A SYMPOSIUM ON THE 95 THESIS: A PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL OF FORGIVENESS

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throw out indulgences but to discover what they really were; and since dead teachers, that is, the books of the theologians, could not help me, I decided to seek the counsel of the living. I looked to the pope, the cardinals, and the bishops for enlightenment, because I was so stuffed and soaked with their doctrine that I hardly knew whether I was asleep or awake. But I have not intended this to be a biography. I wish to confess my folly, ignorance, and weakness, lest someone think more highly of me than he ought, because in those great travails I, too, was just a man. (Ibid., 450)

These recollections, which Luther wrote in his old age, may be extremely self-aggrandizing, yet they justify the suggestion that the 95 Theses are less a document of protest than a humble and fearful search for the truth. It would be well for us to banish from our minds and our pulpits the vision of a German Hercules taking the field on October 31, 1517, to hurl his challenge into the teeth of the Roman juggernaut. The 95 Theses were written in weakness. Herein lies their great strength, for in that weakness we Christians will see God's word and promise going into glorious fulfillment: Not by the might nor the power of man, but by my spirit are things established and done, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Thus He also comforts His little flock at Philadelphia: "You have but little strength, but you have kept my word and have not denied my name." The 95 Theses were written in weakness and thus it pleased God to use them in order to demonstrate His strength. This is the primary and only reason, for the success of the Reformation.

Though Luther's theology in the 95 Theses was still imperfect, nevertheless these Theses, and chiefly their exposition and protest, in the inchoate fashion, most of the major themes in the Reformation that followed: salvation by grace alone; justification through faith alone; the sole mediatorialship of Christ; the clear distinction between law and gospel; sanctification as a fruit of faith; the true meaning of repentance; the blessings of the Christian cross, and many others. Despite his fears and failures in 1517, Luther had a firm grasp on the central truth of the Gospel. With this truth which eventually irradiated his whole theology, and with a freedom firmly rooted in Scripture, Luther was permitted to rise above the masses of tradition that choked the church; a child of God in whom the Savior's promise was abundantly fulfilled: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Near the end of Luther's exposition of the 95 Theses stand these pregnant words:

The church needs a reformation, but this cannot be the work of a man, nor of many men meeting in high council. It must come from God, and the appointed time is known only to Him who has created time.

(LS.L.XVIII, 267–268)

Little did Luther know at that writing how soon his wish would be fulfilled. As Thomas aptly depicts it in His parable: "So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up, he knoweth not how."

(St. L. XVIII, 267-268)

Roman Catholic Remnants in the 95 Theses

by Pastor Henry F. Koch

The Luther we revere in this 450th anniversary of the Reformation is the Luther on the heroic faith of "Abenruh, der Herr und Erpressst ist unser God." But that came 10 years after the Theses. His steadfast faith we share as proclaimed in the Smalcald Articles: (Bekenntisschriften p. 408)

"Artikel unserer Lehre (zusammen bringen) obs nur Handlung saeme, was und wiefern wir wollten oder konnten den Papisten weichen auf welchen wir gedeacht zu be harren und zu bleiben. Desnach habe ich diese Artikel zusammen gebracht und unserm Teil uererantwort wortet. Die sind auch von den Unsern angenommen und eintragslich bekennet und beschlossen, dass man sie solte (wo der Papst mit den seinen einmal so kuehe wollt werden, ohn Liegen und triegen, mit Ernst und wahrhaftig ein recht frei Concilium zu halten, wie er wohl treulich ware) offenlich uererantworten und unsers Glaubens Bekenntnis fuerbringen."

The Lutheran we try to follow is the Luther whose great pastoral concern produced his two Cathechises: "To publish the Cathechism, or Christian Doctrine in this short, plain, simple form, I was impelled by two considerations: the expectation of the gospel, and the better and more explicit instruction of the people, especially the young, as is observed in a visitation of the churches. The Luther we admire is the Luther who did not fear to go to Worms, no matter how many devils were there.

The Luther whose knowledge of history and Scripture astounds us is the Luther who in the Babylonish Captivity offered the Sacrament in both kinds, who abolished the Mass, celibacy and monasticism, extreme unction and auricular confession.

Such writings show Luther as we know him, the reformed Reformer. In 1517 he was only a "student" Reformer, no, he did not even claim this. In his latter work we see him toppling whole empires of thought. In 1517 he was trying to excise a few cracked, rotten stones from the wall to replace them with sound material.

