

A LUTHERAN THEOLOGIAN LOOKS AT THE NINETY-FIVE THESES IN 1967

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THE FACT that 1967 is being celebrated as the 450th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation that radiated from Wittenberg in the sixteenth century adds to the annual ambivalence with which a Lutheran theologian normally faces the last day of October.

It is not so much a matter of the date as of the document that the date emphasizes. The difficulties connected with the date he takes in his stride. He knows that the keeping of October 31 in his tradition seems to have developed out of a little classroom ceremony that Philip Melancthon initiated—a professorial commemoration prompted by collegial piety.¹ He knows that most of the early liturgical commemorations of the Reformation were annual remembrances of the introduction of the evangelical religion in the respective town or territory. He knows that 1617 became the first centennial of the Reformation because by then there was a weary recognition that the breach in the Western patriarchate promised to be permanent and that an interprovincial and international birthday of the evangelical movement was a felt need among at least some adherents of the Augsburg Confession. (He also knows that at that very time the “hawks” of the seventeenth century were on the verge of devoting three decades to a series of gory and futile wars designed to prove that the force of arms could—or could not—reunite the Western *corpus christianum*.)

He is not greatly distressed by the arguments that October 31 may perpetuate a historical error and that he ought really observe November 1, or that the ninety-five theses may actually not have taken their extant form before December of 1517. Again, he is fully aware that the surviving evidence does not establish beyond historical doubt that Augustinian Hermit Martin Luther really nailed the ninety-five theses to the north door of the Church of All Hallows in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, and may merely have mailed them to his ecclesiastical

¹ *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883-) 1, 230. Hereafter this edition is abbreviated *WA*.

superiors on that day. But the Lutheran theologian also knows that the counterarguments are ultimately just as indecisive. Thus he is likely to be satisfied with the view that in either case Luther can truthfully be said to have posted the theses.

Nor does your Lutheran theologian feel the distress over against the Lutheran Reformation that some Anglo-Catholics have felt over against the Henrician Reformation in England. Your Lutheran theologian regrets profoundly, of course, that the external unity of the empirical Church, already torn by the schisms with the various Eastern Christian Churches, underwent further rending. Yet he feels that the breach was not something which the Lutheran Reformers designed or for which they were exclusively or even extensively responsible. Without making any concession to historical determinism, he is likely to believe that in the premises—the sociopolitical situation that had been developing for over a century and the concrete personal factors in the formula, the Hohenzollern prince-bishop-archbishop-primate, the stubborn son of upward mobile Hans and Margaret Luther, the Medici pope, the Wettin rulers of Saxony, the ordinary of the diocese of Brandenburg, the spectacularly successful indulgence preacher, the Dominican general, the Ingolstadt professor who forged the weapons of theological debate—a cataclysmic rupture would have been avoided only by a direct divine intervention. Ultimately, he feels, the Lutheran Reformation, precisely because it was a reformation, had aspects that deserve celebration and expressions of gratitude to God.

Nor is your Lutheran theologian too much dismayed by the reflection that some other date than October 31 would have been more appropriate—say June 25, the day in 1530 when the Saxon chancellor Christian Beyer read the Augsburg Confession before the assembled estates of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. For after all, your Lutheran theologian feels, once the Lutheran community decided to celebrate the Reformation, the date became of minor moment. We keep the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ on December 25. Monarchs celebrate their official birthdays on a day when they can at least hope for good weather for their presumably rejoicing subjects. The rubrics permit commemorating the dedication of a church on any suitable date if some other commemoration permanently impedes a celebration on the actual anniversary.

The problem, this writer would repeat, is not the date but the document. Reformation Day is bound to the ninety-five theses. These theses, your Lutheran theologian notes, are the program for a disputation that was never held. Unlike the Small and the Large Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles—also works of Luther—the ninety-five theses did not find a place among the symbolical books of the Lutheran community. Indeed, unlike *De servo arbitrio* and *De votis monasticis iudicium*, they are nowhere cited in the Lutheran symbols as supporting documentation to illustrate at length a point that the symbols make in more summary fashion. Again, while the Lutheran symbols quote significant portions of *Vom Abendmahl Christi Bekenntnis*, for example, they do not quote or even demonstrably allude to the theses.

