A SYMPOSIUM ON THE 95 THESSES; A PROCLAMATION OF THE
GOSPEL OF FORGIVENESS

*******

Elmer C. Kiessling, Theodore J. Hartwig, Henry F. Koch, Siegbert Becker,
Martin W. Lutz, Edward G. Zell

Michigan Lutheran Seminary
Saginaw, Michigan
August 9-16, 1967
The Ninety-Five Theses: A Document of Protest
by Prof. Theo. Hartwig

It is commonly known that Luther was not first to see and to protest the abuses which plagued the church in head and members. Six years before publication of the 95 Theses the prominent Dutch scholar, presented internationally famous, with a treatise entitled "The Praise of Folly." It was a cartoon-like criticism of the whole ecclesiastical body and scattered its birdsfoot over priests and over popes, who "administer the sweet blessings of hangman's cords, and that terrible tongue-communica-

tion, with the very sight of which they sink men's souls beneath the bottom of hell and hurl with more fierceness against such as, by the instigation of the devil, attempt to rob them of their worldly possessions." Thus Erasmus wrote shortly before the Reformation; and then, alarmed by the escalation of the Lutheran bombardment, he spent his later years trying to rehabilitate himself with the papacy.

One meets with criticism from unexpected sources. Fifty years before the Reformation, no less an authority than Pope Pius II lectured his cardinals on their preoccupation with hunting, games, and the companionship of women. He tells them: "People say we live in luxury, amass wealth, are slaves to ambition, ride on the fattest mules, walk the streets with puffed-out cheeks under red hats, lavish much on actors and parasites and nothing on the defense of the faith; and they are not entirely wrong." But from the other side of his cheek this same pontiff, in an official policy statement or papal bull, execrated that pestilential poison in the hundred years, the people who deny the pope's supremacy and dare to make an appeal over the pope's head to a general church council.

One hundred years before the Reformation the Italian writer, Boccaccio, published a collection of short stories, many of which lampooned prevailing iniquities in the church. Consider the Jew who against the entreaties of his Christian friends trying to convert him decided to make a final test of the Christian faith with a personal visit to the citadel of Christendom and, much to the surprise of his friends, returned from Rome a converted Christian, for, as he reported, if Christianity could survive the horrid conditions he had seen at Rome, particularly in its ill-qualified leadership, here certainly was proof positive that the Christian faith must be right and true.

One hundred years before the Reformation Dante, the supreme poet of Italy and a good Catholic, heaped up in his literary master-

erpiece, the "Divine Comedy," one maladiction after another on the pope and on the clergy in general. He describes them as Shepherds who have turned wolves; and hour by hour Dust gathers on the Gospels, gathers slow

On the great Doctors, while they thumb and scrawl 0'er the Decretals, as the margins show. Yet even this in Heaven sits less thanath. Than when God's holy Word is misconstrued, Or when supremacy it no more hath. All men to show their ingenuity Contrive their own inventions - these they preach; The Gospel is passed over silent. Christ His Apostles did not thus address: 'Go forth, preach idle stories to all, But taught the Gospel, and proselytised. But nowadays men preach with jokes and jestes, And if they raise a laugh, their cows all swell With pride - they ask no more, the jackanapes.

(Parad. IX: XXIX)

This poetry was penned two hundred years before the Reformation, and our quick survey of pre-Reformation rebuke might be extended backwards by at least another two centuries: four hundred years of protest apparent, without substantial results.

Now what was different in the protest of 1517 that it bore such abundant fruit? True to his craft, the scientific historian lifts Luther into one loth with his forerunners and credits the success of the Reformation to natural causes, political, economic, and cultural: the invention of printing that permitted the rapid spread of Luther's views; the revival of the papacy which, by bringing the Reformation by the wealthy, the nobility, and the intelligentsia; the efficiency of the new national governments which used the religious upheaval of Luther's day to their own worldly advantage; the success of the Reformation; they are not the causes.

