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Primary and Secondary Sources Activity

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The Reformation in Europe

Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*
Martin Luther, Ninety-five Theses

Background

Celebrated scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536) argued in a series of works that education in classical and Christian literature could shape human nature itself. Erasmus also used what he had learned about the past to criticize the present, especially the abuses of the Catholic Church that he wanted to reform his masterpiece, *The Praise of Folly,* published in 1511, was a popular, lighthearted satire written to criticize the pretentious, self-important behaviors and absurdities of the Church and society, particularly the upper classes. Some historians consider it to be one of the sparks that ignited the Protestant Reformation. In this he prepared the way for Martin Luther's reforms, though in the end he rejected Luther's ideas and remained part of the Church.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) also urged reform of the Catholic Church. However, unlike Erasmus, Martin Luther challenged the Church directly when he distributed his Ninety-five Theses to German Church leaders and several friends. The focus of Luther's theses was his belief in true inner repentance and his opposition to the selling of indulgences as an easy substitute. Within four years, this challenge led to Luther's excommunication from the Catholic Church and eventually to his founding of the Lutheran Church. Luther's Reformation thus expressed his belief that faith granted by God, not indulgences sold by popes, led to salvation.

Directions: Read the two selections: one from Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* and one from Luther's Ninety-five Theses. Then answer the questions that follow.

Now as to the popes of Rome, who pretend themselves Christ's vicars, if they would but imitate his exemplary life, in the being employed in an unintermitted course of preaching. In the being attended with poverty, nakedness, hunger, and a contempt of this world; if they did but consider the import of the word pope, which signifies a father; or if they did but practice their surname of most holy, what order or degrees of men would be in a worse condition? . . . Though, indeed, the church has no enemies more bloody and tyrannical than such impious popes, who give dispensations for the not preaching of Christ; evacuate the main effect and design of our redemption by their pecuniary bribes and sales; adulterate the gospel by their forced interpretations, and undermining traditions; and lastly, by their lusts and wickedness grieve the Holy Spirit, and make their Saviour's wounds to bleed anew.

— Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 1511

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36. Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.

37. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has part in all the blessings of Christ and the Church; and this is granted him by God, even without letters of pardon.

82. To wit:—"Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial."

— Martin Luther, Ninety-five Theses, 1517

1. **Comparing and Contrasting** Compare the target of Luther's Ninety-five Theses with the target of Erasmus's satire.

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2. **Analyzing Primary Sources** What common reforms do the authors seek? How do the authors differ?

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3. **Identifying Central Issues** What do Luther's theses suggest is most important to obtaining salvation? How does it compare with what Erasmus suggests is most important?

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4. **Identifying Central Issues** Both pieces of writing attacked the practices of the Catholic Church. Yet one led to a complete break, while the other did not. What in Luther's words seems uncompromising, and what in Erasmus' words leaves more room for reform?

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