

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

EF993

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

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Michigan Lutheran Seminary
Saginaw, Michigan

August 9-16, 1967

Six essays were prepared for this convention upon recommendation of the 450th Reformation Anniversary Committee. The title of the essays is

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A PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL OF FORGIVENESS

I.

The History of the 95 Theses Before and After 1517

by Dr. Elmer C. Kiessling

Among the unforgettable scenes of the Martin Luther story is that of a monk standing in front of a church door with a hammer in his hand. Though he is only engaged in tacking up a notice, the hammer looks like an instrument that could batter down a door. And the monk, as he was portrayed by the chief actor in the well-known Luther film, has an angry, determined look on his face, as if to say: With these hammer blows I am breaking an old, corrupt world and constructing the foundations of a new and better one.

Now this dramatic aspect of the scene is probably legendary. When Luther allegedly posted the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg castle church on October 31, 1517, he was only following a customary academic procedure of the time. We have his word for it that he merely wanted to invite other theologians to discuss his theses with him. The legend nevertheless embodies the essential truth. These theses did deliver the hammer blows that destroyed the profitable practice of selling indulgences. They shook the church and the world. Just as the voyage of Columbus a quarter of a century earlier revealed a new hemisphere, and the discovery of Copernicus a quarter of a century later established a new planetary theory, so these few strokes from a tack hammer by an Augustinian friar ushered in a new era in the world of the spirit.

Luther's theses do not have the same impact on us that they had on his generation. I rather think that everyone who reads them for the first time today wonders how they could have caused such an uproar. To appreciate what they meant to the people of that time, we shall have to recall conditions as they existed in the Germany of the early 16th century.

It might be well to start with Luther himself. Still a young man of 34 in 1517, he had achieved the reputation of being the outstanding professor at the university of Wittenberg. Students began coming to that small university in an out of the way country town just to study the Bible under him. Originally destined for the law by his father, Martin had entered the cloister of the Augustinians in Erfurt at 22 as the result of a profound religious struggle. But his spiritual difficulties did not cease in the monastery. In fact they increased and continued for the better part of a decade. He tells us that he pictured God as a stern and righteous judge rather than as a God of mercy. He thought the expression "righteousness of God" in Romans 1, 17 meant the righteousness that God requires of man through good works, not the righteousness that He gives freely in Christ. Brother Martin was not sure that he was performing enough good works or that God had predestined him to be saved.

The scales fell from his eyes one day in the "Turmerlebnis", or tower experience, so called because it is supposed to have happened in his study in the tower of the cloister. Years later, when Luther married, his prince, the Elector of Saxony, gave him this cloister as a wedding present, and it became the family dwelling. Today it is a museum known as the "Lutherhaus". We took a look at it last year during a tour of eastern Germany. The tower, though badly damaged in World War II, has been completely restored. Its many windows let in a great deal of light, and it seems to be any-

thing but a dark monastic cell in which a spiritually troubled soul is searching for illumination. At any rate, after Luther recognized the essential nature of God as love, he became more confident in his faith, more enthusiastic in his teaching, and more critical of certain views and practices then obtaining in the church.

One of the most spectacular of the practices was the sale of indulgences - certificates of pardon sold for money. In their origins these indulgences go back to the practice of discipline in the early church. A man who had sinned and thereby placed himself outside the communion of saints had to go through three steps to become a member in good standing again. First he had to confess his sin before the congregation, or in later centuries before a priest. Secondly he had to show true sorrow and implore God for mercy. This was called contrition. His sin would then be forgiven before God and his guilt removed. But Mother Church, like a good parent or teacher or judge, demanded a third step called satisfaction, which could mean making reparation, saying special prayers, fasting, giving alms, going on a pilgrimage to some shrine or enduring some severe punishment. Since the church meted out these penalties, it was taken for granted that the church could remit them, reduce them or convert them into money payments under certain conditions. The last method became very popular. The remissions of penalties on the payment of money became known as indulgences, but Robert Bainton in his biography of Luther calls them the bingo of the 16th century. People liked them because they provided a quick way to avoid bothersome works of penance. The church liked them because they brought in money, and money was desperately needed to salary the ever increasing number of ecclesiastical officials and to build the great cathedrals of Europe. One half of the proceeds of that very indulgence which prompted Luther to write his theses was designated for the building of St. Peter's in Rome.