The church-orientated historian, on the other hand, sees a sharp contrast between pre-Reformation protest and purely outward abuses; Luther's protest inspired by strong spiritual concerns. Yet the latter concern was not entirely lacking before the Reformation. Luther was not first to question the traffic and theology in indulgences. He was not first to criticize monastic life; in fact, he was one of the highest state of Christian perfection. He was not first to label the papacy as the Antichrist. Nor did Luther strike a strange new chord when he stressed the authority of Scripture. The Bible was the most studied book of the Middle Ages; it was searched out by professionals and students in school and monastery and, after 1300, to an increasing degree by educated lay people. Rather than abetting church misusing of Scripture, it was better to recognize the difficulty for pre-Reformation people to read Scripture without peering through layer on layer of superimposed theological varnish laid down chiefly by the fathers of the early church; and this deep pre-Reformation respect for tradition, this conservatism, is best comprehended when one also recalls that through the labors of those same monks and church fathers, new and authoritative tradition of doctrine promoted by teachers with no respect for tradition, the truths of the Holy Trinity and of the Person of Christ were preserved and grandly exhibited in our Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds.

In contrast for past the Reformation and a flare for originality was usually symptomatic of heresy.

While Luther displays a remarkable freedom in the 95 Theses to assert his own Scripture-based convictions against tried and tested, he had not yet, however, set himself loose from all the patristic varnish either. When he explains his fifteenth thesis, which touches on purgatory, he cites the familiar stock of proof passages from the church fathers in support of purgatory and
closes with a condemnation of the heretics who denied what had been believed in the church over so many centuries.

***

Yet there was a new note of protest in the 95 Theses. Though missed by the multitude, it was recognized by the discerning few as an axe laid at the root of the Roman tree. For Luther explains the character of his protest in the following manner:

Truth and quality of life are to be distinguished. Life is as wicked with us as with the papists. We do not criticize or condemn them for their life. This, Wycliffe and Hus have not seen. They attacked only the life of the pope. Therefore they did not succeed, for they too, like the papists, were sinners. But I took hold of the doctrine and used it to defeat them, for in these matters the important issue is not one of life but one of doctrine.

(St.L.XXII, 892)

The indulgence question gives a strong unifying element to the 95 Theses, but Luther's protest in this document reaches much deeper. Indulgences were just one among many other scabs that covered the festering sore of the church; they were the sparks, pretexts, and petty grievances which have fired most wars but were not the underlying causes of the wars. Luther concerned himself with the underlying causes and thereby touched the vital nerve of the whole Roman Catholic system. This is the major difference between Luther and his reform-minded predecessors; this is one major reason for the triumphant forward march of the purifying fire that was lit on October 31, 1517.

Those deeper issues behind the indulgence question are best seen in Martin Luther's defense and explanation of the 95 Theses which he published some seven months later. (See St.L.XVIII, 100-269) Two themes permeate this document; two problems in Roman teaching and practice lie at the heart of Luther's protest. Repentance and faith are the two themes of this first essay. One of these deals with the nature of Christian life. The other deals with the source of Christian truth.

In regard to the first theme, the essence of Luther's protest is this: Christian life is a simple, single thing: it is the new heart and new mind of trust in the atoning work of Christ, and this trust pervades the whole life to bring forth fruits of love and of patience under the blessed cross. Such is Christian life, rather than a piecemeal proposition which falsely rests its confidence on the merit value of everything which God has taught Christians to believe and to do, as if faith, sorrow, confession, prayer, devotion, participation in the Mass, viewing a relic, suffering a punishment, making a pilgrimage, entering a monastery - each thought, each word, each deed taken individually - carried with itself a certain debt: Christianity by piecemeal.

Luther pours out the true wine of the Gospel in the first thesis: When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' he called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence. As he said in his first thesis, and the four that follow, Luther calls attention to the wrong slant which the official Latin Bible of the church could give to the word "repent." The Latin translation of the word is most naturally understood to mean "do penance"; the emphasis is shifted so that repentance is a change of heart and mind to repentance as an obligation for people to do outward works. Thus a single word, imperfectly translated, helped to found a false theology. Repentance rests on satisfaction of the sacrament of penance, Luther continues. Repentance is an inward change. Therefore it embraces more than outward works which can also be done by the proud hypocrite. Christ is a spiri-

tual teacher who proclaims spiritual realities and who calls for a repentance within whatever station the Lord has placed us, whether we be kings, or priests, or lords, or merchants, or laborers, or beggars; repentance overruns outward behavior and outward callings.

