

The Significance of October 31, 1517

For more than a year Martin Luther had privately questioned the value of indulgences. Indulgences were certificates that freed people from performing acts of penance the church required to show sorrow for certain sins. Indulgences were never intended to let people “buy forgiveness.” They were supposed to express people’s inner desire to turn from sin. However, many medieval priests and popes distorted the original intent of indulgences. Now Luther found out some people were saying sorrow for sins was not necessary if you bought an indulgence.

Although he wasn’t calling for the total elimination of indulgences, Luther was convinced indulgences were being abused and people were being misled. When Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* on October 31, 1517, he had no idea these statements would lead to the Reformation. He wrote them in Latin and not for public consumption. Luther was calling for an academic discussion. In these theses Luther did not suggest breaking with the Catholic Church. At this time, he still believed in purgatory and other teachings he would later reject. This was a beginning point, not a fully developed reform.

In his theses Luther emphasized two points. “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying ‘Repent,’ wanted the entire life of the faithful to be one of penitence” (Thesis 1). “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (Thesis 62). Repentance and the gospel—here Luther sowed the seeds of the Reformation. The harvest came later.

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Southeastern Wisconsin District Festival Service

November 5 ♦ 3:30 PM

Miller High Life Theatre

500 W Kilbourn Ave ♦ Milwaukee, WI

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