

A Symposium on the 95 Theses: A
Proclamation of the Gospel of Forgiveness

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GOSPEL OF FORGIVENESS

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(dreinzuschlagen) The theses are like a paper sack full of water. Everything is safe for the moment, but in imminent danger of breaking out.

And yet, there was certainly enough of Romanism left to have poisoned this Reformation, and would have, - if Luther had not been forced into Scripture all the more, and if he had not applied what he learned there to his church.

The Ninety-Five Theses: A Triumph of the Gospel

by Dr. Siegbert 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 the other 93 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 1505, 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

that the Bible must be allowed to interpret itself.

It is a little difficult for us to follow Luther's thought in this matter, because the Theses were written in Latin. If we were operating with the German translation we would still be able to follow his line of argument without too much difficulty. The Latin phrase which is rendered "Repent" in English is poenitentiam agite, which is literally translated in our German "tut Busze", and which in English could be translated, "do penance".

When the pious Catholic in 1517 heard the phrase "poenitentiam agite," "tut Busze," "do penance," he had been conditioned by centuries of usage in the church to think primarily of the sacrament of penance, of acts of piety prescribed by the priest and performed as a penalty in reparation for sin. It is obvious, however, from the following theses, that Luther interprets the phrase according to its usage in Scripture, and thus he is applying the principle which he enunciated so clearly two and a half years later in the Open Letter to the Christian Nobility, where he said that the right to interpret Scripture does not belong solely to the pope or the Roman hierarchy, but to all Christian believers.

The significance of this appeal to the words of Christ becomes obvious when we read what Luther has to say about this matter in the Explanation of the Ninety-Five Theses. There it becomes crystal clear that Scripture has become for him the last word, even though, as he confessed in his later writings, he was still too deferential to the pope and to the councils.

We cannot, in the time allotted to this essay, cite all the evidence for this, but a few items should be mentioned. There are very few pages in the Explanation on which he does not cite some passage from the Bible. His references to the literature of the church are comparatively few, and for the most part they are quoted to show that they do not mean what his opponents understood them to say, and that in any case they must be understood in the light of what the Bible says.

In his discussion of the first theses, he appeals to the original Greek text of the New Testament in order to show that "poenitentiam agite," "Repent," must be understood to refer to that inner repentance which consists of a change of heart. (LW, 31, p.84) (All page references hereafter, are to this volume of the American edition of Luther's Works.) He was criticized for not interpreting the Scriptures in a Catholic sense (p. 246), but in answer he asserts several times that his opponents have no right to read their interpretations into the Bible, and he holds that we must cling to the "true and real meaning...which Christ intended." (p. 87) He says that the simple and plain meaning of Scripture must not be made ambiguous or doubtful. In the introduction to his Explanation he serves notice that he does not intend to be bound by the opinions of the scholastic theologians. (p. 83)

As we indicated a few moments ago, Luther in 1517 and 1518 had not yet cut himself free from the authority of popes and councils and the opinions of the theologians, as becomes evident when we hear him say, "It is utterly absurd to teach anything in the church for which a basis cannot be found in the Scriptures, in teachers, in the canons, or at least in human reason." (p. 94). However, it is certainly not without significance that every time he mentions the Scriptures, the church fathers, the councils, the popes, and the judgments of human reason as the basis of his argument, the Scriptures always occupy the first place in this list of authorities, and a careful reading of his Explanation of the Ninety-Five Theses will demonstrate that the listing of these other authorities is only a bad habit which he has brought with him out of the past, and for all practical purposes the Scriptures have become the final, and we might almost be justified in saying, the sole authority for him in matters of doctrine. He finds fault, for example, with many of the priests of his time because, as he said,

they placed "greater value upon obedience to the canons than obedience to the call of God." (p. 114) He says that we must not look upon the teachers of the church as "men of such importance and authority that whatever they think must be immediately counted among the articles of faith." (p. 146) He challenges many of the opinions of the scholastic teachers by exclaiming, "See for yourself whether they cite any text or scripture," (p. 147) and for all his deference to the pope, he is ready to question even his authority, for he says, "Prove what you say, Holy Father." (p. 172) He states that "a command of God has infinitely more value than that which is permitted to exist by man's word and is in no way commanded by God" (p. 200) Even though he held that a general council had more authority than the pope, yet he said that the church would expose itself to ridicule if, without proving its case from Scripture or demonstrating it by reason, it would adopt a position in matters of doctrine for which it could give no other reason than that "it pleased the pope and the Roman Church" to have it so. (p. 216f). Basically his view is very well expressed in the words, "It is only right to give preference to the truth first, and then to the authority of the pope and the church." (p. 222)