The sacrament of penance, contrariwise, occurs at stated times. To identify Christ's call to repentance with the sacrament of penance would demand constant conference with the clergy. The sacrament of penance is an outward thing which presupposes inward renewal. Neither is there a command of Christ regarding this sacrament as an institution, least in the form in which it was promulgated, which demands satisfactions or good works in order to make one's forgiveness perfect. But these outward expressions of repentance do not belong to the substance of the sacrament. They are expressions of a condition of heart, a footing place for the faith that is a piecemeal patchwork, but permeating the total life. Thus fasting, more than occasional abstinence from food and drink, includes all disciplining of the flesh that one does to oneself. Thus praying, more than the rosary, embraces all exercises of the soul to God. Thus alms, more than a present to the pauper, comprehends every service owed to the neighbor. Repentance is a conversion to new life, not a piecemeal performance of credit-earning satisfactions, and Luther ranges through the whole Scripture to nail down this vital truth. Consider John the Baptist's pastoral counsel when the tax collectors and soldiers came to him and asked what they should do. John did not tell them to make satisfaction for past sins, but to live and deal justly in the future.

It is contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, Luther shows in his exposition of this thesis as early as February 17, 1520, to say that a sinner who demands piece-by-piece restitution for individual sins. In the fortieth thesis Luther returns to this theme. A truly repentant man does not ask for prescriptions for the sacrifices; he just is himself. The Gospel proclaiming free grace is to be exalted over all things, he comments under Thesis 55: it reaches above all ceremonials, yea, above the Mass and over the sacraments, for without the Mass there is no Mass, and in the sacrament of the altar, the very word Mass is still there. The Mass avails him who has been made alive, but the Gospel benefits everyone. The Gospel abases and elevates, the Mass grants grace to those who have been humbled.

Luther's commentary on the 95 Theses reaches a climax under Thesis 58. There he declares:

No saint has ever in this life sufficiently fulfilled God's commandments, whence it follows that he neither has done anything superfluously nor left any good works behind that might be distributed to others through indulgences. As Christ teaches in His parable, Luke 17:10: 'When you have done all these things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants.' Likewise in the parable of the ten virgins, the wise virgins could not give away even a part of their oil, lest they would not have enough for themselves; and in 1 Cor. 3:8 Paul writes that each receives his reward according to his works, not those of another. Therefore the idea of superfluous good works is just a pious opinion. All of this agrees perfectly with what the old church fathers wrote. Did not Augustine say that all saints must pray the Fifth Petition? Did not Augustine beautifully declare that all the commandments of God are fulfilled when that is not said, for the sinner for forgiven? and did not Augustine cite the words of ten other church fathers in support of this teaching?

(St.L.XVIII, 232)

In such a manner this first theme that deals with the true nature of Christian life permeates the 95 Theses and lays an axe
mote discipline and efficiency in a church bogged down by sheer weight of numbers with a multitude of administrative duties - these opinions and ordinances, growing in force and authority over many centuries, had enshackled the church to such a degree that it was almost impossible for him to think of anything but liturgical discipline, free from the faith-suffocating atmosphere. The 95 Theses with their call for a re-examination of the fundamentals - what is the nature of Christian life? what is the content of Christian truth? - sounded a fresh, new note in the history of the Reformation. A reformation Gospel tone which had not been heard so distinctly in the church for almost 1500 years. Thus the 95 Theses prepared the way for the Reformation which followed.

In spite of what has been said, however, it is not exact to label the 95 Theses a document of protest. As Luther explains it, he wrote the Theses so that he might discover and learn the truth. He did not do so in order to start anything. He was not so much saying, "This is wrong," as saying, "This is right," he was asserting the truth as he saw it. He was preparing the minds of the people for a spiritual awakening, for a recovery of the true and pure doctrine of the Gospel. The 95 Theses, therefore, were not a protest against the Church of Rome, but a protest for the Church of God. They were written to correct the errors of the Church and to bring it back to the true path of righteousness. They were written to唤醒 the people from their slumber and to prepare them for the Reformation. They were written to establish the foundation of the new church and to guide it in the right path. They were written to inspire the people with a love for the true Gospel and to give them a new and living faith. They were written to set the people free from the yoke of the old Church and to lead them to the freedom of the children of God. They were written to give the people a new and living hope and to enable them to live a life of faith and love. They were written to give the people a new and living hope and to enable them to live a life of faith and love.

