

Study Guide

The writings of Martin Luther in this volume arose in a specific historical context. They speak to and within a moment of history that was a time of great change. How do we evaluate Luther's words within the original context and determine the impact of his words for future contexts, including the present day? Luther was a teacher of Bible by vocation, and these early writings were intended to raise questions and encourage conversation. In this spirit, questions are provided here for individual reflection and group discussion.

Introduction [pp. xiii-xvi]

1. Describe your understanding of how the Reformation began? What have you have seen or heard about this? How does this compare to what is presented in the Introduction?
2. What *is* an indulgence, and how does it relate to the medieval sacrament of penance?
3. Relate the parts of penance to purgatory and indulgences.
4. In Luther's earliest sermons that mentioned indulgences from 1517, what was the nature of his critique? What difference does it make to learn that Luther himself "preached" an indulgence?
5. In light of the above, what difference does it make to you

that scholars debate whether the *Ninety-Five Theses* were posted or printed?

6. What might it mean that Luther was the first living bestselling author in the world on the basis of a German sermon?

7. Luther's theology distinguished *law* and *gospel*. How do you understand these terms as he used them.

8. What in this Introduction surprised you the most? Why?

The *Ninety-Five Theses* [pp. 1-26]

1. What are ways in today's church that people try to avoid God's judgment and therefore undermine God's gracious forgiveness?

2. Identify those theses that are hardest to understand. Why is this so?

3. Thesis 5 on the limits of indulgences to ecclesiastical penalties was used by Luther's opponents as a sign of his disrespect for the papacy. How else might this thesis be understood? Why was it so important for Luther's argument?

4. A handful of theses emphasize God's grace and the gospel. How might the human propensity either to "earn" salvation or to buy a way around God's judgment undercut the gospel today?

5. How does recognizing the rhetorical structure of the theses help in understanding Luther's intent? What seemed to you the strongest arguments? The weakest?

6. In the *Ninety-Five Theses* Luther attacks attempts to manipulate God through the purchase of "indulgences." Discuss whether and where this same confusion between grace and works exists in today's church.

The Letter to Albrecht [pp. 27-36]

1. What were Luther's main pastoral concerns?
2. Given the concerns identified in the previous question, in what ways do church leaders face similar issues today? What causes people to overlook them?
3. Are there occasions today when people use such outward humility in their speech or actions? What would be the advantages or disadvantages? Why do we now generally associate this with *false* humility?
4. Archbishop Albrecht immediately suspected heresy. Why might this be a typical reaction of someone in his position?
5. Why did Luther bother to make this protest? That is, what were his underlying motivations identifiable in the content and tone of this letter?
6. If you were concerned about a particular practice or teaching of the Christian church, how and to whom might you express that concern? By what authority would you do it?

The Sermon on Indulgences and Grace [pp. 37-48]

1. Much as later French and now English are the common language of scholars, in Luther's days all scholarly work, church business and school and university lectures were conducted in Latin. How did using a vernacular tongue (German) change the contours of debate over indulgences?
2. What arguments do the *Ninety-Five Theses* and the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* hold in common? How might this help define what Luther thought most important early in the debate?
3. While critical of scholastic theology and its method, Luther also used aspects of academic theology in his sermon. How do Luther's arguments respect the teaching and traditions of the church? How