

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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The Roman Catholic Doctrine of Repentance
in 1517 and in 1967

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INTRODUCTION

In the year 1493 - just one year after Columbus had "sailed the deep blue sea" - a notable book on world history appeared on the European market, published by the famed press of Anton Koberger in Nürnberg, Germany. It was the Liber Chronicarum, "The Book of Chronicles," by Hartmann Schedel. Known today simply as the Nürnberg Chronicle, its main claim to fame was its inclusion of more than 1800 woodcut illustrations, a most ambitious undertaking for that day when printing was still in its infancy. In his survey of world history, Schedel did not bother to mention the recent momentous discovery of America, nor, for that matter, the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope five years previous. "The reason is that he did not think of history as the record of humanity expanding upon earth and craving as the highest good more earth in which to expand. He thought of history as the sum of countless pilgrimages through a vale of tears to the heavenly Jerusalem. Every one of those now dead would some day rise and stand with the innumerable host of the departed before the judgment seat to hear the words, 'Well done,' or 'Depart from me unto everlasting fire.'" ¹

To emphasize the inevitability of that coming Day of Judgment, Schedel's Nürnberg Chronicle closed with a striking full-page woodcut which portrayed Christ the Judge sitting upon a rainbow. Roland Bainton, in his familiar biography of Luther, entitled Here I Stand, includes a reproduction of this awesome woodcut along with this verbal description of Christ as the Final Judge: "A lily extends from his right ear, signifying the redeemed, who below are being ushered by angels into paradise. From his left ear protrudes a sword, symbolizing the doom of the damned, whom the devils drag by the hair from the tombs and cast into the fumes of hell." ²

When the Nürnberg Chronicle, with this terrifying concluding illustration, came off the presses in 1493, Martin Luther was still only a ten-year-old lad. It's hard to say whether or not Luther ever saw this precise woodcut depicting Christ as the Final Judge, but he must have seen others that were very similar. Bainton remarks: "The Christ upon the rainbow with the lily and the sword was a most familiar figure in the illustrated books of the period. Luther had seen pictures such as these and testified that he was utterly terror-stricken at the sight of Christ the Judge." ³

This was the concept of Christ that Martin Luther carried with him through childhood into adolescence and adulthood: not Christ the loving Redeemer, but Christ the avenging Judge, who somehow had to be appeased by an unending stream of good works if a man was ever to enjoy the bliss of heaven. No sensible person waited until the last minute to take care of this crucial matter. The thinking man clutched at every straw of help that the medieval Church had to offer: sacraments, pilgrimages, indulgences, the intercession of saints. One of the surest ways of gaining God's favor was to renounce the world and take the cowl of a monk. "Even St. Thomas Aquinas himself declared the taking of the cowl to be second baptism, restoring the sinner to the state of innocence which he enjoyed when first baptized. The opinion was popular that if the monk should sin thereafter, he was peculiarly privileged because in his case repentance would bring restoration to the state of innocence. Monasticism was the way par excellence to heaven." ⁴

It was not surprising, therefore, that Luther's close call with death on that sultry July day in 1505, when a sudden lightning

bolt knocked him to the ground, should have prompted him to become a monk. He was determined to save his soul and he would live the life of a monk to the utmost! He chose one of the stricter monastic orders - that of the reformed Augustinian - and set about with feverish intensity to accumulate enough good works. He voluntarily undertook more nighttime vigils and prayers than the rules required. He fasted often, sometimes for as long as three days on end without a bite of food. On cold nights he would frequently throw aside his blankets and nearly freeze to death in his frigid cell. In later years Luther recalled: "I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work." ⁵

And what did Luther gain by all of these self-imposed acts of penitence? Did he find true peace of conscience? Did he arrive at a joyful certainty of salvation? Over and over again Luther summed up his monastic career with such expressions as: "I was always sad...I fell into a state of melancholy...I was the most miserable man on earth." ⁶ He strove mightily to make satisfaction for his sins, but he could never feel certain that his account was paid, that God's ledger was balanced. In fact, he came to realize that he could not even begin to satisfy God at any point!