The 95 Theses which we regard as the birth certificate of the Reformation and a Wahrzeichen (Landmark) Lutheran faith are still speculad with Rom. Catholic thought. Luther viewed them with remorse. His evaluation of them is given in a Vorrede to the republished Theses:

"Ich lasse geschehen und güt' sein, dass meine Disputationes oder Propositiones (in welchen ich etliche Ansichten wie die kusest), die ich in Anfang meiner Sache wider das Ablass, Papstum und der Sophisten Lehre (so daszul in der Chris tenheit allein in Schwang ging, und I allow and approve the publishing and distribution of my Theses in which at the be deindulgenz, Papacy and the Sophists doctrine which then filled all Christendom
ESSAYS

mit Gewalt getrieben ward, anstatt
des lieben Evangeli, das lange
Zeit geschwiegen, gar dardnieder
lag), gehandelt habe, an Tag kommen
und ausgeholt sich darum,
dass die Große und der glück-
liche Fortgang dieser Sache (so mit
der Zeit erfolgenmir von Gott
darzu gegeben, dass ich nicht erhebe
und stolz mache. Denn durch die-
selben Propositiones wird öffent-
lich angetragen, dass meine
Schande, das ist, meine grosse
Schwachheit und Unwissenheit, welche
ich in Angen drungen, diese Sache
mit grosser Furcht und Zittern
anzufangen.

"Ich war allein und aus Unvorsichtig-
heit in diesen Handel geraten, und
weil ich nicht konnte zurückweichen,
rauschte ich dem Pabst in vielen und
hohen Artikeln nicht allein viel ein,
sondern betete ihn auch mit rechtem
Ernst williglich an.

"Ich aber, weil sie mir zuschau-
eten, und allein in der Gefahr
ließen sie nicht so frechlich, getrost und der Sache
so gewiss. Denn ich wusste viel
nicht, welches ich, Gott lob,
nun weiss, ja, ich verstand nicht
was das Abluss war, wie auch alle
Papisten auf einen Haufen gar
dochs davon wussten, welcher
allein seine Kraft und Gewohnheit
willen hoch ward gehalten. Daher
ich auch davon disputierte, nicht
der Meinung, als wollte ich ihn
verwerten, sondern weil ich aller-
ding nicht wusste, was seine Kraft
waere, haette ichs gerne von andern
erleart. Und weil mich die toten
oder stummen Meister, das ist, der
Theologen oder Juristen Buecher,
nicht ganzen berichten konnten,
begehrte ich bei den Lebendigen
Rat zu suchen, und die Kirche
Gottes selbst zu horen, auf dass,
wo etwa von Leute vorhanden
waren, durch den H. Geist er-
leuchtet, sich ueber mich er-
barmte, und nicht allein mir,
sondern gemeyiner Christenheit zu
gut, rechten gewissen Bericht vom
Abluss taeten.

and was vigorously taught in-
stead of the dear Gospel that
long lay silent and defeated.
(I ali mice of them did not get
the outcome, given by God,
great and fortunate, as his-
tory has shown, may not lift
me up and make me proud.
For thru these same Theses my
shame is publicly displayed,
that is, my great weakness and
ignorance, which at the first
forced me to begin this matter
with fear and trembling.

"Da fanden sich viel fromme Maen-
ger, die gross Gefallen an meinen
Propositionen hatten, und viel
darum berichtet, dass mir
unmoglich, dass ich dieselben
erer Gliedmass der Kirche, mit
dem Hl. Geist, erst recht habe
koennen ansehen und erkennen,
sohe allein auf den Pabst,
Cardinaele, Bischoefe, Theologen,
Juristen, Moenche, Pfaffen:
daher wartete ich des Geists,
denn ich hatte ihre Lehre so
gierig in mich (dass ich so
de) gefressen und gesoffen,
dass ich gar duhn davon war,
und nicht fuchelt, ob ich
schlielle oder wachte.

