

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

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

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## II.

## 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, Erasmus, gained international fame with a treatise entitled "The Praise of Folly." It was a cartoon-like criticism of the whole ecclesiastical body and scattered its birdshot over priests and over popes, who "administer the sweet blessings of hangings, heavy burdens, and that terrible thunderbolt of excommunication, 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 minds of some people who deny the pope's supreme lordship over all Christians and dare to make an appeal over the pope's head to a general church council.

More familiar are the protests of the two morningstars which glittered one hundred years before Luther: John Wycliffe, the English master whose anti-papal outbursts smoked vitriol, yet who was permitted to die in peace, and his more moderate Bohemian disciple, John Hus, whom a Roman church council burned at the stake. Less well-known is a contemporary of these two men, John Gerson. He was an educational leader of pan-European stature whom Luther and Melancthon quote with respect in our Confessions; a man who spent his lifetime teaching, writing, and preaching for the cause of church reform, but who also took a leading part in the proceedings that resulted in John Hus's death.

One hundred fifty 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 convinced 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.

Two hundred years before the Reformation Dante, the supreme poet of Italy and a good Catholic, heaped up in his literary masterpiece, the "Divine Comedy," one malediction after another on the papacy 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  
O'er the Decretals, as the margins show.  
Yet even this in Heaven stirs less wrath  
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 silently.  
Christ His Apostles did not thus address:  
'Go forth, preach idle stories to all men,'  
But taught them His true doctrine to profess.  
But nowadays men preach with jokes and japes,  
And if they raise a laugh, their cowls 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 apparently 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 lumps Luther into one loaf 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 forcing the issue against Luther, served to strengthen his cause; the support given the Reformation by the wealthy, the nobility, and the intelligentsia; the efficiency of the new national governments which used the religious upheavals of Luther's day to their own worldly advantage. These are concomitants to the success of the Reformation; they are not the causes.

The church-oriented historian, on the other hand, sees a sharp contrast between pre-Reformation protest against purely outward abuses and 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 of indulgences. He was not first to criticize monastic life as if it were 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 study of Scripture. The Bible was the most studied book of the Middle Ages; it was searched out by professionals and their students in school and monastery and, after 1300, to an increasing degree by educated lay people. Rather than swinging roundhouse style at the medieval church for its neglect of Scripture, it were 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 old church fathers, as they battled against winds 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. Contempt for past authority 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 traditions, he had not yet in 1517 cut 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.

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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. In his Tabletalk 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 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 which lie at the heart of Luther's protest.

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 credit: Christianity by piecework.

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 expounds this 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." Thereby the emphasis is shifted from repentance as 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 fix a false theology. Repentance must be distinguished from 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 overreaches 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. It is a papal institution, at least in its third part 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 the Christian life which effervesces from faith, not in 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 prayer, more than the rosary, embraces all exercises of the soul to God. Thus alms, more than a present to the pauper, comprehend 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 Thesis 17, to regard God as a tit-for-tat deity who demands piece-by-piece restitution for individual sins. In the fortieth thesis Luther returns to this theme. A truly repentant sinner does not need prescriptions for penance; he disciplines himself. The Gospel proclaiming free grace is to be exalted over all things, he comments under Thesis 55; it reaches above all ceremonies, yea, above the Mass and over the sacraments, for without the Gospel there is no sacrament, but if the sacrament is missing, the Gospel can still be there. The Mass avails him who has been made alive, but the Gospel benefits everyone. The Gospel abases and humbles; 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 commands of God are fulfilled when what is not fulfilled is 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

at the root of the whole Roman system with its piecemeal, sacramental dispensation of grace in return for piece-by-piece, credit-earning good works. The other prominent theme in Luther's exposition of the 95 Theses treats the source of Christian truth. Luther sounds this theme in the introduction to his commentary. There he tells his readers that he has no intention of departing from what has always been taught in Holy Scripture, in the Roman Church, in the writings of the orthodox church fathers, and in the canons and decretals of the popes. But there is one principle on which in Christian freedom he must take his stand, namely, that where mere opinions of the schoolmen and the canonists are concerned - where they speak without the authority of Scripture - he will take the liberty to agree or disagree, and he will do that in obedience to the counsel of St. Paul, 1 Thess. 5:21: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

Having stated the principle in the preamble, Luther returns to it many times in the exposition that follows. He charitably suggests that many abuses have crept into the church from the grass roots, whence they picked up so much momentum that Zion's watchmen were dragged into the morass. Either the clergy were sleeping or were preoccupied with other concerns. Luther does not wish to blame the bishops who are charged with oversight of the priests. He wants to be understood in the spirit of Matt. 13:25: Tares have insinuated themselves while men slept. Luther will not believe everything ascribed to the indulgence preachers. Their words have been twisted by the people. If they taught what the people are reporting, Luther would have to charge them with heresy, for such theology would permit indulgences to be hawked among Turks and Jews; indeed, under such an arrangement a donkey, if he were able to generate gold, could also minister to a person's forgiveness and release from purgatory.