Beyond that, the theses appear to say either too much or too little. That they say too little is suggested by the fact that Luther himself felt that he had moved beyond the position of the theses and the explanatory *Resolutiones* by 1520; he writes in that year that he wishes that all that he had written on indulgences might be burned and that a single proposition might replace them: "Indulgentiae sunt adulatorum Romanorum nequitiae."² They say too much in that they affirm attitudes toward the pope, toward purgatory, and toward indulgences themselves that a contemporary Lutheran cannot bring himself to affirm. The fundamental problem for the Lutheran lies in the basic assumption that the theory of a penal purgatory developed, that every forgiven sin—venial sins forgiven by their very definition, mortal sins forgiven either in the tribunal of penance or in response to an act of perfect contrition—has a specific but incalculable residual element of temporal punishment that either satisfactions in this life or satispas-

² "De indulgentiis ante duos annos scripsi, sed sic, ut me nunc mirum in modum poeniteat editi libelli. Haerebam enim id temporis magna quadam superstitione Romanae tyrannidis, unde et indulgentias non penitus reiiciendas esse censebam, quas tanto hominum consensu cernebam comprobari. Nec mirum, quia solusolvebam saxum. At postea beneficio Sylvestri [Prieratis] et fratrum adiutus, qui strenue illas tutati sunt, intellexi, eas aliud non esse quam meras adulatorum Romanorum imposturas, quibus et fidem dei et pecunias hominum perderent. Atque utinam a Bibliopolis queam impetrare et omnibus qui legerunt persuadere, ut universos libellos meos de indulgentiis exurant et pro omnibus quae de eis scripsi hanc propositionem apprehendant: INDVLGENTIAE SVNT ADVLATORVM ROMANORVM NEQVICIAE" (*De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium* [1520], *WA* 6, 497, 9–23). Nevertheless, Luther still appeals to the ninety-five theses and to the *Resolutiones* (*ibid.* 543, 5–7; 548, 18–20; 549, 15).

sions in purgatory must expiate. For this the Lutheran finds persuasive evidence neither in the Sacred Scriptures nor in the primitive Church's understanding of the divine revelation.³

Nevertheless, your Lutheran theologian cannot deny that the theses were in a very real sense the catalyst that precipitated the Lutheran Reformation,⁴ and for that reason alone they call for special attention in 1967.

For a fuller understanding of Luther's position as sketched in the theses, we have a number of subsidiary documents.

Most important are the *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* of 1518,⁵ a thesis-by-thesis commentary on the earlier barebones statement upon which this paper draws heavily. The *Resolutiones* are our clue to the widely-varying degrees of intensity of Luther's conviction over against the different theses. Again, in the *Resolutiones* we have without doubt the documentation that Luther would prudently have collected before offering his theses for public disputation. (That he had expanded and refined this documentation in the course of the intervening months is likewise obvious.)

From an earlier date we have his *Sermo de indulgentiis pridie Dedicacionis*,⁶ conventionally taken as preached on All Hallows' Eve (October 31), 1516; the concluding paragraph of his sermon on St. Matthias' Day (February 24), 1517;⁷ and from a later period his popular *Sermon von dem Ablass und Gnade* of 1518,⁸ which went through twenty-two

³ However, in the *Resolutiones* Luther already holds that the bishop of Rome as late as the episcopate of St. Gregory the Great "had no jurisdiction over other churches, at least not over the Greek Church" (*WA* 1, 571, 16-18). In quoting the text of the ninety-five theses and the *Resolutiones*, this paper generally follows the translation of Charles M. Jacobs, as revised by Harold J. Grimm, for the former, and of Carl W. Folkemer for the latter, as contained in the American edition of *Luther's Works* 31, *Career of the Reformer* 1, edited by Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia, 1957) 25-33, 83-252.