What was wrong? Luther had done all, yea, more than the Roman Catholic Church had prescribed, and yet he wound up utterly frustrated. It was only after he had immersed himself in the study of Scripture that Luther finally realized that it was not so much he, but the teaching of the Roman Church that was at fault!! God's way of salvation, as revealed in Scripture, was crystal-clear; it could bring true peace of conscience and the joyful certainty of salvation to the troubled heart. But for centuries the truths of Scripture concerning sin, repentance, justification, and holy living had been devilishly twisted and distorted by the Church of Rome, leaving tortured souls perpetually in doubt and despair as to their actual standing with God.

It is the burden of this essay to examine in some depth the specific teachings of the Roman Catholic Church concerning "Repentance". It should be obvious to all, after hearing the previous four essays delivered at this convention, that it was Rome's false conception of the doctrine of Repentance which led to the notorious indulgence practices that Luther attacked so vigorously in his 95 Theses. We shall consider two questions:

(1) What did Rome teach concerning "Repentance" in Luther's day - in 1517?

(2) What does Rome teach concerning "Repentance" today-in 1967?

Before proceeding any further, it should be noted that, prior to the Reformation, there was no single fixed, official formulation of Roman Catholic Doctrine in existence. It was not until late in 1545, just two months before Luther's death, that the Ecumenical Council of Trent began the first official formulation of Roman Catholic doctrine. Trent finally finished its work eighteen years later in December of 1563, and ever since that date the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent have served as the basic official statement of Rome's doctrinal standards.

Both before and after the Council of Trent much of Roman Catholic theology was a complex and confusing mixture of Scripture and ancient and medieval philosophy. Human reason was employed in an attempt to explain divine mysteries and to support human doctrines which had no foundation in Scripture. Over the centuries many different schools of thought came into vogue, with one school often flatly contradicting the pet teaching of another. The Council of Trent, in addition to condemning Protestant beliefs, was supposed to settle all such doctrinal disputes among Catholics. Trent,

however, neatly sidestepped many of the hotter doctrinal potatoes, compromised on others and when the dust had cleared, it was mainly the Aristotelian philosophy of Thomas Aquinas that prevailed as official Roman Catholic doctrine.

PART ONE: THE ROMAN CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF REPENTANCE IN LUTHER'S DAY

By the time Martin Luther came on the theological scene, the Roman Church had already for a thousand years or more been suppressing the Scriptural truth that an individual sinner could approach his gracious God directly and receive assurance of full forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. Ever since the rise of the Roman Papacy in the fifth century Rome had effectively erected the barrier of its priesthood and sacramental system between God and the individual sinner. Falsely identifying its outward organizational structure with the universal, invisible Church of Christ, Rome brazenly claimed that "extra Ecclesiam nulla salus!" - "outside the Church - i.e., the Roman Church - there is no salvation!" Only by going through the "funnel" of the Church of Rome, with its tyrannical priesthood and elaborate sacramental system, could the sinner ever hope to obtain grace, forgiveness of sins, and the chance to spend eternity with God in heaven. The New Testament doctrine of the "universal priesthood of all believers" was literally unknown to the average Roman Catholic of the Middle Ages. It would certainly have seemed a strange and foreign concept to Martin Luther when, as a loyal son of Rome, he began his theological studies during the first decade of the 16th century.

As a result there was no thought in Luther's day of an individual sinner, armed only with the Word of God, repenting on his own and clinging in faith to God's universal proclamation of forgiveness in the Gospel. No, only by submitting to the sacraments of Baptism and Penance, rigidly controlled by the Roman Church, could a sinner hope to obtain remission of his sins. Rome had fiendishly turned the sweet promises of the Gospel into a new and terrible kind of Law which a man had to obey slavishly in order to merit his own forgiveness. "Repentance," as we know it, was a word seldom used in Roman Catholic circles; instead the concept of "doing penance" was heavily stressed. Hence, to understand Rome's teaching about Repentance we must focus our attention on her man-made sacrament of Penance. And before we can understand all that was involved in Penance, we must briefly review Rome's peculiar teachings about man and sin, grace and justification.