The pope liked indulgences for another reason. Only he could issue them, and that greatly extended his influence. John Tetzel always had the pope's bull of indulgences carried high on a gold embroidered velvet cushion when he entered a town. The humblest housewife could be sure that the certificate she bought came directly from the holy father in Rome. Chaucer includes an indulgence seller, or pardoner, among his 30 Canterbury pilgrims. The pardoner's pouch, he tells us, was "bretful (brimful) of pardons come from Rome al hot." As the vicar of Christ the pope also had jurisdiction over the treasury of merit established by Christ and the saints. He could apply part of the surplus of this treasury to any poor sinner who was in arrears with his satisfactions, provided the sinner showed his good intentions by buying an indulgence. That of course could shorten his eventual stay in purgatory or perhaps eliminate it altogether. The pope could apply the merits even to those already in that scorching place, not by direct power to be sure but by intercession with God. People - whether they believed or not didn't matter in this case - were therefore urged to buy indulgences for their dead relatives, for

As soon as the coin in the coffer rings
The soul from purgatory springs.

In his theses Luther sarcastically asked: If the pope has such influence why doesn't he empty purgatory at once out of charity instead of waiting until he gets cash for the transaction?

In general people who bought indulgences didn't distinguish between church penalties and the guilt of sin. They thought they were buying a package of complete forgiveness, and men like Chaucer's pardoner or Tetzel did nothing to disillusion them. We still have four of Tetzel's pilot sermons, besides numerous reports of people who heard him hold forth in the marketplaces of German towns where he used to set up his pulpit. What he actually

said seems to have gone far beyond what he had put down on paper. Under the inspiration of the moment he would make extreme statements as that he had saved more souls by selling indulgences than Peter had saved with his sermons or that indulgences were effective not only for past but future sins. Luther twice told a story that a nobleman came up to Tetzel asking him whether it was really true that an indulgence would absolve a man from a sin he had not yet committed but intended to commit. When Tetzel replied in the affirmative, the nobleman confided that he planned to beat up an enemy and would therefore like to buy an indulgence. Tetzel hedged for a while, but finally sold him the paper for three times its regular price. On his way to the next town he was waylaid and beaten by the nobleman, who also relieved him of his money box. When the case came before Duke George, the nobleman produced his certificate and the case was dropped.

Tetzel's most extreme statement and one that especially roiled up Luther was that an indulgence would even assuage a man had he violated the Virgin Mary. Though Tetzel later swore that he had never made that statement, there is no doubt that he played upon the fears and the baser instincts of the people in order to part them from their money. The English playwright, John Osborne, in a very effective scene in his play "Luther," presents the notorious preacher as he might have spoken to a typical German audience in the early 16th century.

Catholics who attended this play when it was given in Milwaukee were reportedly impressed by this scene. One I talked to said it just proved what they knew all along, that the church was sadly in need of reform at the time--but not, he added of a Lutheran reformation.

The indulgence preached by Tetzel had been issued by Leo X in 1515 to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. It could not be sold in Luther's homeland, Saxony, because Elector Frederick the Wise had a pet indulgence of his own--some 19,000 relics set up in the castle church. By praying before them and paying a fee pious folk could get nearly two million years of remissions of penalties. The income kept not only the castle church and the university going but was large enough to pay for a proposed bridge over the Elbe. The traffic at the castle church was conducted without Tetzel's fanfare and carnival spirit, but Luther was against it just the same. In at least three sermons before October, 1517, he expressed his disapproval of the whole idea of indulgences, and in one of the three given on the eve of All Hallows, 1516--that would be exactly a year before the posting of the theses--he directed his criticism against the relics in the castle church. Word reached him that Elector Frederick was displeased with this disparagement of his treasures.