A year before his death Luther recalls the seriousness with which he approached his undertaking in 1517:
I was once a monk and a most enthusiastic papist when I began the cause. I was so drunk, yes, submerged in the pope's dogmas, that I would have been ready to murder all, if I could have, or to cooperate willingly with the murderers of all who would take but a syllable from obedience to the pope. I was not such a lump of frigid ice in defending the pope as Zock and his like were, who appeared to me actually to defend the pope more for their own belly's sake than to pursue the matter seriously. To me, indeed, they seem to laugh at the pope to this day, like Epicureans! I pursued the matter with all seriousness, as one, who in dread of the last day, nevertheless from the depth of my heart wanted to be saved. (St. L. X. IV, 439)

In another recollection of those critical years at the beginning of the Reformation Luther writes:

I took hold of this matter with great fear and trembling, and suddenly, through impudence, found myself so deeply involved that I could not draw back. I was a little monk I was, more dead than alive, that I should enter the lists against the majesty of the pope. Those who afterwards followed me, and who attacked the pope with such arrogant self-confidence, knew nothing of the stubbornness and difficulties which I had to face. I knew absolutely nothing about indulgences, and therefore I wrote my theses not to
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 stifled and soaked with their doctrine that I hardly knew whether I was asleep or awake. But I have not intended this to be a biog-

These recollections, which Luther wrote in his old age, may be extremely self-deprecatory, 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, which later came to be written in a form that sometimes inspired, or often imitated fashion, most of the main themes in the Reformation that followed: salvation by grace alone; justification through faith alone; the sole mediatorship 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 mass 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:

"Artikel unserer Lehre (zusammen bringen) obs nur Handlung xaeume, was und wiefer wir wollten oder konnten den Papisten weichen und auf welchen wir gedaechten zu be-harren und zu bleiben. Desnach habe ich diese Artikel zusammen gebracht und unsern Teil uberantwor tet. Die sind auch von den Unsern angenommen und einzeylige lich bekennet und beschlossen, dass man sie sollte (wo der Papst mit den seinen einmal so kuehne wollten werden, ohn Li-gen und triegen, mit Ernst und wahrhaftig ein recht frei Concilium zu halten, wie er wohl suehend ware) offentlichen uberantworten und unsers Glaubens Bekenntnis fuerbringen."

"The Luther we try to follow is the Luther whose great pastoral concern produced his two Catechisms: "To publish the Catechism, or Christian Doctrine in this short, plain, simple form, I was impelled by the miserable condition of the doctrine, which I have frequently 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 there were.

The Luther whose knowledge of history and Scripture astounding us is the Luther who in the Babylonian Captivity offered the Sacrament in both kinds, who abolished the Mass, celibacy and monasticism, extremeunction 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 later work we see him toppling whole empires of thought. In 1517 he was trying to excuse 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) of Lutheran faith are still speakled with Rom. Catholic thought. Luther viewed them with remorse. His evaluation of them is given in a Vorrede to the republished Theses.

"Ich lasse geschritten und güt-sein, dass meine Disputationen oder Propositiones (in welchen ich etliche Augen und Erkennung habe gefasst), die ich im Anfang meiner Sache wider das Ablass, Papstum und der Sophisten Lehre (so dezumal in der Chris- tenheit allein im Schwang ging, in
to gather articles of our doctrine, should it be discussed, what and how much we would or could yield to the papists, and on which we planned to stand and hold fast. Accordingly I have gathered these articles and delivered them to our party. They have been accepted and confessed without dissent and it is decided we should publicly turn over and deliver our faith's Confes-
sion (if only the Pope would be brave enough to call seriously and honestly, without lies or deception, a truly free Council as he ought."

The Luther who we revere in this 450th anniversary of the Reforma-
mation is the Luther on whose faith and apostleship "Christ our Lord is our God". But that came 7 years after the Theses. His steadfast faith we share as proclaimed in the Smalcald Articles: (Bekenntnisschriften p. 408)

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.

Little did Luther know at that writing how soon his wish would be fulfilled. As a human 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."