In our day, even in the Lutheran Church, many efforts are being made to separate the authority, the inerrancy, and the proper interpretation of Scripture from the significance and the power of the Gospel message. A study of Luther's thought, as it is developed in the Theses and in his Explanation, will demonstrate how closely these questions of the authority and the clarity of Scripture, its inspiration and inerrancy, are allied to the very heart of the Gospel.

Behind Luther's discussion of indulgences and their value, there lies as a basic premise in his thinking the conviction that a man can be sure of his salvation because the words of God are absolutely true and that the promises of God are completely worthy of trust. It is not true, as the existential theologians of our time assert so often, that for Luther, faith was a leap in the dark. Even though his views of sin and forgiveness, of guilt before God and canonical punishments imposed by the church, of satisfactions and indulgences are still in some respects beclouded by the heritage of centuries of heresy in regard to the basic Gospel message, yet by the time he nailed the theses to the church door, Luther had already learned that certainty about the forgiveness of sins must be found in the forgiving word, in the absolution spoken by God through the pastor, or as Luther still called him at this time, the priest. In October of 1517, Luther had already come a long, long way from the spiritual place where he found himself in July of 1505, when he resolved to enter the monastery, where he hoped to find the holiness that would avail before God, but where he only learned more fully to experience the despair which he expressed when he said, "The holier we became, the more we became children of the devil," and "the oftener we wash our hands, the filthier we become."

Only when he learned to base his assurance of forgiveness on the words and promises of God did Luther find the peace of heart and soul and conscience which he had sought when he entered the monastery in Erfurt, and this is the peace which he offered to share with others in the Ninety-Five Theses. His opposition to the sale of indulgences was rooted in his conviction that the indulgence sellers were turning men away from faith in the forgiving word of God and causing them to trust in the promises of men.

It may seem, at first glance, when we read the seventh theses, that Luther still makes forgiveness too dependent upon the ministry of the priest, that he has not yet freed himself from the sacerdotalism which characterized the church of the middle ages. In this seventh thesis he says, "God remits guilt to no one unless at the same time he humbles him in all things and makes him submissive to

his vicar, the priest." He expressed a related thought in his explanation of the sixth thesis, when he said, "No one can be reconciled to God unless he is first reconciled to the church." (p. 98) In his comments of the seventh thesis he said, that a troubled soul will find no peace or consolation "unless he flees to the power of the church and seeks solace and relief from his sins and wretchedness which he has uncovered through confession." (p. 100)

And yet, for all this, in the sixth thesis he had written, "The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring and showing that it has been remitted by God." And the full sun of the Gospel is breaking through the clouds when he says that when a man's sins are forgiven by pope or priest, he should be sure that they are truly forgiven, "not at all on account of the prelate himself or his power, but on account of the word of Christ who cannot lie when he says, 'Whatever you loose on earth.' He continues, 'Faith born of this word will bring peace of conscience...Whoever seeks peace in another way, for example inwardly through experience, certainly seems to tempt God and desires to have peace in fact rather than in faith. For you will have peace only as long as you believe in the word of that one who promised, 'Whatever you loose, etc.' Christ is our peace, but only through faith. But if anyone does not believe this word, even though he be pardoned a million times by the pope himself, even though he confess before the whole world, he shall never know inner peace." (p. 100f) The power to forgive sins which Christ has given to the church, he says, "is the only consolation for sins and wretched consciences, if men will only believe that that which Christ has promised is true." (p. 101) A little later he writes, "We are not sure of the remission of guilt except through the judgment of the priest," but he immediately adds, "not even through him unless you believe in Christ who has promised, 'Whatever you shall loose, etc.'" (p. 101) Sacerdotalism has not been completely renounced, but the protest against indulgences has nevertheless a solid Gospel base. Luther understood well that the word of the priest and of the pope did not manufacture forgiveness. They could only announce what God has already done in Christ. What we today call objective justification, which even some conservative Lutherans have difficulty in accepting in our day, shines forth clearly in his comments on the seventh thesis, where he says, "The sins of the adulteress had already been forgiven before Christ raised her. But she did not recognize this...until she heard the voice of the bridegroom, who said, 'Neither do I condemn you.'" When Luther attacked the sale of indulgences, he did so because he was convinced that men must learn to base their hope of salvation on a promise of God rather than on a piece of paper blessed by the pope or even on the contribution that they were making to the building of St. Peter's in Rome. He summarized his quarrel with the indulgence sellers and their defenders by saying, "Our opponents base the remission of sins not upon faith and upon the word of the compassionate Christ, but upon the work of man who seeks and strives." (p. 117)

