

Martin Luther
NINETY-FIVE THESES
or, disputation on the power of
indulgences
Illustrated

Translated by Henry Wace

INTRODUCTORY LETTER.



TO THE MOST Reverend Father in Christ and most illustrious Lord, Albert, Archbishop and Primate of the Churches of Magdeburg and Mentz, Marquis of Brandenburg, etc., his lord and pastor in Christ, most gracious and worthy of all fear and reverence -

JESUS.

The grace of God be with you, and whatsoever it is and can do.

Spare me, most reverend Father in Christ, most illustrious Prince, if I, the very dregs of humanity, have dared to think of addressing a letter to the eminence of your sublimity. The Lord Jesus is my witness that, in the consciousness of my own pettiness and baseness, I have long put off the doing of that which I have now hardened my forehead to perform, moved thereto most especially by the sense of that faithful duty which I feel that I owe to your most reverend Fatherhood in Christ. May your Highness then in the meanwhile deign to cast your eyes upon one grain of dust, and, in your pontifical clemency, to understand my prayer.

Papal indulgences are being carried about, under your most distinguished authority, for the building of St. Peter's. In respect of these I do not so much accuse the extravagant sayings of the preachers, which I have not heard, but I grieve at the very false ideas which the people conceive from them, and which are spread

abroad in common talk on every side – namely, that unhappy souls believe that, if they buy letters of indulgences, they are sure of their salvation; also, that, as soon as they have thrown their contribution into the chest, souls forthwith fly out of purgatory; and furthermore, that so great is the grace thus conferred, that there is no sin so great – even, as they say, if, by an impossibility, any one had violated the Mother of God – but that it may be pardoned; and again, that by these indulgences a man is freed from all punishment and guilt.



gracious God! it is thus that the souls committed to your care, most excellent Father, are being taught unto their death, and a most severe account, which you will have to render for all of them, is growing and increasing. Hence I have not been able to keep silence

any longer on this subject, for by no function of a bishop's office can a man become sure of salvation, since he does not even become sure through the grace of God infused into him, but the Apostle bids us to be ever working out our salvation in fear and trembling. (Phil. ii. 12.) Even the righteous man – says Peter – shall scarcely be saved. (1 Pet. iv. 18.) In fine, so narrow is the way which leads unto life, that the Lord, speaking by the prophets Amos and Zachariah, calls those who are to be saved brands snatched from the burning, and our Lord everywhere declares the difficulty of salvation.

Why then, by these false stories and promises of pardon, do the preachers of them make the people to feel secure and without fear? since indulgences confer absolutely no good on souls as regards salvation or holiness, but only take away the outward penalty which was wont of old to be canonically imposed.

Lastly, works of piety and charity are infinitely better than indulgences, and yet they do not preach these with such display or so much zeal; nay, they keep silence about them for the sake of preaching pardons. And yet it is the first and sole duty of all bishops, that the people should learn the Gospel and Christian charity: for Christ nowhere commands that indulgences should be preached. What a dreadful thing it is then, what peril to a bishop, if, while the Gospel is passed over in silence, he permits nothing but the noisy outcry