"Und da ich alle Argumenta (die
mir im Weg lagen), durch die
Schrift von mir verleugnt
wurden, habe ich letzlich
dies Einige niemals, dass man
die Kirche hoeren sollte, mit
groser Angst, Muehe, und Ar-
beit durch Christi Gnade kaum
uberwunden. Denn ich halte
mit viel grosserer Ernst und
rechter Ehrerbietung (und tats
vom Herzen) des Pabsts Kirche
fuer die richtige, denn
diese schandlichen laser-
lichen Verkehrer, die jetzt des
Pabsts Kirche wider mich
ruhmen. Wenn ich den Pabst
veracht habe, wie ihr jetzt
verachtet, die ich doch mit
Worten sehr loben, haette ich
mich besorgt der Erde werde
dieselbe Stunde sich aufgetan
haben, und mich leerlich
ver-

Luther himself lists the failings of his Theses: respect for the
papacy, acknowledging the church as the official exegete of
Scripture, and failure to understand the nature of indulgences as
the chief shortcoming.

Respect for the Papacy, high expectations from it are obvious
throughout. For example Luther accords the Pope the great honor
of calling him a tool of the Holy Ghost, an ally of Christ and
apostolic successor.

Thesis 9: Inde bene nobis facit spiritus sanctus in papa
excipiendo in suis decretis semper articulum mortis
et necessitatis.

Hence the Holy Spirit acting in the Pope does well for
us, in that, in his decrees he always makes exception
of the article of death and necessity.
ESSAYS

Thesis 53: Hostes Christi et Papa sunt il, qui propter venias predicandbas verbum dei in aliis ecclesiis penitus silere jubesent.

Enemies of Christ and the Pope are those who order the Word of God to be silent in other churches because of the preaching of indulgences.

Thesis 41: Cautus sunt venie apostolice predicande, ne populus false intelligat eas preferri ceteris bonis operibus charitatis.

Apostolic indulgences are to be preached with caution, lest the people falsely understand them to be preferred to other good works of charity.

Thesis 69: Tenentur Episcopi et Curati veniarum apostolicae Commissariorum cum omni reverentia admittere.

Bishops and curates are bound to receive the commissions of apostolic indulgences with all reverence.

To be sure, it has been noted that wherever Luther honors the Pope he also restricts his power. While one hand puts him on the back, the other takes from him one of his privileges. And some may think this reverence is a deliberate ruse of Luther to free himself from suspicion and attack while he goes on to further criticism of the Pope.

But Luther was not a cynical church politician who used words to hide his thoughts. He felt himself to be a champion of the pope, a defender of what the pope truly intends to accomplish through indulgences. He believed the Pope would be shocked at the excessive claims of his Indulgence preachers. To protect the honor of the Pope, to defend the Pope’s theology he says:

Thesis 5: Papa non vult nec potest ullam penas remittere pretio eas, quas arbitrio vel suo vel canonum imposuit.

The Pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties except those which he has imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.

Luther was angered by disrespect to the Pope shown by the Pope’s own camp. “If I had despised the Pope as those despise him now, who honor him with their words, I would have feared the earth would have opened at that moment and swallowed me alive as were Korah and his band.”

Luther felt himself on the Pope’s side, his theses state only what the Pope himself wants. “Papa non vult-” “the Pope does not wish it,” this extension of claims that his power to forgive reaches from Fugatory below to heaven above.

The priesthood is upheld by Luther and with it, the need to confess sins to the priest.

Thesis 7: Nulli prorsus remittit deus culpam, quin simul eum subiiciat humilliatum in omnibus sacerdoti suae vicario.

God never remits any man’s guilt without at the same time subjecting him, humbled in all things,
Adiecit 'super terram'. Alioquin nisi restringere voluisset potentatem Clavium, satis fuerat dixisse "Quodcumque solveris, solutum est!" Aut ergo Christus ut nugator superfluit verbis aut potesitas Clavium solummodo est super terram."

"Fourthly and most forcefully of all, Christ does not speak in ambiguous, but in clear, open, polished words: Whatever you shall have bound on earth, shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you shall have loosed on earth, shall be loosed in heaven. Not in vain does he add 'on earth'. Unless he had otherwise wished to restrict the power of the Keys, it would have been enough to have said 'Whatever you shall have loosed, shall be loosed.' Therefore either Christ as a fool makes extra words or the power of the Keys exists only on earth."

In Thesis 20 Luther uses church law to prove his point. He reaches back to Pope Urban II, who in 1095 granted full indulgence from all church imposed penalties to every participant in the Crusades.

