

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

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

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 bekennt 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

mit Gewalt getrieben ward, anstatt des lieben Evangelii, das lange Zeit geschwiegen, gar darnieder lag), gehandelt habe, an Tag kommen und ausgehen, vornehmlich darum, dass die Groesse und der glueckliche Fortgang dieser Sache (so mit der Zeit erfolget), mir von Gott darzu gegeben, mich nicht erhebe und stolz mache. Denn durch dieselben Propositiones wird oeffentlich angezeigt meine grosse Schande, das ist, meine grosse Schwachheit und Unwissenheit, welche mich im Angang drungen, diese Sache mit grosser Furcht und Zittern anzufahren.

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

"Ich aber, weil sie mir zuschauten, und allein in der Gefahr liessen stecken, war nicht so froehlich, getrost und der Sache so gewiss. Denn ich wusste viel nicht, welches, ich, Gott Lob, nun weiss, ja, ich verstund nicht was das Ablass war, wie auch alle Papisten auf einen Haufen gar nichts davon wussten, welcher allein ums Brauchs und Gewohnheit willen hoch ward gehalten. Daher ich auch davon disputiert, nicht der Meinung, als wollte ich ihn verwerfen, sondern weil ich allerdings nicht wusste, was seine Kraft waere, haette ichs gerne von andern erlernt. Und weil mich die toten oder stummen Meister, das ist, der Theologen oder Juristen Buecher, nicht genugsam berichten konnten, begehrte ich bei den Lebendigen Rat zu suchen, und die Kirche Gottes selbst zu hoeren, auf dass, wo etwa fromme Leute vorhanden waeren, durch den Hl. Geist erleuchtet, sich ueber mich erbarmten, und nicht allein mir, sondern gemeiner Christenheit zu gut, rechten gewissen Bericht vom Ablass taeten.

and was vigorously taught instead of the dear Gospel that long lay silent and defeated. (I allow it) especially that the outcome, given by God, great and fortunate, as history has shown, may not lift me up and make me proud. For thru these same Theses my shame is publicly displayed, that is, my great weakness and ignorance which at the first forced me to begin this matter with fear and trembling.

I was all alone and landed in this business thru carelessness, and since I could not retreat, I not only yielded much in many and important matters to the Pope, I also worshiped him willingly and sincerely. -----

While others watched and let me sit alone in danger, I was not so happy, confident and sure of the matter. For there was much I didn't know, which I now, thank God, do know. I didn't even understand what Indulgence was, nor did all the Papists together understand. It was honored only because of usage and custom. Therefore I discussed it, not intending to discard it, but because I didn't know its power and would gladly have learned from others. And since the dead or silent teachers, that is the books of theologians and jurists could not tell me enough, I desired help from the counsel of the living and (wanted) to hear what the Church of God (said). (I hoped) that if there were pious people available, illumined by the Holy Spirit, they might take pity on me and not only me, but might give a sure account concerning Indulgences for the benefit of Christianity in general.

"Da fanden sich viel fromme Maenner, die gross Gefallen an meinen Propositionen hatten, und viel davon hielten; aber es war mir unmoeglich, dass ich dieselben fuer Gliedmass der Kirche, mit dem Hl. Geist begabt, haette koennen ansehen und erkennen, sahe allein auf den Pabst, Cardinaele, Bischoefe, Theologen, Juristen, Moenche, Pfaffen: daher wartete ich des Geists, denn ich hatte ihre Lehre so gierig in mich (dass ich so rede) gefressen und gesoffen, dass ich gar duhn davon war, und nicht fuehlte, ob ich schliefte oder wachte.

"Und da ich alle Argumenta (die mir im Weg lagen), durch die Schrift vonmir verlegt), ueberwunden hatte, habe ich letztlich dies Einige, naemlich, dass man die Kirche hoeren sollte, mit grosser Angst, Muehe, und Arbeit durch Christi Gnade kaum ueberwunden. Denn ich hielte mit viel groesserem Ernst und rechter Ehrerbietung (und tats von Herzen) des Pabsts Kirche fuer die rechte Kirche, denn diese schaedlichen laesterlichen Verkehrter, die jetzt des Pabsts Kirche wider mich hoch ruehmen. Wenn ich den Pabst veracht haette, wie ihn jetzt verachten, die ihn doch mit Worten sehr loben, haette ich mich besorget die Erde wuerde dieselbe Stunde sich aufgetan haben, und mich lebendig verschlungen, wie Korah und seine Rotte.

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

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

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

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

There were many pious people who were very interested in my Theses and held much of them; but it was impossible for me to consider them members of the Church, endowed with the Holy Spirit. I looked only to the Pope, cardinals, bishops, theologians, jurists, monks, clergy: there I expected the Spirit, for so greedily had I devoured (so to speak) and quaffed their doctrine, that I was fuddled and did not know whether I was asleep or awake.