A. ROME'S DOCTRINE OF MAN AND SIN

First of all, then, what was the consensus of medieval Roman theology regarding the doctrine of man and sin? The Scholastic philosophers made a distinction between the natural gifts and supernatural gifts which God had supposedly given to Adam before the Fall. The natural gifts were identified with the "image of God" and were said to consist of freedom of the will, right emotions, great scientific knowledge, and immortality of the soul. Rome actually taught that Adam's natural body, before the Fall, was the "seat of concupiscence", i.e., his sensuous desires or his interest in, and love for, the beauties of creation. These natural gifts, according to Rome, enabled Adam to lead a rich earthly life but were insufficient to enable him to attain the beatific vision of God in heaven. Therefore God had to give Adam some additional supernatural gifts, such as perfect control over concupiscence, immortality of the body, and especially "sanctifying grace" (donum gratiae superadditum), which enabled Adam to attain the similitude of God.

What, then, according to Rome, did Adam actually lose in the Fall? He lost only the extra supernatural gifts: immortality of

the body, perfect control over concupiscence, and his similitude to God. But Adam's original nature was not changed; he retained his natural gifts; he retained the "image of God!" That meant, above all, that Adam, together with all his descendants, still possessed free will. Here is the KEY that opens the door to salvation by works: namely, that sinful man still has a trace of free will to make spiritual decisions! Although Rome admitted that, in Adam, all men had lost their holiness and become subject to death, yet Trent declared that "free will, weakened though it was in its powers, and bent down, was by no means extinguished in them" (Trent, Sess. VI, ch.1).⁸ In short, Roman Catholic theology denied the Scriptural teaching that original sin involved total depravity. It claimed that man was not rendered spiritually dead by the Fall, but was merely spiritually "wounded." Contrary to the clear words of St. Paul in chapters 6, 7, and 8 of Romans, the Catholic Church refused to brand concupiscence as sin, but merely called it an "incentive to sin" which remained in man for his exercise (Trent, Sess. V, "On Original Sin," part 5).⁹

Moreover, Roman theologians taught that both the guilt and the effects of original sin were completely removed by Baptism, so that the concupiscence which remained after Baptism was not really sin. The sins committed after Baptism were labeled as "actual" sins and were defined as any willful thoughts, desires, words, actions, or omissions forbidden by the Law of God. Such actual sins were divided into two categories: mortal sins and venial sins. Mortal sins were regarded as serious sins - grievous offenses against the Law of God, which, if not repented of, would result in eternal damnation. Venial sins, on the other hand, were thought of as less serious sins, which would not damn a person to hell but would bring on God's temporal punishments in this life and in purgatory.¹⁰

B. ROME'S DOCTRINE OF GRACE AND JUSTIFICATION

Next, we must be aware of what the Roman Catholic theologians taught about "grace". To us Lutherans "grace" is a very simple, clear, and beautiful word; it means the "undeserved mercy" of God - the full and free forgiveness which God bestows on the sinner for the sake of Christ. But in Roman Catholic theology, from the Middle Ages onward, "grace" was anything but a simple word; it became a "weasel word" which could have a dozen different shades of meaning. Trying to unravel all of these fine shades of meaning can make one's head spin. We shall mention only two: "actual grace" and "sanctifying grace", the two main phases of justification in Roman theology.

ACTUAL GRACE "Actual grace" - also called "prevenient grace" - was defined as a supernatural gift which God gave to all men to enable them to use their natural reason and will-power to choose between good and evil. If a man chose evil, actual grace in his case was said to be "merely sufficient." If, however, a man used his actual grace to choose good, he thereby prepared himself for phase two, "sanctifying grace," which was the essential grace needed for justification.

SANCTIFYING GRACE "Sanctifying grace" - also called "infused grace" - was defined as a supernatural quality which God "infused" or poured into a man's soul to give him the power to merit eternal life by doing good works. It might be described as a supernatural "hypodermic injection" of some necessary spiritual "vitamins"! Rome taught that a man could receive more and more sanctifying grace either by doing good works (ex opere operantis) or by using the sacraments (ex opere operato). If, however, he fell into mortal sin, he could lose his sanctifying grace entirely. "Faith", on the other hand, could not be destroyed by

mortal sin, since Rome looked upon "faith" as being merely an intellectual condition (*habitus*) in man - "a dogmatical or theoretical belief in the truths of Divine Revelation." 11

JUSTIFICATION In short, Rome always injected the idea of merit into the word "grace" and accordingly turned "justification" into a long, drawn-out, lifetime process, in which a man could never be quite sure of where he stood with God. We Lutherans accept the beautiful and comforting Scriptural teaching that "grace" is an unmerited gift of God and that "justification" is an instantaneous act whereby God pronounces us free from all guilt and punishment for Christ's sake, a fact of which we can be joyfully certain on the solid basis of God's clear Gospel promises!