It was not only a matter of theory but of practice with Luther, for he had been assistant pastor of the town church since 1514 and found his work as a pastor hampered when parishioners presented their indulgence slips instead of accepting his admonitions that a true Christian ought not try to avoid penalties but rather want to suffer for his sins, as Christ had done. Though the Wittenbergers could not buy indulgences in their own city, they had only to cross the river to be in the Archbishop of Mainz's territory and deal with Tetzel. Luther got angrier the more he saw and heard of the wretched business. He was also getting clearer in his own mind about faith and works and the value of Bible study as against the study of medieval theologians. He felt that he was ready to prove the theologians wrong from the scriptures, and it was in that mood that he prepared the theses.

They were not the first he had prepared nor were they to be the last. In September, 1516, he had set up a long list of theses arguing that the study of the Bible and of Augustine was more valuable than the study of Aristotle, who was the patron saint of

medieval theologians. Those theses caused some dissension in the university faculty. To prove Luther wrong, Prof. Carlstadt traveled to Leipzig and bought a complete set of Augustine's works. That meant a trip of some 50 miles one way--I know because we covered the distance over a bumpy cobblestone road by Volkswagen last summer. But after a careful study, Carlstadt came out with 151 theses saying that Luther was right. Luther wrote to his friend, John Lang of Erfurt: "Our theology and that of Augustine are going ahead, and they reign in our university and it is the Lord's work. . . . No one can hope for an audience unless he professes this theology." Then in September, 1517, just two months before October 31, Luther published 97 theses against work righteousness. He had them printed and sent to several universities, offering to defend them against anyone in debate. In a sense these 97 were more drastic than the 95 which soon followed, yet no one accepted his challenge or said a word about them. At any rate he had had practice in writing theses.

And then came the fateful month of October. The festival of All Saints would surely bring in another harvest of money, and it would be needed for that bridge over the Elbe. But Luther cared little about such worldly affairs when conscience was at stake. He had just come across instructions which the Archbishop Albrecht had issued to his people proclaiming the virtues of the jubilee indulgence for St. Peter's church. It not only listed the graces obtainable by purchasing certificates of pardon but set the prices expected of different classes of people--kings, queens, archbishops, were to pay 25 gold florins, and so on down to merchants, who paid three, and poor people, who paid only one. "And since," added the archbishop, "we are concerned for the salvation of souls quite as much as for the construction of this building, none shall be turned away empty. The very poor may contribute by prayers and fastings, for the kingdom of heaven belongs not only to the rich but also to the poor." Albrecht's letter contained 94 paragraphs. Perhaps that was why Luther settled on the number 95. There now followed the usual procedure of having the theses printed, of posting them, and sending copies to a number of people.

About ten years ago a German Protestant scholar, Hanz Volz, published a book trying to show that Luther did not affix the theses on the traditional date but on the day after. Luther several times affirmed that on October 31 he had sent copies of the theses to Archbishop Albrecht and to the bishop of his diocese, Hieronymus Schulz, who latinized his name as Scultetus. Volz argued that Luther had sent these copies for approval and that common courtesy would require that he wait at least a day before posting them. Volz's colleagues rejected his argument but praised the careful study he had made of all the known documents. It turned out that, surprisingly, not a single one of these documents dating from Luther's lifetime says anything about the nailing of the theses to the church door. It was not until a few months after the Reformer's death that Melancthon in a brief biography that served as an introduction to the second volume of Luther's Latin works stated explicitly: "And these he affixed publicly on the day before the festival of All Saints (on the 31st of October) in the year 1517 to the church that adjoins the castle in Wittenberg." Note that Melancthon doesn't even mention the door.

In 1962 a Catholic scholar, Erwin Iserloh, came out with a book trying to prove that the whole occurrence was a myth, something like that of George Washington and the cherry tree. The controversy is still going on. I have read the arguments and also the documents as collected by a Lutheran scholar, Kurt Aland, and I believe that Melancthon was stating a fact in the sentence just quoted, for he was a careful historian and had researched Luther's life. I believe that Luther did post the theses and that he sent those copies to Albrecht and Scultetus not for approval but for

information and admonition.

Whether the theses were posted or not would really make little difference. Within a few weeks several Latin and German editions were in print, and Luther was presently the most talked of man in Germany. The emotions of those who shared his views are expressed by his friend Fleck, the prior of a cloister: "He is here, the man who will do it." Albrecht Duerer, the great painter, sent him a number of his copper etchings and woodcuts in appreciation. And when Tetzal published 106 theses against Luther and threatened him with burning at the stake, Wittenberg students hijacked the cart in which 800 copies were brought to Wittenberg and burned the lot.

