of criticism during the Protestant Reformation?

- a. All religious organizations
- b. European political leaders
- c. The Roman Catholic Church
- d. Any religion that disagreed with the Roman Catholic Church

#### 2 | Complete the sentences based on the passage above.

The Reformation began in the year 1517 when a German monk named Martin Luther criticized the selling of indulgences. People could buy indulgences from the Roman Catholic Church to decrease punishment for their sins.

The German monk posted a list of many other criticisms against the Catholic Church and its leader, the pope. This list was called the 95 Theses, and it is a document many historians study to better understand the causes of the Protestant Reformation.

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Read an example of Martin Luther's criticisms of indulgences in his *95 Theses*. Then answer the question.

Thesis 36: Every truly **repentant** Christian has a right to full **remission** of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.

**repentant**: seeking forgiveness  
**remission**: forgiveness

**3 | Complete the sentence based on the excerpt above.**

Luther believes that all repentant Christians can receive forgiveness of their sins, even without

\_\_\_\_\_ **letters of pardon** \_\_\_\_\_. (Also accept **indulgences**.)

**Martin Luther explains why indulgences are not necessary for salvation. Read the four theses below. Then answer the questions.**

Thesis 41: **Apostolic pardons** are to be preached with caution, lest the people may falsely think them preferable to other good works of love.

Thesis 42: Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend the buying of pardons to be compared in any way to works of mercy.

Thesis 43: Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons.

Thesis 44: Because love grows by works of love, and man becomes better; but by pardons man does not grow better, only more free from penalty.

**Apostolic pardons**: the pope's official forgiveness of specific sins

**4 | Based on the theses above, what can you infer about Martin Luther's beliefs?**

- a. He believed that indulgences were better than good works.
- b. He believed that buying pardons was the same as being generous and merciful to the needy.
- c. He believed preaching about the advantages of pardons from the pope was a good practice.
- d.** He believed that doing good works was the best way to gain forgiveness and become a better person.

**5 | List three actions that Martin Luther believes are preferable to buying indulgences. Sample answers**

1. **Doing works of love or mercy** \_\_\_\_\_
2. **Giving to the poor** \_\_\_\_\_
3. **Lending to the needy** \_\_\_\_\_

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Keep going! Answer the questions below.

6 | Look back at Thesis 44 on the previous page. According to that thesis, why does Martin Luther suggest that works of love are better than pardons?

- a. Because only pardons from the pope will forgive your sins
- b. Because works of love help to forgive your sins and make you a better person
- c. Because pardons make you more free from penalty
- d. Because works of love do not make you free from penalty

Read another example of Martin Luther's criticism of indulgences. Then answer the questions.

Thesis 46: Christians are to be taught that unless they have more than they need, they are bound to keep back what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on Pardons.

7 | What group of people does Martin Luther seem to be trying to protect in Thesis 46?

- a. The Roman Catholic Church
- b. The pope
- c. The priests selling indulgences
- d. The poor

**Bonus question:**

8 | The Protestant Reformation eventually led to several religious groups breaking away from the Catholic Church to start Christian churches that offered alternatives to Roman Catholic theology and practices. After analyzing excerpts for Martin Luther's 95 Theses, what impact do you think Martin Luther had on the Protestant Reformation? **Sample answer**  
Martin Luther was a Catholic monk willing to criticize the pope and the Catholic Church's role in selling letters of pardon, also called indulgences. Luther's belief that good works were the best way to receive forgiveness for sins challenged Catholic Church practices. Luther publicly displayed his criticisms by posting his 95 Theses on a Catholic Church door. This set an example for others to speak out.