Now that Rome's unscriptural concepts of "sin", "grace," and "justification" have been explained, her teaching concerning Penance should be easier to follow.

C. ROME'S SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Rome's teaching, in Luther's day, regarding Penance can be easily ascertained from the Lutheran Confessions, as well as from the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent. Articles VI, XI, and XII(V) of Melancthon's Apology of the Augsburg Confession and Articles III and VIII of Part III of Luther's Smalcald Articles deal at length with the Roman errors concerning Penance. In reaction to these earlier writings of the Reformers, the Council of Trent devoted almost its entire 14th Session in 1551 to defending Rome's teachings about Penance and anathematizing the Lutheran Reformers for their supposed "heresies."

In contrast to Baptism, which Rome regarded as a sacrament that should be administered just once to an individual for the removal of his original sin, the sacrament of Penance was designed by Rome as one which should repeatedly be administered to Christians so that they might obtain forgiveness for the many actual sins they commit after Baptism. According to Trent, the sacrament of Penance was instituted by the risen Christ on Easter evening when He appeared to his fearful disciples behind locked doors, breathed on them, and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23). This power of forgiving and retaining sins - the Power of the Keys - Trent limited to "the Apostles and their lawful successors;" it was not given to individual Christians, but only to the duly ordained priesthood. (Trent, Sess. XIV, ch. 1 & 6) 12

Rome looked upon the sacrament of Penance as a criminal court proceeding, in which the penitent sinner was arraigned as a criminal before the tribunal of the Church, with Christ's Apostles and their successors, the priests, sitting as judges. To these priestly judges all mortal sins or "crimes" had to be carried, so that they might pronounce the sentence of forgiveness or retention and assign appropriate kinds of temporal punishment (Trent, Sess. XIV, ch. 2 & 5). 13 This judicial concept was the very HEART of the sacrament of Penance.

Trent pointed out several important differences between the sacraments of Penance and Baptism. In Baptism the priest did not act as a judge; in Penance he was a judge. In Baptism the sinner, without any effort on his part, was made an "entirely new creature, obtaining a full and entire remission of all sins." In Penance, however, sinners were in "no ways able to arrive at" such newness and entire forgiveness "without many tears and great labors" on their own part. Accordingly, Trent quoted the Church Fathers as calling Penance "a laborious kind of Baptism;" Trent also referred to Penance as "a second plank after shipwreck." (Trent, Sess. XIV,

ch. 2 & can. 2) 14 F. E. Mayer explains the thought behind these expressions as follows: "The Church is the ship surrounded by drowning men. In her generosity the Church through Baptism rescues men without any effort on their part. But when men through mortal sin fall overboard, the Church throws out the life line of Penance, and man must by his own efforts regain the safety of the Church". 15

For a sacred act to qualify as a sacrament, the Roman Church, much like the Lutheran, required that the act contain three necessary elements: (1) a divine institution; (2) invisible grace; and (3) an outward, visible sign or material element. With regard to Penance, Rome viewed Christ's Easter command to remit and retain sins as the divine institution. The second element, invisible grace, was said to be earned by the actions of the penitent and communicated through the priestly absolution. But Roman theologians had trouble defining the "matter" or outward visible signs connected with Penance. Scripture, of course, indicates no visible sign in connection with its teaching on true repentance. Trent, following the reasoning of Thomas Aquinas, finally settled on the required three acts of the penitent as constituting the "matter" or outward sign in the sacrament of Penance. These three acts required of the penitent person were: Contrition, confession, and satisfaction (Trent, Sess. XIV, can. 4) 16 A fourth essential part of Penance was, quite naturally, the priest's act of dispensing absolution. This act of absolution was technically considered as the "form" of the sacrament, namely, the exact words prescribed by the Church which gave "form" and validity to the "matter" of the sacrament, the three acts of the penitent.