**Thesis 20:** Igitur papa per remissionem plenariorum omnium penarum non simpliciter omnium intelligent sed a seipsa tantummodo imposituram.

Therefore the Pope, by "full remission of all penalties", does not understand literally all, but only those imposed by himself.

So by legal (Theses 8-13) as well as by theological arguments (Theses 14-19) Luther limited the usefulness of Indulgences. Indulgences were however not discarded by Luther. They were not to be despised. Cp. Theses 38, 49, 69, 71.

**Thesis 30:** Remissio tamen et participatio Pape nullo modo est contemnenda, quia (ut dixi) est declaratio remissionis divine.

However, the remission and sharing of the Pope is by no means to be despised since, as I have said, it is a declaration of divine forgiveness.

In their place he emphasizes true penance and his tone here is remarkably Catholic.

**Thesis 36:** Quilibet christianus vere compunctus habet remissionem plenariam a pena et culpa etiam sine litteris veniarum sibi debetim.

Any truly penitent Christian has full remission from penalty and guilt owed to him (debitam) even without letters of indulgence.

(The next Thesis softens the harshness of this 'right' of a Christian by speaking of his sharing in Christ's gifts.)

The purpose of the Theses was to destroy the easy forgiveness (and the security that results from it). That is the reason for the repeated warning to repent, even to the point of requiring confession to a priest. That is also the reason why Luther spoke so highly of good works.

**Thesis 41:** Caute sunt venie apostolice predicande, ne populus false intelligat eas preferri ceteris bonis operibus charitate.
ESSAYS

The dying pay all penalties by death and are already dead to the canon laws and are by right relieved from them.

But then, three principles which are the source and life force of the indulgence trade came into operation. There is first the quite natural desire for Strafflosigkeit, immunity or release from any penalties. Second, there is the belief that the church possesses a treasury of merits, and lastly, the wish to maintain the duty of man to earth, at least in part, his forgiveness.

Hence the old penalties were exchanged for something more comfortable to the penitent, i.e. instead of public confession, self-chastisement, sackcloth and ashes the penitent paid fines (indulgences), made pilgrimages or recited prescribed prayers. Again, quite naturally, the church noticed that these fines, properly channeled, would be useful for the purposes of the church (not the penitent), e.g. for building St. Peter’s.

How and why the use and purpose of Indulgences mushroomed beyond the original intent Luther understood and pictured as follows:

Thesis 14: Imperfecta sanitas seu charitas mortiur necessario secum fert magnum timorem, tantoque maiorem, quanto minor fuerit ipsa.

The imperfect soundness or charity of a dying person necessarily brings with it great fear, and the less it is, the greater is the fear it brings.

Yet indulgences, in their proper place, are condoned as we have seen. Cf. §47.

Purgatory is still a part of Luther’s belief. Purgatory is used by God to drive out the old Adam. There the new life in the spirit is born, fear of punishment vanishes as faith and love grow. In the Resolutio, Conclusio 17) Purgatory has saints whom no even wish to be released, since the truly penitent welcome chastisement.

Thesis 29: Quis scit, si omnes anime in purgatorio velint redimi, sicut de s. Severino et Paschali factum narratur.

Who knows whether all souls in purgatory would like to be redeemed, as is told about Saints Severinus and Paschall.

In the Resolutions Luther says concerning these two saints:

Non quidem fide dignam scripturam de iis duobus legi. Narrari tamen audivi, quod potissimum suis meritis liberari, si minus voluerint glorificari: iudex potius sustinuerit quam minuerent gloriam visionis. Sed in iis credit quisque quod velit, mea nihil refert. (W.A.T.,§86)

I haven’t read anything trustworthy about these two. But I’ve heard it said that they could have been freed by their merits, if they had accepted less glorification: so they rather held it out than diminish (their) vision of glory. But let each one believe what he wants about them, it makes no difference to me.

ESSAYS

The Papacy, priesthood and the necessity of confession to a priest, indulgences, the canonical penalties and laws, purgatory and saints are all present in the 95 Theses. The language has a Roman cast to it. These are the words and ideas of men, good works, reason alongside Scripture as authority for faith.