And when I had overcome all opposing arguments from Scripture exegized by myself, I still barely overcame this one argument, thru Christ's grace, and with great fear, toil and labor, that one ought to hear the Church. For I held with much greater earnestness and true respect (and did it from the heart) than these shameful, blasphemous pervertors that the Pope's Church is the true Church, though they now prate against me because of the matter (of their overcoming) of the Church. Had I despised the Pope as those despise him now, though they praise him highly in words, I would have worried lest the earth open in that hour and swallow me alive as it did Korah and his band.

Thesis 53: Hostes Christi et Pape sunt ii, qui propter venias predicandas verbum dei in aliis ecclesiis penitus silere iubent.

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

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

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

Thesis 69: Tenentur Episcopi et Curati veniarum apostolicarum Commissarios cum omni reverentia admittere.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

God never remits any man's guilt without at the same time subjecting him, humbled in all things,

to the priest, his representative.

The higher clergy, whose powers were thought to be higher, were also recognized, but with powers severely curtailed in scope.

Thesis 25: Qualem potestatem habet papa in purgatorium generaliter, talem habet quilibet Episcopus et Curatus in sua diocesi et parochia specialiter.

The same powers which the Pope has over purgatory in general, every bishop has in his own diocese and in particular every curate in his own parish.

There was debate as to the Pope's power in purgatory, whether he could grant indulgences by his authority or per modum suffragii - i.e. by praying that the penalties be remitted.

Luther restricted his ability to remit penalties to per modum suffragii.

Thesis 26: Optime facit papa, quod non potestate clavis (quam nullam habet) sed per modum suffragii dat animabus remissionem.

The Pope is most correct when he gives remission to souls not by the power of the keys (which he does not have) but by petition.

The Pope has no power of the keys (in purgatory), he can bring remission to souls only by praying for them. And the granting of this request is up to God alone.

In August of 1518 Luther published an explanation of his Theses: Resoluciones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute. A copy was sent to the Pope with a letter in which Luther defends himself against the charge of wishing to diminish the power of the Pope. Luther closes the letter in abject prostration at the foot of the Pope whose protection he believes will provide shade for him.

"Quare, Beatissime Pater, prostratum me pedibus tue Beatitudinis offero cum omnibus, quae sum et habeo. Vivifica, occide, voca, revoca, approba, reproba, ut placuerit: vocem tuam vocem Christi in te praesidentis et loquentis agnoscam. Si mortem merui, mori non recusabo. Domini enim est terra et plenitudo eius, qui est benedictus in saecula, Amen, qui et te servet in aeternum, Amen. ANNO MDXVIII." (W.A. I, 529)

"Wherefore, most blessed Father, I offer myself prostrate at the feet of your Blessedness, with everything I am and have. Give me life, kill, call, recall, approve, reprove as you please: I acknowledge your voice to be the voice of Christ presiding and speaking in you. If I have deserved death, I do not refuse to die. The earth is the Lord's and its fullness, who is blessed forever, Amen, who will also preserve you in eternity, Amen."

Yet in these Resoluciones Luther, explaining each Thesis, says regarding Thesis 26: (W.A. I, 577)

"Quarto et omnium fortissime Christus non ambiguus, sed clarus, apertis, rotundis verbis dicit: Quodcunque ligaveris super terram, ligatum erit et in caelis, Et quodcunque solveris super terram, solutum erit et in caelis. Non frustra

adiecit 'super terram'. Alioquin nisi restringere voluisset potestatem Clavium, satis fuerat dixisse "Quodcunque solveris, solutum erit." Aut ergo Christus ut nugator superfluit verbis aut potestas Clavium solummodo est super terram."

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

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

Thesis 20: Igitur papa per remissionem plenariam omnium penarum non simpliciter omnium intelligit, sed a seipso tantummodo impositarum.

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

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

Thesis 38: Remissio tamen et participatio Pape nullo modo est contemnenda, quia (ut dixi) est declaratio remissionis divine.

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

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

Thesis 36: Quilibet christianus vere compunctus habet remissionem plenariam a pena et culpa etiam sine literis veniarum sibi debitam.

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

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

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

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

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

In the Resoluciones Luther sets up a scale of values for the different ways a Christian should spend his money. First of all he is to help the needy. This must be done even at the cost of interrupting the building of churches and decorating them. When no one is left who needs help, then only the Christian may help in the building of churches, hospitals and public buildings. (He speaks of building churches "in our own lands".) Finally he may, if he can afford it, and wishes to, buy indulgences. Since only the first step has Christ's command, the rest do not! (W.A. I, 598.)