CONTRITION Let us look a bit more closely at each of these three acts of the penitent. The first, "contrition," was defined by the Council of Trent as "a sorrow of mind, and a detestation for sin committed, with the purpose of not sinning for the future" (Trent, Sess. XIV, ch. 4). 17 The term "contrition" was based on the Latin word conterere, meaning "to pulverize, to grind." The Vulgate Bible used the word "contrite" to denote complete compunction or remorse of the heart which "grinds the sinner to dust". 18 A distinction was made at Trent between "perfect" contrition and "imperfect" contrition. If the sinner's feeling of utter helplessness was prompted by perfect love of God, it was labeled as "perfect" contrition and could lead to immediate reconciliation with God, provided it was coupled with a sincere desire to receive the sacrament of Penance.

ATTRITION On the other hand, if contrition was prompted by a lower motive, such as fear of punishment or realization of the heinousness of sin, it was called "imperfect" contrition or, more commonly, "attrition." The term "attrition" was derived from the Latin word atterere, meaning "to rub against;" however, it was never used in the Latin Vulgate Bible. Rome taught that attrition, in itself, was not enough to justify the sinner; yet Trent could still describe it as "a gift of God, an impulse of the Holy Ghost...whereby the penitent, being assisted, prepares a way for himself unto justice. And although this (attrition) cannot of itself, without the sacrament of Penance, conduct the sinner to justification, yet does it dispose him to obtain the grace of God in the sacrament of Penance." (Trent, Sess. XIV, ch. 4)

This explanation of "attrition" by the Council of Trent, if taken seriously, would have led the sinner either to great anxiety or to a false security. 20 Luther, in his Smalcald Articles of 1537, mockingly described Rome's attrition as "half a contrition" and branded it as "mere hypocrisy," a manufactured and fictitious thought (or imagination), derived from man's own powers, without faith and without the knowledge of Christ (Part III, Art. 3). Trent reacted strongly to these words of Luther; the Council de-

clared that attrition, motivated either by pondering on the multitude or filthiness of one's sins or by the fear of hell, was a "true and profitable sorrow" which did not make a man a hypocrite but rather prepared him for grace (Trent, Sess. XIV, can. 5).²² Thus Rome, in line with its mechanical *opus operatum* theory of the sacraments, opened the way for Penance to provide a mechanical sort of justification without faith in Christ, partly through the acts of the so-called penitent, partly through those of the priest.²³

CONFESSION The second act required of the penitent sinner in the sacrament of Penance was "auricular confession," i.e., confession made privately "into the ear" of the priest in the confessional booth. In the year 1215, on the occasion of the Fourth Lateran Council, Pope Innocent III in his bull *Omnis utriusque* had decreed that every member of the Roman Church must make such an auricular confession of his sins at least once a year during Lent. Failure to do so would constitute a mortal sin. The Council of Trent reemphasized this necessity and insisted that all mortal sins had to be confessed (Trent, Sess. XIV, can. 7 & 8).²⁴ Venial sins could also be confessed but this was not required, since, properly speaking, they did not come before the judicial tribunal of the Church and could be remitted by other means.²⁵

Rome's auricular confession consisted of four parts: (1) the sinner's self-accusation; (2) the sinner's declaration of all his mortal sins, together with an explanation of their attendant circumstances; (3) confession before the properly authorized priest; and (4) the priest's decree of absolution as a judicial act, effective *ex opere operato*.²⁶ Since the priest, in his capacity as a judge, had to impose a sentence which befitted the sinner's "crime", he had to know all the pertinent details and circumstances which might have affected the seriousness of the "crimes." For instance, under certain conditions the theft of a carpenter's tools might have been considered only a venial sin; but if the carpenter was thereby deprived of a day's wages, it might have been classed as a mortal sin!²⁷