⁴ So Luther himself. In *Wider Hans Worst* (1541), he rehearses the events of 1517—not without evidence of some lapses of memory concerning happenings that took place nearly a quarter of a century before—and declares: "Dis ist der erste, rechte grundliche Anfang des Lutherischen Lermens" (*WA* 50, 541, 7.21). But it should be noted that Luther is attempting to exculpate his late lord, the elector Frederick the Wise, from the charge of Duke Henry of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. Frederick, said Duke Henry, had been responsible for the "Lutheran upheavals." Luther puts the blame for them on Archbishop Albrecht of Mayence and John Tetzel.

⁵ *WA* 1, 525-628.

⁶ *WA* 1, 94-99.

⁷ *WA* 1, 141, 22-38.

⁸ *WA* 1, 243-46. In spite of the title and the opinion of the editors of the Weimar edition, Luther may never have actually preached the contents of this treatise.

editions; the *Asterisci Lutheri adversus Obeliscos Eckii* (March[?] 1518);⁹ and his defense against a countertreatise by John Tetzel, *Eine Freiheit des Sermons päpstlichen Ablass und Gnade belangend* (June, 1518).¹⁰

With the perspective of four and a half centuries, your Lutheran theologian finds both positive and negative elements in these documents, and pre-eminently in the ninety-five theses.

In all these documents Luther writes as an intentionally Catholic theologian who could rightly point out that he had his ordinary's imprimatur—not hastily given, either—both for the *Sermon von dem Ablass und Gnade* and for the *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* (and with the latter, for the ninety-five theses that the latter incorporated). Nevertheless, even though he could justifiably argue that ecclesiastical authority had not decided all the issues quite as definitely as his opponents imagined, Luther confessedly stood in opposition to the theological consensus of his age. One must also concede that not all the biblical evidence that Luther cites will stand twentieth-century exegetical scrutiny. His logic is sometimes more ingenious than persuasive. The historical facts that he alleges are, upon examination, not as decisive in every case for us as they seem to have been for him. (That one can say the same things, sometimes with greater justice, of his adversaries' contributions to the controversy does not alter the facts as far as Luther is concerned.)

At the very least, Luther's act in offering the theses was either an example of great courage or of great rashness. We can accept at face value his innocent evaluation of Leo X as "pontifex optimus . . . cuius integritas et eruditio delitiae sunt omnibus bonis auribus" and as "ille suavissimus homo."¹¹ We can do the same in the case of his protestations that he did not at the time realize how deeply the primate of Germany was involved in the indulgence operation himself. We can do the same with his declared conviction that he needed only to call Archbishop Albrecht's attention to the scandalous contents of the *Instructio* published under his name and coat of arms and Albrecht would at once prohibit its further circulation. But it needs to be remembered that in his attack on indulgences the Augustinian Hermit

⁹ *WA* 1, 281–314. The traditional date of August 10, 1518, is almost certainly wrong; see *ibid.* 279–80.

¹⁰ *WA* 1, 383–93.

¹¹ *WA* 1, 573, 17–19.

was involving himself not only with the pope and with the primate of Germany but with the prince on whom he depended for personal protection. The right to offer indulgences to the faithful who came to venerate the relics in the electoral Chapel of All Hallows in Wittenberg dated back to Boniface IX (1389-1404).¹² Luther's own elector, Frederick the Wise, was no mean collector of indulgenced relics himself. According to the catalog that Luke Cranach the Elder illustrated in 1509, the *Wittemberger Heilighumbuch*, the elector had expanded the collection that he had inherited to a total of 5,005 items, with the possibility of 1,443 years of indulgence.¹³ Nine years later, the size of the collection had grown to 17,443 items, carrying with them the possibility of the equivalent of 127,709 years and 116 days of public penance in the primitive Church's fashion.¹⁴ Luther's *Sermo de indulgentiis* had, he himself ruefully remarked, gained scant thanks from the elector.¹⁵ Luther knew how much the university at which he taught depended on the revenues of the chapter of All Hallows' Chapel.¹⁶ For him to have taken publicly the position toward which he had increasingly felt himself pushed for two years is a tribute to his integrity.