Luther also knew in 1517 that the word of forgiveness received its validity from the completed work of Christ. In the 79th thesis he wrote, "To say that the cross emblazoned with the papal coat of arms, and set up by the indulgence preachers, is equal to the cross of Christ is blasphemy." "The cross of Christ," he said in his explanation of this thesis, "gives life to the whole world by the destruction of sins," while the cross of the indulgence sellers excuses the buyer from certain temporal punishments imposed by the church. (p. 243)

When he was accused of making the indulgences of little value by his theses, he answered, "It is better to cheapen indulgences than to make the cross of Christ of no effect." (p. 113) And he understood clearly the significance of the cross. In the 32nd thesis he wrote, "Those who believe that they can be certain of

their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned together with their teachers." While this strikes a negative note, yet he said this because he knew, as he said later in the explanation of this thesis, "We have no other hope of salvation except in Jesus Christ alone." (p. 180) Commenting on his statement in the 52nd thesis, "It is vain to trust in salvation by indulgence letters even though...the pope were to offer his own soul as security," he wrote, "May every single sermon be forever damned which persuades a person to find security and trust in or through anything whatever except the pure mercy of God, which is Christ." (p. 209).

Against the claim of the indulgence sellers that the superfluous works of the saints are conveyed to the sinner through indulgences, Luther replied that the saints had no superfluous merit but that it is Christ who blots out our sins through the merit of His suffering. (p. 225) These superfluous merits of the saints, which the church claimed to have stored away, as it were in a bank vault, and which supposedly were granted through indulgences to those who were not holy enough to get to heaven on their own, were called "the treasure of the church." Against that view Luther placed thesis number 62, where he wrote, "The true treasure of the church is the holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God."

When he wrote that he knew what the Gospel is, and why it is the true treasure of the church. A few months later, when he told the world what he had in mind when he wrote that sentence, he described the Gospel. He did not describe it in vague terms such as we often hear today, when we are told, for example, that the Gospel is good news for a bad situation, but he wrote, in almost lyrical terms, "The Gospel is a preaching of the incarnate Son of God, given to us without any merit on our part for salvation and peace. It is a word of salvation, a word of grace, a word of comfort, a word of joy, a voice of the bridegroom and of the bride, a good word, a word of peace," which says, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Behold Him who alone fulfills the law for you, whom God has made to be your righteousness, sanctification, wisdom, redemption, for all those who believe in Him." He continues, "When the sinful conscience hears this sweetest messenger, it comes to life again, shouts for joy while leaping about full of confidence, and no longer fears death, the types of punishments associated with death, or hell." (p. 231) When he said, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel," he knew what this meant, and he meant what he said.

It is clear, too, from the theses and especially from Luther's own Explanation, that by 1517 he had cut himself loose from that conception of the way of salvation which had driven him into the monastery twelve years before. When he wrote in the 36th and 37th theses, "Any truly penitent Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters," and "Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted to him by God, even without indulgence letters," he was in effect renouncing the whole papal system of salvation by works.*

This becomes even clearer in the Explanation where he says, "The law is fulfilled not by our works, but by the grace of God, who pities us in Christ...it shall be fulfilled not through works but through faith, not by anything we offer God, but by all we receive from Christ and partake of in Him." (p. 231) Luther makes it clear also that he wants nothing to do with any system of salvation which turns God into a storekeeper who hands forgiveness over the counter in exchange for something of value that man has brought in payment. (p. 117)

In insisting on rejecting all human merit as a cause of forgiveness, Luther renounced even the notion which characterized Roman Catholic piety where it was most in earnest, and which is not

always fully renounced by those who call themselves Lutheran today, namely the idea that our contrition is a cause of forgiveness. In our time we sometimes hear even Lutherans say that God forgives us because we are sorry. This is often the last stand of that legalistic spirit, which is natural to the human heart, and which seeks in some way to find at least some little thing in man which merits God's consideration.