The Lutheran Reformers did not object to private confession as such; in fact, the Lutheran Confessions encouraged it as a wholesome practice because of the comfort that might be obtained through private absolution. But what they objected to was the legalistically enforced nature of the Roman confessional system with its priestly tyranny over the consciences of sinners who were afterwards left in doubt. One writer has aptly described the Roman confessional box as "a torture chamber in which the penitent is at once defendant, prosecutor, and witness..."²⁸ Trent indignantly branded as "impious" those who dared speak of auricular confession as the "slaughter-house of consciences."²⁹ (Trent, Sess. XIV, ch. 5) But that's just about what it amounted to; the truly penitent sinner was, as it were, left hanging somewhere between heaven and hell. He could never be sure that he, on his part, had made a full confession. And he could never be sure that the priest had acted with the proper intention and authority, since the validity of the sacrament depended as much on the priest's actions as his own acts of penance.³⁰

SATISFACTION The third act of the penitent in the sacrament of Penance was "satisfaction." After questioning the sinner in detail concerning his "crimes" and before pronouncing absolution, the priestly judge would assign works of penance or satisfaction whereby the penitent could help pay part of the punishment of his sin. The Council of Trent vehemently condemned the Lutheran doctrine that in justification God cancels the guilt and all the punishment for a man's sin (Trent, Sess. VI, can. 30; Sess. XIV, can. 12).³¹ Instead Rome made a false distinction between the guilt and punishment due to mortal sin. She taught that Pen-

ance could remove only the guilt and eternal punishment of mortal sin. After receiving absolution of these, the sinner still had to undergo temporal punishment which could be removed only by performing the satisfactions imposed by the priest. If the sinner died before he had made full satisfaction for his "forgiven" mortal sins, he could finish the job in purgatory. Venial sins, though they could not damn, nevertheless entailed similar temporal punishments to be paid either in this life or in purgatory. The customary means for making satisfaction for all such temporal punishments were the three "good works" of praying, fasting, and almsgiving, which Rome considered best suited as satisfactions for the "three cardinal sins: pride, lust of the flesh, and lust of the eyes."³²

INDULGENCES It was at this point that indulgences gradually came into the picture, ostensibly as a merciful act on the part of the Church at large to aid the individual sinner in canceling his temporal punishment. Actually, of course, the Roman Church introduced indulgences as a practical, money-making scheme to finance a wide variety of projects, from crusades and cathedrals to roads and bridges. In order to justify the practice of granting indulgences, the Roman theologians of the 13th century invented the doctrine of the "treasury of merits", a fabrication that was made official church doctrine by the papal bull *Unigenitus*, published by Pope Clement VI in 1343. The "treasury of merits" was alleged to be a sort of spiritual bank containing inexhaustible deposits of superabundant merits left over from the lives of Christ and the saints. Simply for the price of an indulgence letter, those left-over merits could be dispensed as full (plenary) or partial payment for the temporal punishments of either the living on earth or the dead in purgatory.

The Roman Church asserts that it has never officially taught that indulgences could remove sins, although several papal bulls did use the expression, "an indulgence for the remission of sins." Indulgences were supposed to remove, not sins themselves, but only the temporal punishments left over from "forgiven" sins. The granting of indulgences did not release a man from his obligation to help work out his own salvation. Theoretically the Church was supposed to grant indulgences only upon the fulfillment of three conditions: (1) the recipient had to be in a state of grace; (2) he had to conscientiously perform the prescribed good works; and (3) he really had to have the intention to gain an indulgence.³³ But how often was this pointed out at the height of the indulgence traffic in Luther's day? This would have been unfamiliar language to the common man who, egged on by the high-pressure salesmanship of Tetzel and other indulgence hawkers, believed that he was buying forgiveness for past sins and even permission for future sins!!

It was not so much the sacrament of Penance itself, but rather the absurd and excessive claims of the indulgence sellers that drew Luther's main fire in his 95 Theses. However, already in his opening theses Luther began stressing the need for true inner repentance in contrast to the outward satisfactions imposed in sacramental Penance. And as he matured in his evangelical, Christ-centered faith, Luther came to understand and reject the whole set of false premises underlying the man-made sacrament of Penance.