Again, the Lutheran theologian can only commend Luther's pastoral concern for the faithful whom both the exaggerations of the indulgence preachers and their own mistaken expectations had betrayed into committing mortal sin without repentance. Similarly, he can only laud the genuine desire to preserve the visible head of the Church and the respect that the priesthood still enjoyed from the calumnies and the cynical questions that fell from the lips of laymen (theses 81-90), whose disposition to anticlericalism the "effusa licentia praedicatorum veniarum"¹⁷ had only heightened and confirmed. Likewise, he can only praise Luther's recognition of his own fallibility, along with his disclaimer of heresy as a necessary consequence ("errare quidem

¹² Matthaeus Faber, *Schlosskirche* (1717) pp. 48 ff., 67 ff., cited in E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis, 1950) p. 312.

¹³ Schwiebert, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Schwiebert, *ibid.* According to Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, 1950) p. 71, the collection had grown by 1520 to 19,013 items with an indulgence potential of 1,902,202 years and 270 days.

¹⁵ Bainton, p. 71.

¹⁶ See Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, translated from the German original by John W. Doberstein and Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, 1946) p. 177.

¹⁷ *WA* 1, 625, 32.

potero, sed haereticus non ero"¹⁸) and his determination not to accept the "mere opinions" of the Schoolmen and the canonists, which are "maintained without text or proof," as intrinsically decisive.¹⁹ He would feel that Luther was justified in insisting that the precise value of an indulgence is not something that can be specified with the precision that some of the indulgence preachers appear to have claimed.²⁰ The Lutheran theologian will stand with Luther in his rejection of a penal purgatory, although he may doubt that Luther, even with all his reservations, could be quite as certain as he ultimately appears to have been in 1517 about the nature of the cleansing process in the intermediate state.

The Lutheran theologian must hail with unqualified endorsement the opening thesis, asserted without any doubt: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." This repentance Luther sees as a "transmencation," the assumption of another mind and feelings, the recovery of one's true senses, the transition from an awareness merely of earthly matters to a knowledge of spiritual things, a change of heart that results in a hatred of sin. This repentance involves the totality of life and the totality of Christians; it must mark the life alike of the king in his purple robes, of the priest in his sacerdotal ornaments, of the monk in his cell, and of the beggar in his poverty. Repentance is our own response of self-displeasure to our own perennial prayer, "Forgive us our debts."²¹

Your Lutheran theologian rejoices in the polar stress of the second and third theses, which on the one hand sees the repentance that our Lord calls for as transcending the transaction that takes place in the confessional between the confessor and the penitent, and on the other hand as affirming that this repentance cannot be solely something within. To prove its worth, it must find outward expression in a fasting that includes all chastenings of the flesh, in a prayer that includes

¹⁸ *WA* 1, 530, 11.

¹⁹ *WA* 1, 530, 4-8.

²⁰ Luther's vehement 32nd thesis, "Damnabuntur in aeternum cum suis Magistri qui per litteras veniarum securos sese credunt de sua salute," is the strongest statement of his position. It is directed, as the American edition of *Luther's Works* (31, 179, 61) points out, against those "who permitted the ignorant masses to believe that the purchase of indulgences made them sure of salvation and free of guilt before God, instead of free from punishments imposed by the church."