Luther, however, says that theologians attribute entirely too much to this torment of conscience when they teach people to trust in the delusion that their sins are cancelled by their contrition. He says that we should teach people instead to despair over their own contrition. (p. 103) In the 30th thesis he points out that men can never be sure that their contrition is what it ought to be, and that if our certainty of forgiveness depended on the quality of our contrition, we could never come to the sure knowledge of our forgiveness. In the 31st, the 35th, 39th, and 40th theses, he has a great deal to say about the importance and the need of contrition, but he recognizes that it is not needed to earn forgiveness from God or to cause God to grant us forgiveness. He says that our sins must be borne by the wounded Christ and not by our own conscience, (p. 161) and he gives the advice that if we do not believe that we are penitent enough, we should just trust in God's promise. (p. 193) He writes, "Take care that you do not in any manner trust in your own contrition but completely and alone in the word of your kindest and most faithful Savior, Jesus Christ! Your heart may deceive you, but He will not deceive you." (p. 195) In this connection he says once more, "You shall not err if you believe God's word." "We ought to place our hope in Christ's word," he tells us, "and not in our penitence." (p. 194)

And thus we end on the same note with which we began, The triumph of the Gospel in the Ninety-Five Theses is rooted in Luther's conviction that in the Scriptures we have the very words of God and that its promises are the promises of God, who cannot lie and whose Word cannot err. This word, therefore, is a firm foundation for our faith, on the basis of which we can come to the full assurance of our forgiveness in Christ. And Luther gives voice to a truth which we would do well to remember in our own time when he says, "What difference does it make to you, if the Lord should speak through an ass, either male or female, as long as you hear that word by which you may hope and believe?" How different is the spirit that breathes through those words from that which prompts men in our time to cast doubt on the words of God by saying that the snake in the garden could not have spoken because snakes do not have vocal cords? God help us to cultivate the one and to avoid the other. Amen.

* It may be noticed that in the third essay in this series, thesis 36 is cited as evidence of a latent Romanism in the Theses, whereas here it is viewed as a rejection of the Romanistic system of salvation by human merit.

This conflict illustrates the obscure nature of some of the theses. In thesis 36, Luther says that every penitent (compunctus) Christian has a right to full remission of both punishment and guilt. Literally, he says, that remission is owed (debitam) to the penitent Christian.

The first question that needs to be resolved is this: "What did Luther in thesis 36 mean by the term 'penitent sinner'?" "It is my opinion that this term should be understood in the light of Luther's own definition of repentance as it is set forth at the beginning of the Theses. It should not be interpreted as a sinner who has done penance in order to earn remission, but as one who has experienced that inner change of mind and heart which we call conversion.

When Luther said that this penitent sinner has a right to

full forgiveness even without indulgence letters or that forgiveness is owed (debitam) to him, this could indeed be understood in a Romanistic way, as though it were due him by way of merit.

However, in my opinion, it should not be so understood. It is owed to him in the same sense in which St. Paul said that he was a debtor both to the barbarian and to the Greek. St. Paul felt that he owed the Gospel of forgiveness to the world. So Luther felt that the church owed the assurance of forgiveness to the penitent sinner. What he is saying, in my opinion, is that when a man is truly penitent, the church has no right to withhold full forgiveness from him; the church has no right to demand anything more from him as a condition of forgiveness; it owes him forgiveness and the sinner has a right to it because Christ has earned it for him and commissioned the church to offer it to him. Understood in this way, the thesis, together with the one which follows, is a rejection and not a remnant of Romanism. It cannot be established beyond doubt that in 1517 Luther had cut himself free from the Romanizing tone that we may still hear in that word "owed" (sibi debitam), but the above interpretation is in agreement with Luther's views as he set them forth in his Explanation of 1518.