This fact is abundantly reflected in the Lutheran Confessions which began appearing from 1530 on, authored by Luther and his co-worker Melancthon. Both the *Apology* of 1531 and the *Smalcald Articles* of 1537 minutely examined the various parts of sacramental Penance. Step by step they used the truths of Scripture to expose the pernicious, man-made teachings of Rome which for so long had both robbed the penitent of true comfort and given false security to the impenitent. From beginning to end - from contrition and confession right through to absolution and satisfaction - the Lutheran Reformers showed how Rome "instructed men to repose confidence

in their own works."³⁴ "There was no mention of Christ nor faith; but men hoped by their own good works to overcome and blot out sins before God."³⁵ Even though a sinner did not truly lament his sins, as long as he said that he desired to have contrition, the Romanists "accepted this as contrition, and forgave him his sins on account of this good work of his (which they adorned with the name of contrition)".³⁶ When it came to confession, the sinner was not instructed to depend on the promise of Christ for comfort; no, rather upon the sinner's own "enumeration of sins and his self-abasement depended his consolation."³⁷ And with regard to satisfaction, since Rome kept its penitents in a constant state of uncertainty, the Lutheran Confessions had to restate this Scriptural truth: "Neither can the satisfaction be uncertain, because it is not our uncertain, sinful work, but it is the suffering and blood of the (spotless and) innocent Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world."³⁸ The uncertainty, the hopelessness, the utter futility engendered by Roman sacramental Penance was perhaps best summed up by Luther in the Smalcald Articles when he succinctly remarked that Rome was, in effect, teaching her poor, deluded followers "forever to do penance and never to come to repentance!"³⁹

PART TWO: THE ROMAN CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF REPENTANCE TODAY

Exactly 430 years have elapsed since Luther, in 1537, wrote the words just quoted above from the Smalcald Articles. And this year - particularly at this convention - we are commemorating the 450th anniversary of Luther's "PROCLAMATION OF THE EVERLASTING GOSPEL" through his posting of the 95 Theses. What has happened during the intervening centuries by way of modification of Rome's doctrines concerning repentance? Surely the Scriptural truths established by Luther and his followers must have made a dent in Rome's teaching and caused her to reevaluate and correct her falsehoods regarding sacramental Penance! Or did they? Let's look at the record!

In direct reaction to the Protestant Reformation the Church of Rome convened its 19th Ecumenical Council at Trent in northern Italy in December of 1545. After two long interruptions of three and ten years' duration, Trent completed its work in December of 1563, eighteen years after it had begun. Its chief purpose was to settle doctrinal disputes and institute reforms. Did Trent accomplish this purpose? It effected some practical reforms, particularly in the area of education and discipline among the clergy, but it produced no reforms in the area of doctrine! As we indicated earlier, Trent carefully sidestepped doctrinal questions disputed within Catholicism and instead concentrated on pronouncing its curses upon all the evangelical doctrines of the Protestant Reformers. In the process Rome, for the first time, officially defined her main doctrines and demanded absolute obedience to them on the part of all her members. All of Rome's falsehoods, including her teachings on Penance, were boldly upheld as absolute truth. On the closing day of the Council the practice of granting indulgences was officially approved as "most salutary" for Christians. A mild warning was given that "moderation be observed" and that all "evil gains" connected with the sale of indulgences be abolished, so that "the gift of holy indulgences may be dispensed to all the faithful, piously, holily, and incorruptly". (Trent, Sess. XXV, ch. 21)⁴⁰

"Well, after all," someone might say, "the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent were formulated over 400 years ago. Surely the situation has changed since!" Not really. The decrees of Trent have been consistently upheld and reaffirmed over the past four centuries as the unchanging official position of the Church of Rome. There has been no change for the better, only for the worse! Rome has added new falsehoods to her storehouse of dogma: e.g., in 1854, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and in 1950, her bodily

Assumption into heaven. Late in 1869 Pope Pius IX convened the First Vatican Council - the 20th Ecumenical Council and the first in over 300 years since the close of Trent. In the opening sessions of Vatican I all the delegates, before being seated, were required to give formal depositions that they supported the decrees of the Council of Trent! Before Vatican I closed in October of 1870 a new doctrine had been promulgated: the Infallibility of the Pope!