²¹ *WA* 1, 530, 16-531,¹⁸.

every spiritual pursuit in meditation, reading, listening, and petitioning, and an almsgiving that includes every service to one's neighbor.²²

The Lutheran theologian will acknowledge the rightness of the realistic insight—nourished by the cited examples of Sts. Augustine of Hippo and Bernard of Clairvaux—that true interior repentance, in the form of an unremitting hatred of our native self-centeredness, must last as long as life itself.²³

He will concur in Luther's conviction that the only penalties which the Church can really remit are those which the Church itself has imposed (thesis 5) and that beyond such remission the Church's action can only be a declaration that God has remitted the guilt (thesis 6). But at a time when the sacrament of repentance has become something of a formality in most Lutheran Churches most of the time, he might well urge Lutherans to reconsider the virtue of the sacerdotal declaration of pardon in the name of Christ who gives the priest his authority (thesis 7). "As a general rule we are not sure of the remission of guilt, except through the verdict of the priest," for there is no peace until we are sure that the remission of sin is for us.²⁴

He will also concur in Luther's conviction that the Church ought not to seek to impose canonical penalties on the dying or reserve them to a penal purgatory where the departed are beyond the jurisdiction of the empirical Church (theses 8-13). He will regard it as a legitimate thesis that "any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters" (thesis 36), and that "any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the Church, and this granted him by God, even without indulgence letters" (thesis 37).

He appreciates the insistence on faith as a condition of the fruitful use of the means of salvation that comes through so strongly and clearly. For example:

Faith is necessary everywhere. You receive as much as you believe. And this is what I understand it to mean when our teachers say that the sacraments are efficacious signs of grace not because of the mere fact that the sacrament is performed

²² *WA* 1, 531, 20—533, 33, especially 532, 12—27.

²³ *WA* 1, 533, 35—534, 18.

²⁴ "Ordine generali non est nobis certa remissio culpae nisi per iudicium sacerdotis" (*WA* 1, 541, 20—21).

but because it is also believed, as St. Augustine contends.²⁵ . . . So also here. Absolution is efficacious not by the mere fact that it takes place, no matter who finally does it and whether he errs or does not err, but because it is believed.²⁶

Yet as Luther himself points out, "declare" and "approve" are "too modest" to be quite adequate as verbs that describe the process of pardon.

The judgment of the keys is necessary, so that a man may not believe in himself, but rather trust in the judgment of the keys of the Church, that is, of the priest. And it makes no difference to me if the one who bears the keys is unlearned or flip-pant. The penitent can believe, not on account of the priest or his authority, but on account of the word of him who said and who did not lie, "Whatever you shall loose and so on." For those who believe in that word the authority of the keys cannot err. The keys err only for those who do not believe that the absolution of the priest is valid.²⁷

Your Lutheran theologian will approve the opposition of the theology of the cross to the theology of glory.

A theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God) teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the most precious treasury of all and the most sacred relics which the Lord of this theology himself has consecrated and blessed, not alone by the touch of his most holy flesh but also by the embrace of his exceedingly holy and divine will, and he has left these relics here to be kissed, sought after, and embraced . . . A theology of glory does not recognize, along with the Apostle, the crucified and hidden God alone [1 Cor 2:2] . . . Disagreeing with the theologian of the cross, [the theologian of glory] defines the treasury of Christ as the removing and remitting of punishments, things which are most evil and worthy of hate. In opposition to this the theologian of the cross defines the treasury of Christ as impositions and obligations of punishments, things which are best and most worthy of love.²⁸

With great enthusiasm the Lutheran theologian concurs in the assertion of thesis 62 that "the true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." The *Resolutiones* explain: "The gospel is a preaching of the incarnate Son of God, given to us without any merit on our part for salvation and peace. It is a word of

²⁵ Luther has in mind St. Augustine's *Tractate 80* on Jn 3: "Unde est tanta virtus aquae, ut corpus tangat et cor abluat, nisi faciente verbo, non quia dicitur, sed quia creditur?" (*PL* 35, 1840).

²⁶ *WA* 1, 595, 4-8.

²⁷ *WA* 1, 594, 31-37.

²⁸ *WA* 1, 613, 23-28; 614, 17-18. 22-26.

salvation, a word of grace, a word of comfort, a word of joy, a word of the bridegroom and the bride, a good word, a word of peace."²⁹

In this connection he will note appreciatively the adumbration of what Lutherans have come to call the "law-gospel polarity," which capsules major emphases of the biblical revelation.