Luther acknowledged all this, “denn ich damal besser baepstisch war, weder Meinz und Heinz selbs je gewest sind noch werden muegen,”. (From Wider Hans Worst, 1541. Meinz is the bishop of Mainz, Heinz is Henry of Braunschweig, the target of ‘Hans Worst’) But Luther has two final Theses to add to his 95. He introduces them in the “Babylonian Captivity of the Church”.


Whether I want to or not, I am forced to grow wiser day by day since so many and such great teachers compete with me and give me punishment. Two years ago I wrote about Indulgence, if I saw a way that I am now sorry I published the book. For at that time I was tangled in a great superstition regarding the Roman tyranny. So I did not think it had to be completely discarded, since I saw how it was praised so unanimously. And that’s not surprising, because then I rolled the boulder all alone. But later, supported by the kindness of Silvester and the brethren, I came to the realization that indulgence is nothing but pure trickery in the part of the Roman flatterers through which to destroy faith in God and waste peoples’ money. And would to God, that I could persuade all the bookdealers and those who have read about it, that they would burn all my books about Indulgence and instead of all I have written substitute this statement: Indulgence is a knavish trick of the Roman sweet-talkers.

After mentioning how the papal camp instructed him concerning the authority of the pope and so again forced him to renewed study, he offers this conclusion: “Das Papstum ist die gewaltige Jagd des romischen Bischöfs.” The Papacy is the great hunting preserve of the Roman bishop.

When we read the Theses and note the Catholic remants we may be dismayed that Luther should show such weakness. The people in his day however saw that all those things we think of as remants had restrictions applied to them and they rejoiced that they finally found a theologian who was willing to hit hard.
The Ninety-Five Theses: A Triumph of the Gospel

by Dr. Siegfried Becker

When President Naumann asked me to read an essay on the Ninety-Five Theses as a triumph of the Gospel, I remembered how disappointed I was when I read the Theses in their entirety for the first time. As a boy in parochial school, I had memorized the two theses which say, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent!" He intended that the whole life of the believer should be one of repentance," and "The true treasure of the church is the Gospel of the glory and the grace of God." At that time I was under the impression that these theses would speak as clearly and directly as ringing affirmations of the Gospel. And yet, when the whole document was read for the first time, none of the other theses seemed to come up to the level of these two. This has very likely been the experience of more than one of us gathered here this morning.

We must learn not to expect too much of the Theses. It should not be forgotten that the Theses were the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther did not yet have that full understanding to which he came in the next few years as a result of the controversies into which the attacks of his opponents plunged him. If Luther had not progressed far beyond the position which he held in 1517, the Lutheran Reformation would have been still-born. Luther himself tells us that he did not come to full clarity about the nature of justification until the fall of 1519, and in 1520, when his enemies demanded that he recant what he had said in 1517, he apologized for having thought so highly of the pope. And even though Luther had already come a long way since 1509, yet the Theses were not written as a clear confession of faith. He did not intend to issue a This We Believe when he nailed the Theses to the church door. Far from being a definitive presentation of the Gospel message they were intended to arouse debate and discussion on the subject of indulgences. They were not even intended to be the last word on indulgences.

Luther says somewhere that such theses for debate should be deliberately obscure and provocative. Because they were deliberately provocative of argument, it is at times difficult to see what Luther had in mind in writing some of the Theses; but, fortunately, in the months that followed, Luther worked on a detailed explanation of the Theses, and this work was published in the late summer of 1518. This work, in which he stated the convictions which led him to write the Theses, helps us to see more clearly how great the triumph of the Gospel had already become in the heart of Martin Luther when he issued his call for the indulgence debate. In upholding the proposition that the Ninety-Five Theses are a triumph of the Gospel, we shall repeatedly appeal to Luther's own explanation of what he had in mind in writing these propositions for debate.

First of all, the Ninety-Five Theses breathe a clear spirit of confidence in the authority of the Word of God, that is, of the Holy Scriptures. In 1517, Luther still had a high regard for the authority of the pope and especially for the decisions of the general councils of the church as normative in the field of doctrine.

However, it is apparent from the Theses, and from Luther's own Explanation of them, that the great reformer had already at this time learned to give the authority of Scripture precedence in his thinking. In the very first of the Theses he appeals to the authority of the Scriptures when he says, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent! He intended that the whole life of the believer should be one of repentance." The remaining theses are, in one way or another, a commentary on this word from the Bible, a commentary which is, implicitly at least, based on the conviction...