How about today - 1967? Has Rome made any significant doctrinal changes in recent years? To be more specific, has Rome made any changes in her teaching concerning repentance? Just a few short years ago - in the early 1960's - the religious world was all aflutter over the sudden decision of jolly Pope John XXIII to convene another Ecumenical Council. As Pope John himself put it, "We are going to bring some fresh air into the church!" Vatican Council II met in four successive annual sessions from October, 1962, until December, 1965. During those years the public and religious press was filled with optimistic reports about "a new spirit in Rome." To be sure, the Roman Catholic Church showed a friendlier face to the "separated brethren;" she spoke a bit more highly of Scripture; she allowed the use of modern vernacular languages in the liturgy; she encouraged the laity to take a more active part in church affairs. But these were largely surface matters. As far as doctrinal matters were concerned, it proved to be the same old story: NO CHANGE! About the only time Penance was even mentioned was in connection with the switch to vernacular languages in the administration of the sacraments. Now the penitents in the confessional box may hear the priest speak entirely in their own language, except for the three Latin words of absolution: "Ego te absolvo," "I absolve thee." Big deal!

It's no great secret that certain Catholic Progressives at Vatican II were hopeful that their Pontiff would, at long last, abandon the whole practice of granting indulgences. Far from taking such a major step, Pope Paul VI made only a few minor changes as reported in Newsweek magazine this past January. Newsweek described the change as "dropping ecclesiastical bookkeeping." All it means is that the Roman Catholic Church will no longer try to determine the exact number of days or years of temporal punishment that may be subtracted from a sinner's unpaid "debt" through the granting of indulgences. But the whole unscriptural framework of sacramental Penance, with its meritorious acts of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, combined with its teachings about indulgences available from a fictitious "treasury of merits" - all of this still remains very much part and parcel of Rome's doctrinal system.

Should anyone still doubt that this is so, we would encourage him to drop in at a library and spend an hour or two perusing the latest edition of the New Catholic Encyclopedia. Look under such headings as "Contrition," "Attrition," "Penance," "Sin," or "Indulgences." It's all there in black on white: the whole sordid story of how the modern Roman Catholic is still being told to help merit his own forgiveness by doing penance, just as his forebears were told to do in Luther's day. Easier still, if you are on good terms with a Roman Catholic neighbor, ask to see his child's catechism. This essayist had access to a modern Catholic Catechism printed as recently as 1964.⁴¹ It devoted twenty interesting pages to a discussion of mortal and venial sins, Penance (including contrition, confession, and satisfaction), and indulgences. Here are just a few quotations from that catechism which show that Rome has not changed:

"Our spirit of repentance should show itself in acts of penance. Such acts of penance help us to pay off the debt of punishment which we have deserved for our sins."⁴² "What is most important in receiving the sacrament of Penance is our sorrow. Unless

we are sorry we cannot receive forgiveness for our sins. If anyone has committed mortal sins he has to be sorry at least for these mortal sins. If he is confessing only venial sins he must be sorry for at least one of them. In this sacrament it is enough to have imperfect contrition; but it is much better, and we should do all we can, to be sorry for our sins out of love for God..."⁴³ "In the sacrament of Penance we are indeed let off all the eternal punishment we may have deserved, but not all of the temporal punishment. So the priest orders us to do some penitential acts (usually to say some prayers) so that when we do our penance we may join in to the saving passion of Christ and thus profit even more from it..."⁴⁴ "After we come out from the confessional we should do the penance which the priest told us to do. It is a good thing to give ourselves some extra penance of our own free will. We should offer up our penance as a satisfaction, in union with the saving passion of our Lord..."⁴⁵

We could go on and on citing more examples, but these should suffice to prove that ROME HAS NOT CHANGED HER TUNE! She may be smiling more broadly and singing more sweetly, but it's still the same old satanic melody that Luther's keen ears recognized as being out of tune with Scripture way back in 1517. No matter how open and friendly and ecumenically concerned Rome's current crop of theologians may appear on the surface, let's not be taken in so easily. We would do well to heed the centuries-old warning against Rome's theologians voiced in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: "Aye, it is true, they are called teachers and authors, but by their singing you can tell what sort of birds they are!" (Apology, Article XIII(V))⁴⁶

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