Through the law [Luther observes in his comment on thesis 62] we have nothing except an evil conscience, a restless heart, a troubled breast because of our sins, which the law points out but cannot take away. Therefore for those who are overwhelmed by sadness and in dire despair, the light of the gospel comes and says, "Fear not" [Is 35:4], "Comfort, comfort my people" [Is 40:1], "Encourage the fainthearted" [1 Th 5:14], "Behold your God" [Is 40:9], "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" [Jn 1:29], Behold that One who alone fulfils the law for you, whom God has made to be your righteousness, sanctification, wisdom, and redemption, for all those who believe in him [1 Cor 1:30] The true glory of God springs from this gospel.³⁰

All this, however, lies 450 years in the past, a past that cannot be reversed or undone. It is an oversimplification, but not a wholly untrue observation, which sees in the various "reformations" of the sixteenth century—that of Trent, that of Luther and his associates, that of Henry VIII and Edward VI and Elizabeth I, that of Zwingli and Oecolampadius and Bullinger and Calvin and Knox, and the radical reformation of the Anabaptist left wing—the institutionalization in confessional traditions of emphases that the pre-Reformation Western Church held in a progressively more uneasy and growingly intolerable tension. Each confessional tradition was right not only in what it shared in common with the others, but also in the insights which it particularly perpetuated, but each became increasingly wrong in its unbalanced (and sometimes absolutized) stress on its privileged insights as it continued in isolation from the other confessional traditions.

Concretely, in the issues that divided the adherents of the Apostolic See and the Lutheran Reformers, we have a perpetuation and an institutionalization of the juridical stress in the Tridentine Reformation and a perpetuation and an institutionalization of the evangelical stress in the Lutheran Reformation. The transcending of the differences that nearly 450 years of mutual isolation have rigidified will lie in a recovery

²⁹ WA 1, 616, 20-23.

³⁰ WA 1, 616, 27-34. 39.

of the complementarity of the valid basic insights that are at the root of each confessional tradition's emphases and in a revision of the confessional vocabularies that sometimes occlude for the other partner in the dialogue the basic validity of a given confessional tradition's emphasis.

The Lutheran theologian rejoices in the conclusions of his Roman Catholic counterparts as they have addressed themselves in recent years to various aspects of indulgences. Here a de-emphasis of the juridical aspects and of the quantifiability of either the punishment or the satisfaction. There a stress on the fact that neither the Church nor the penitent can determine the value of any act of repentance in the sight of God. In another context the assertion that the Church can only intercede for the penitent in the consciousness of her solidarity with her Head and of the perennial value of His once-and-for-all atonement. Elsewhere still in the observation that references to the merits of Christ and of the saints do not in any sense involve the association of two entities of equal value. Or in the emphasis on the sovereignty of the divine will and action. Or in the declaration that repentance is always a response to the divine judgment and the divine grace and that the virtuous acts that a penitent Christian performs are always theologically subsequent to his renewed commitment to a God who continues to love us even when our sin has offended His justice. Or in the assertion that a Christian can never claim forgiveness as a matter of right but only as a gift rooted in the atonement that God Himself accomplished in Christ. Or in the affirmation that whatever we do as the expression of our repentance in thought, in word, or in act is part of the imitation of Christ to which God has called us in baptism. Or in such evaluations of the historical realities as the declaration that, while the theories of indulgences that John Tetzel actually advanced can be defended technically, his practice—even though widely approved by ecclesiastical authority—had extensively become something sub-Christian.

If all of us—Lutherans no less than Roman Catholics—can recover for ourselves and for the Church militant of which we are a part the real significance of the beginning and ending of the ninety-five theses, the 450th observance of the beginning of the Reformation that began at Wittenberg will not have been in vain after all:

In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" [Mt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance (thesis 1)

Away then with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace! [Jer 6:14] (thesis 92).

Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Cross, cross," and there is no cross! (thesis 93).

Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death, and hell (thesis 94);

And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace [Acts 14:22] (thesis 95).