

The Theses That Shook the World

at On the 31st of October, 1517, Martin Luther walked boldly to the church door at Wittenberg and nailed to it ninety-five Theses or propositions against the doctrine of indulgences. He declared himself ready to defend them on the morrow at the university, against any and all. These Theses spread with the rapidity of lightning. In a short time the pilgrims, the university, the whole town rang with them. A month had not elapsed before they were at Rome. "In a fortnight," said a contemporary historian, "they were in every part of Germany, and in four weeks had traversed almost the whole of Christendom; as if the angels themselves had been the messengers, and carried them before the eyes of all men." They were afterwards translated into Dutch and Spanish, and a traveller even sold them at Jerusalem! What did these famous Theses contain to cause such publicity, and to shake the very foundations of the Church of Rome? Some of these Propositions are quoted below, written with the pen of the monk:

6. "The pope cannot remit any condemnation, but only declare and confirm the remission which God himself has given. At least he can only do it in cases which belong to him. If he does otherwise, the condemnation remains exactly as before.

8. "The laws of ecclesiastical penance ought to be imposed on the living only, and have nothing to do with the dead.

27. "It is the preaching of human folly to pretend, that at the very moment when the money tinkles in the strong box, the soul flies off from purgatory.

32. "Those who imagine they are sure of salvation by means of indulgences will go to the devil, with those who teach them so.

36. "Every Christian who truly repents of his sins has entire forgiveness of the penalty and the fault, and, so far, has no need of indulgence.

37. "Every true Christian, dead or alive, participates in all the blessings of Christ and of the Church by the gift of God and without a letter of indulgence.

43. "Christians must be told that he who gives to the poor, or lends to the needy, does better than he who buys an indulgence.

52. "To hope to be saved by indulgences is an empty and lying hope even should the commissary of indulgences, nay, the pope himself, be pleased to pledge his own soul in security of it.

62. "The true and precious treasure of the Church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

76. "The indulgence of the pope cannot take away the smallest daily sin, in regard to the fault or delinquency.

79. "To say that a cross adorned with the arms of the pope is as powerful as the cross of Christ is blasphemy.

80. "Bishops, pastors, and theologians, who allow such things to be said to the people, will be called to account for it.

92. "Would, then, that we were discombered of all the preachers who say to the church of Christ, Peace! Peace! when there is no peace!

94. "Christians should be exhorted to diligence in following Christ their head through crosses, death, and hell.

95. "For it is far better to enter the kingdom of heaven through much tribulation, than to acquire a carnal security by the flattery of a false peace."

The germ of the Reformation was contained in these theses of Luther. Not only were the abuses of indulgence attacked in them, but the evangelical doctrine of a free and gracious remission of sins was publicly professed for the first time. Henceforth the work must grow. The feeble strokes of the hammer were followed throughout Germany by a succession of blows which reached even to proud Rome, threatening sudden ruin to the walls, the gates, and the pillars of the papacy, stunning and terrifying its champions, and at the same time awakening thousands from the sleep of error. The Reformation was on!