It will not do to raise an opinion to the rank of an article of faith. Luther still thinks that the church is under good leadership, and he will listen when the pope speaks in the canons, but Luther will not accept whatever comes into the pope's head; otherwise the faith of the whole church would be in jeopardy. Therefore, Luther writes under Thesis 58,

... it is necessary to read and to ponder with fear and sound judgment also what has been taught by distinguished and holy men. To establish an article of faith on mere opinion without a clear word of Scripture is to become the laughing stock of the heretics and to let them use Scripture against us. But you say: Has St. Thomas strayed so far from the truth? are the pope and the whole church so much in error? are you, Luther, the first person whose opinion is correct? I answer, no; there are others who stand with me, and so does the pope in the canons. Moreover, not all schoolmen agree with St. Thomas, and how many universities staffed with gifted teachers have labored three hundred years on one Aristotle and have not understood him?

(St.L.XVIII, 240.242)

Luther comes with his heaviest cannonade against scholastic theologians under Thesis 72. By their interminable questions, by their subtle distinctions, by their penchant for dividing and subdividing they have befouled God's Word. In former times the church cursed those who hindered pilgrimages to Rome, but let larger curses be heaped on those whose opinions have obstructed and obscured God's Word.

(Ibid., 256)

Thus Luther lays bare a condition that had slowly developed in the church, where human ordinances and opinions which may have seemed harmless at first - calculated to clarify troublesome questions in the church's conflict with error, or designed to pro-

note 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 years, had enshackled the church to such a degree that it was almost impossible to think oneself, much less to break oneself, 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 source of Christian truth? - sounded a fresh, new note in the history of the church, a clarion 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.

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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 know whether everything asserted in these Theses was correct. He makes distinctions among the Theses: some express firm convictions; others, mere opinions; still others are trial balloons for the purpose of evoking contradiction. Yet every thesis was written in total seriousness. cursory reading of the Theses, without benefit of Luther's exposition, may leave the impression that here and there a note of irony, of scorn, of self-assurance has been injected. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Luther was totally serious. Under Thesis 80 and 81 he writes: We cannot follow the example of the heretics who take great pleasure in the stench at Rome, nor of the Pharisee against the publican, nor of the people who make open sport of the holy priesthood in the taverns, as if we are not aware of, and do not grieve and groan over, the filth that cleaves to us. Yet we do not run away like the heretics, leaving the half-dead lie as if we might become polluted by the sin of another, but we stand by the church faithfully, the deeper her misery, and we come hurrying with tears, entreaties, admonitions, and supplications.

(Ibid., 263)

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 Eck 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.XIV, 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 imprudence, found myself so deeply involved that I could not draw back. A poor 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, know nothing of my lowliness and despair. I was not so sure of myself as they were. Indeed, 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 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. Rather, 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-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 other reason, 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 seven months later, anticipate, in often inchoate fashion, most of the major 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:

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.

(St. L. XVIII, 267-268)

Little did Luther know at that writing how soon his wish would be fulfilled. As Jesus 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 and grow up, he knoweth not how."

## III

## 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 of heroic faith who composed "Almighty Fortress is our God". But that came 10 ? years after the Theses. His steadfast faith we share as proclaimed in the Smalcald Articles: (Bekennnisschriften p. 408)

"Artikel unserer Lehre (zusammen bringen) obs nur Handlung kaeme, was und wiefern wir wollten oder konnten den Papisten weichen und auf welchen wir gedaechten zu beharren und zu bleiben. Demnach habe ich diese Artikel zusammen gebracht und unserm Teil ueberantwortet. Die sind auch von den Unsern angenommen und eintraegtiglich bekennet und beschlossen, dass man sie sollte (wo der Papst mit den seinen einmal so kuehne wollt werden, ohn Liegen und triegen, mit Ernst und wahrhaftig ein recht frei Concilium zu halten, wie er wohl schuldig waere) oeffentlich ueberantworten und unsers Glaubens Bekenntnis fuerbringen."

-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 Confession (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 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 and constrained by the deplorable condition which I recently 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 Babylonian 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 later 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) of Lutheran faith are still speckled 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 gut sein, dass meine Disputationes oder Propositiones (in welchen ich etliche Artikel in kurze Sprueche gefasst), die ich im Anfang meiner Sache wider das Ablass, Papstum und der Sophisten Lehre (so dazumal in der Christenheit allein im Schwang ging, und

I allow and approve the publishing and distribution of my Theses in which at the beginning thru short statements on various articles, I dealt with Indulgences, Papacy and the Sophists' doctrine which then filled all Christendom