



2022 History Essay Contest School Highschool Winner

The Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation The Nailing of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and the Church's Reforms

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Martin Luther was an Augustinian friar who ran into many conflicts with the Catholic Church. He was a scrupulous man who did not believe that forgiveness was attainable for his sake. This caused him to voice his frustrations with Church practices in a peculiar way. He nailed his ninety-five opinions, better known as the *Ninety-Five Theses*, to the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church on 31 October 1517. In verbalizing his frustrations with the Catholic Church, Martin Luther was able to break away from the Church, form a branch of Christianity of his own, and indirectly cause reform in the Catholic Church.

There were many reasons to revolt against the Catholic Church during the sixteenth century. Leo X, A corrupt government official, was the pope at the time. One of his most egregious actions was appointing Albert Hohenzollern, who was already the Archbishop of Brandenburg, as the Archbishop of Heidelberg. The church normally has a punishment for this offense, but Pope Leo X exempted himself and Hohenzollern from any punishment. Along with this corruption, preachers were exceptionally corrupt as well. Literacy rates remained abysmal during Luther's time, so preachers explaining the Bible was essentially the only Biblical teaching that people received. All too often,

preachers would lie to their congregations, feeding them misinformation on topics such as financial indulgences. These indulgences, which in many dioceses were transformed into something financial, were advertised to “shorten the time a sinner would have to spend in purgatory after death” (Stock). This was Luther’s biggest problem with the Church of his time. Financial indulgences were people paying church leaders with the hope that they would spend less time in purgatory. What the Church now teaches is that indulgences are not something that can be paid for, but rather they are something granted through actions, prayer, visitations, *et cetera*. This was clearly an unbiblical teaching that infuriated Luther, as it showed exactly what direction the church was heading in. They were heading in a direction of greed, selfishness, and political dominance.

Luther had other doctrinal differences with the church, including justification through faith alone, interpretations of Sacred Scripture, the existence of purgatory, the primacy of the pope, and the validity of the seven sacraments (Sungenis 327). However, his most prevalent issues with the Church in 1517 were issues of reform, not doctrine. It is important to note this because he did not necessarily want to split with the Church in the beginning. He wanted to reform it back into a state of glory. All of these differences with the Church caused him to vocalize his opinions in the form of the *Ninety-Five Theses*. These were ninety-five of Luther’s opinions of the Church and its doctrines. They speak on all of Luther’s opinions of the Church, but specifically on purgatory, Sola Scriptura, and indulgences. He wanted these opinions to be made known to the Church, so he printed copies of them and sent them to Archbishop Albert of Magdeburg on 31 October 1517. Along with the copies sent to the Archbishop, the theses, “were reprinted and circulated, which means any of Luther’s supporters could have posted the document on the church door soon after its publication” (Stock). He may not have necessarily nailed them to the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church himself, but it is very possible that someone who agreed with him did so. Luther chose this method of voicing his frustrations because he wanted to target specific members of the Church, such as Pope Leo X, rather than keep his opinions solely in Germany. His goal was to speak for the humble, illiterate people of Germany against corruption of the Church rather than the members of the clergy who maintained similar opinions. Ultimately, the Church rejected Luther’s objections. Consequently, he was excommunicated on 3 January 1521.

Luther's excommunication, as well as the spread of the *Ninety-Five Theses* throughout Europe, allowed for the rapid spread of his theological views. The ideas of Lutheranism, most especially renewal in Christ through Sacred Scripture and justification through faith alone, were attractive to the common people who daily witnessed the corruption of their local clergy. People sought true, biblical relationships with Christ, and Lutheranism offered just that. His view of Scripture and Faith allowed for the people to play a more active role in weekly sermons. If literate Christians were able to get their hands on a Bible that had been translated to their local vernacular, they were able to study it and make objections to their local pastor. This idea of Sola Scriptura remained a core teaching of the Lutheran Church.

The key ideas of Lutheranism, such as justification through faith alone, Sola Scriptura, and denial of the primacy of the pope, can be seen in many other religions that arose during the Protestant Reformation. While the Church of England might have had a completely different direction and development than Lutheranism, their doctrine had heavy Lutheran influence in the area of scripture. Similarly, the confession of faith of the Church of Scotland, "... negated the authority of the pope and in essence, recognized only the authority of Jesus" (Stock). Ideas of Lutheranism were spreading not only in Scotland and England, but they were also spreading to Austria and even the Holy Roman Empire. This spread of Lutheranism led to the Schmalkadic War, which was a religious war fought between the Lutheran forces and the forces of the Holy Roman Empire in 1546. The Lutherans ultimately pressured the Holy Roman Empire and caused them to formally recognize Lutheran Churches.

Due to the widespread popularity of Lutheranism, and other protestant groups, throughout Europe, the Catholic Church saw the need to reform. The first session of the Council of Trent was called in 1545, the Church was behind the times in terms of fixing the religious divisions in Europe. Nevertheless, there were still faithful Catholics and Protestants who were calling for reform. The Council of Trent sought to accomplish two things. The first being to clarify doctrine that had come into question during the reformation, and the second being to reform the papal offices. Several doctrines that were clarified were the Church's stance on interpretation of Scripture, justification, the sacraments, and papal primacy. The Church clarified that the deuterocanonical books of the Bible were officially part of the canon of scripture and that Apostolic tradition must be held equal to scripture when

interpreting it (Sungenis 379). Next, they made the distinction that the Church does not believe in justification through works, but rather that a man who has faith must also act upon his faith in order for it to be valid. Then, they asserted that all seven sacraments were instituted by Christ as opposed to Luther's two. And finally, they maintained the validity of the pope as a direct lineage from Peter. While the council had trouble in reforming the office of the pope, it was successful in reforming the offices of the bishops and the clergy. An emphasis was put on bishops overseeing their clergy. This was done to prevent things such as priests misinforming their congregations for greedy reasons. This reform led to stronger priests, more qualified confessors, and overall better relationships between bishops and their clergies (O'Malley).

The Catholic Church was obviously in need of reform. Their actions during the mid-to-late 15th century reflected a culture of greed, desire for political power, and overall denial of religion. It took Martin Luther writing the *Ninety-Five Theses* and circulating them throughout Europe, as well as the growth of his newfound religion of Lutheranism, for the church to finally call an ecumenical council and address its internal problems. The Catholic Church would not be where it is today without Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*. The Catholic Church and its members are currently one of the largest sources of philanthropy in the world. Not only did the Catholic Church change as a result of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, but it indirectly led to the creation of an entirely new branch of Christianity. This event began a breakaway for a religious group that now makes up nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population.

Martin Luther was able to cause reform within Catholic Church, as well as create a branch of Christianity of his own, by writing and supposedly nailing his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church. While he might not have actually nailed the document to the doors, the point still gets across. The Catholic Church was headed toward corruption, and Martin Luther caused it to reform in an unorthodox way. Without this boldness in voicing his frustrations, the Catholic Church never would have become what it is today.

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