"Wie gaenzlich fehlt hier der Glaube als das Zeichen des Vollchristen! Auf die Liebe, nicht auf den Glauben kommt alles an." says one writer concerning the Theses. (P. Wernle, Der Evangelische Glaube nach den Hauptschriften der Reformation, Vol.1,7) This is due to the fact that Luther wants to destroy a religion which offers an easy security. And though in the Theses he says man becomes a better person through works of charity (Thesis 44), he knew already in his Romans lectures (1515) that he who is inwardly good alone does good works. Nevertheless, it seems strange to us, who know his stressing of 'sola fide', to find so little mention of faith in the Theses. (In the Resoluciones, cf. Th. 52 and 62, he knows how to value faith).

Concerning Indulgences Luther says, "Denn ich wusste viel nicht, welches ich, Gott Lob, nun weiss, ja ich verstund nicht was das Ablass war, wie auch alle Papisten auf einen Haufen gar nichts davon wussten, welcher allein ums Brauchs und Gewohnheit willen hoch ward gehalten."

"There was much I didn't know, which now, thank God, I do know. I didn't even know what indulgence was, nor did the whole pack of Papists know anything about this, which was revered only because of usage and custom."

Usage and custom had given Indulgence a greater scope than originally intended. Once Indulgence meant only release from the penalties which the church imposed on repentant sinners before readmitting them to the congregation. This historical origin Luther discovered and sought then to bring indulgences back to these narrow limits.

Thesis 8: Canones penitentiales solum viventibus sunt impositi nihilque morituris secundum eosdem debet imponi.

The penitential canons are imposed only on the living, and, according to them, no burden ought to be imposed on the dying.

Thesis 11: Zizania illa de mutanda pena Canonica in penam purgatorii videntur certe dormientibus episcopis seminata.

Those weeds about changing canonical penalties into penalties of purgatory certainly seem to have been sown while the bishops were sleeping.

Thesis 13: Morituri per mortem omnia solvunt et legibus canonum mortui iam sunt, habentes iure earum relaxationem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet indulgences, in their proper place, are condoned as we have seen. Cp. #47.

Purgatory is still a part of Luther's belief. Purgatory is used by God to drive out the old Adam. There the new life in the spirit is born, fear of punishment vanishes as faith and love grow (Cf. Th. 17 and its Resolutio, Conclusio 17) Purgatory has saints who may not even wish to be released, since the truly penitent welcome chastisement.

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

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

In the Resolutions Luther says concerning these two saints:

Non quidem fide dignam scripturam de iis duobus legi. Narrari tamen audivi, quod potuissent suis meritis liberari, si minus voluissent glorificari: ideo potius sustinuerunt quam minuerent gloriam visionis. Sed in iis credat quisque quod velit, mea nihil refert. (W.A.I, 586)

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

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

Luther acknowledged all this, "denn ich dazumal besser baepstisch war, weder Meinz und Heinz selbs je gewest sind noch werden muegen,-". (From Wider Hans Worst, 1541. Meinz is the bishop of Mainz, Heinz is Henry of Braunschweig, the target of 'Hans Worst')

But Luther has two final Theses to add to his 95. He introduces them in the "Babylonian Captivity of the Church".

"Ich mag wollen oder nicht, so werde ich gezwungen, von Tag zu Tag gelehrter zu werden, indem so viele und so grosse Magister um die Wette mich bedraengen und mich ueben. Vor zwei Jahren habe ich vom Ablass geschrieben, aber in solcher Weise, dass es mich jetzt ungemein gereut, dass ich das Buechlein (Resolutions) herausgegeben habe. Denn zu jener Zeit war ich in einem grossen Aberglauben hinsichtlich der roemischen Tyrannie befangen, daher hielt ich auch nicht dafuer, das er ganz verworfen werden muesse, da ich sah, dass er durch so grosse Uebereinstimmung der Menschen gutgeheissen werde. Dies ist auch nicht zu verwundern, weil ich allein damals diesen Fels rollte. Aber nachher, unterstuetzt durch die Guete Silvesters und der Brueder, welche ihn eifrig in Schutz nahmen, habe ich die Einsicht bekommen, dass er nichts anderes sei, als ein blosser Betrug der roemischen Schmeichler, um dadurch den Glauben Gottes und das Geld der Menschen zu verderben. Und wollte Gott, dass ich es von den Buechhaendlern erlangen und allen, die das gelesen haben, einreden koennte, dass sie alle meine Buecher vom Ablass verbrennen und anstatt alles dessen, was ich darueber geschrieben habe, diesen Satz annehmen moechten: Der Ablass ist ein Bubenstueck der roemischen Schmeichler.

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

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

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

(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