On the other side were the enemies. Tetzal, whose business fell off at once, appealed to his Dominican superiors and sent accusations to Rome. Archbishop Albrecht submitted the theses to his university at Mainz, where they were condemned, and also asked the pope to act. And then the Roman curia, which like Pope Leo himself was more noted for its worldliness than its spirituality, released its first thunderbolt--a document hastily written by the papal chamberlain, Sylvester Prierias, which not only defended indulgences and the pope's right to apply their benefits to the dead but abused Luther in foul language as "a leper and loathsome fellow, a false libeller and calumniator, a dog and the son of a dog, born to bite and snap at the sky with his doggish mouth, having a brain of brass and a nose of iron." A Catholic historian, John Todd, in a biography of Luther, published in 1965, writes: "It is worth noting that well before Luther began to use denunciatory-prophetic and generally brutal language, an official Roman document, the first in fact in Luther's case, uses brutal language about Luther himself."

What was Luther doing in this turmoil? For one thing he worked out a thorough and scholarly commentary on his 95 theses. In the English translation it runs to 173 pages; the theses run to nine. It already shows advances from the position he held in October, 1517. This he sent to the pope with an accompanying letter that was both humble yet forthright and critical. For the meeting of his order of the Augustinians at Heidelberg in the spring of 1518, he worked out forty theses on sin and grace, which already express distinctively Lutheran views. He won followers and prestige at Heidelberg. "I went on foot," he said. "I came back in a wagon."

It was soon evident that a man of heroic stature had risen in Germany. Friends warned him to proceed carefully. His prince, Frederick, a serious Christian who was proud of his university and his famous professor but perplexed about his precious relics, urged caution. Frederick avoided meeting Luther personally but he was in constant touch with him through the court chaplain and secretary, Spalatin, who fortunately was an admirer of Luther's. But when the demand came from Rome to appear there in 60 days to answer charges of heresy, Luther threw caution to the winds and spoke out against bans and popes that wielded bans. Less than a year later, in his disputation with John Eck at Leipzig, he took the decisive step by denying the infallibility of either pope or councils. Long before that time the 95 theses had receded into history.

The gospel, which Luther had been teaching in quiet in his classroom for half a decade, and which had prompted his protest against indulgences, now suddenly became the guiding star of all his actions, the content of his utterances. Fearlessly he fought for it in the lecture room, in the pulpit and in his books. Such a spate of writings flowed from his pen that several printers set up their shops in Wittenberg to print his books. Wittenberg shortly became the publishing capital of Germany.

In a second recent play on Luther, titled "Der Arme Mann Luther," by a German Catholic playwright, Leopold Ahlsen, an ef-

fective scene has Luther's former friend and counsellor, John Staupitz, saying good-by to him in these words. "You are a spiritual man, Martin. I can not approach that height. And so I will leave you." In another equally effective scene--non-historical by the way--in which Cardinal Cajetan, like Nicodemus, visits Luther by night, the cardinal expresses almost the same thought as Staupitz: "I want to speak to you, Luther, I felt your faith today and I know that I can not aspire to believe in that degree. And I look upon that as a lack, for I wish I could." The playwright does accord Luther the honor of having had a noble purpose and a spiritualized faith. Yet the main idea of the play seems to be that Luther was overidealistic in thinking that ordinary Christian people were a royal priesthood. The Catholic church, Ahlsen seems to say, was wiser and more realistic in holding on to the paraphernalia of religion--from incense and images to cloisters, confessionals, and indulgences, though the last are not anymore sold for cash.

But Luther abolished such things only when they got in the way of true religion. The 95 theses were directed against one of the trappings that had kept man at several removes from God. Luther wanted to bring man into direct relationship with the God of love whom he had learned to know through bitter experience. This could be done only through faith in Christ, and faith was a spiritual thing, a gift of God, not a work of man. Luther's religion was indeed a high one. It should be a source of pride, but also an incentive and an ideal for all those who call themselves Lutheran.