

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Treasure of the Church

WALTER R. BOUMAN

The Early Success and Gradual Decline of
Lutheranism in England, 1520–1600

BASIL HALL

A Marxist De-Lutheranization
of the German Reformation

DOUGLAS C. STANGE

Brief Studies

Homiletics

Theological Observer

Book Review

Vol. XXXVIII

October 1967

No. 9

The Treasure of the Church

WALTER R. BOUMAN

If being on the cover of *Time* magazine is the status symbol of our age, then Martin Luther has it made. The issue of March 24, 1967, carried his picture, painted by *Time* cover artist Lucas Cranach the Elder. There's not much left in the status department, except perhaps being named "Man of the Year" or being belatedly canonized. The latter has been seriously suggested, but the former won't happen. This is 1967, not 1517. Religion could hardly be called decisive in national or international affairs. A protest against the sale of indulgences would be meaningless. Poor Tetzl couldn't give them away, let alone sell them. There is a sense, therefore, in which the Reformation is locked in history. The observance of its anniversary might then seem to have little more than antiquarian interest for Reformation "buffs." To comment on the Ninety-five Theses under such circumstances, would be like reenacting Civil War battles: lots of smoke but no live ammunition. We could nurse along a few old prejudices, get in a few licks against the pope and the

"Catholics," but it would be playacting as far as the real action of our age is concerned.

The Reformation is an event in history. But it is more than that. Like the perfect tense of a Greek verb, it is completed action with continuing results. We are to examine Thesis 62 from the celebrated Ninety-five Theses. "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." This thesis is embedded in history. It affirmed something against a specific enemy. But John Tetzl was only the form of the enemy. Luther's concern was far more profound. His statement still catches us up today in the center of our existence and continues to confront us with an authentic Word. The Gospel is still the "true treasure of the church," but it needs to be recovered again and again. This statement of Luther's has been subjected to perversion and distortion as bad as or worse than that against which it was originally directed. Therefore the path to receiving it again in its original power and impact must begin with an understanding of its meaning then.

The Ninety-five Theses owed their existence to a crisis in pastoral care. Luther, says Heinrich Bornkamm, "had been induced [to take up the question of indulgences] more by experiences in the confessional than by scholarly considerations."¹ The sale of indulgences was directly related to the practice of confession and the

Walter R. Bouman is assistant professor of theology at Concordia Teachers College, River Forest, Ill. Following his graduation from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, he earned his doctorate in theology at the University of Heidelberg. He joined the faculty of Concordia Teachers College in 1963 after eight years in the parish ministry. He presented the accompanying essay earlier this year as the initial lecture in an "Anniversary Lecture Series" sponsored by Concordia Teachers College in commemoration of the 450th Reformation anniversary.

¹ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), pp. 37—38.

Sacrament of Penance. The nature of repentance has been a problem for the church from its earliest days. The Lord Himself had conferred upon His disciples "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19, Matt. 18:18, John 20:23). But how were they to be used? Who was to be forgiven and who was to be denied forgiveness? The letter to the Hebrews speaks of the impossibility of restoring "again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy" (Heb. 6:4-6). The church, however, *did* restore those who had fallen, even those who had renounced their faith in times of persecution. After a public confession of sin heavy penalties were demanded of the penitent as a manifestation of the sincerity of his repentance. Often years of fasting preceded full restoration to the congregation. Later, private confession in addition to public confession began in the monasteries but soon spread to the laity. In the Middle Ages it became the Sacrament of Penance. This sacrament consisted of three actions on the part of the penitent: contrition, or sorrow over sin, confession of sins to a priest, and after absolution prescribed works as a satisfaction for sin. The whole practice was based on the distinction between "guilt" and "punishment." The "guilt" could be absolved, but the "punishment" could be removed only by doing the compensating works of satisfaction. Hence the works of satisfaction were regarded as necessary, and if they were not done in this life, then they would have to be done in purgatory. Very early, perhaps

as early as the sixth century, says Heinrich Boehmer, the church began to permit penitents to substitute easier works of satisfaction for more difficult ones.² There was a specifically Germanic twist to this practice in that the Germanic legal code made it possible for a man to substitute a money penalty for all corporal or capital punishments. In addition, the German concept of representation occasionally permitted a relative or vassal to discharge the penalty wholly or in part for another. It is easy to see how these Germanic concepts could be combined with penalties imposed by the church to create eventually the indulgence problem of the 16th century. The Crusades were the immediate occasion. In 1095 Urban II promised total remission of the penalties imposed by canon law to those who engaged in the pious work of holy war against Islam. In 1187 the indulgence was extended to those who would pay the cost of a substitute for the crusade. Thus it became an excellent source of revenue; and when the crusades ceased to be available as a work of satisfaction, other works—such as the performance of certain pious acts on jubilee visits to Rome or even the veneration of relics elsewhere—could replace the penalty imposed as penance for sin; and for these works one could substitute a money payment. In 1476 the advantages of the indulgence were extended to the dead. One other innovation, dating from 1294, became a factor in the 16th-century controversy, the so-called "confessional letters." These letters were originally given to persons of high position but were ultimately offered universally.

² Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946), pp. 167 ff.

The "confessional letter" originally empowered the holder to receive complete absolution from any priest whom he selected once during his lifetime and once "in the article of death." Pope Sixtus IV (1471—1484) extended this to include every confession.³ The consequences were obvious. One could select a confessor who would grant absolution on the easiest terms. "Confessional letters" were offered as a bonus in the sale of indulgences, together with other extra inducements. The stage was now set for abuses of every kind.

Fear of purgatorial punishment became a dominant motif in personal piety. The church taught that it could provide relief from purgatorial penalties because it was the custodian of the "treasury of works." This treasury was held to have been established by the merits acquired by Christ. He did not need the works He performed for purposes of His own salvation. Hence He was able to establish a vast reservoir or treasury of extra merits. This treasury was increased and replenished by the merits of the saints, who also did more than the required works of satisfaction. These merits were now available as a substitution for the penances assigned by the confessor. The individual was enabled to participate in this treasury by virtue of a money payment. As an added benefit he could receive a "confessional letter," which entitled him to complete absolution from a priest of his own choosing.

In spite of the revenues that accrued to the papacy, this was, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "cheap grace" and therefore not really grace at all.⁴ This is why

the Ninety-five Theses owed their origin to a crisis in pastoral care. For Luther personally the insight into the gift nature of the Gospel came in the midst of his anguished struggle to "find a gracious God." The works he was doing did not comfort him because there was no certainty that God's wrath was overcome, that God was reconciled by such works. Hence the comfort of the Gospel could be couched in terms of the opposition of "grace" and "works." We shall return to the validity of this insight later. The point here is that Luther received his insight into this aspect of the Gospel while he was doing the most strenuous of spiritual works. He had taken the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; he fasted, prayed, and engaged in various forms of mortification; he went to confession often (too often, said his spiritual counselors) and did the prescribed penances. In this context one could speak of the opposition of "grace" and "works." But the Ninety-five Theses had a totally different context. Here Luther was addressing himself to those who were looking for an easy "gospel." The noting of this circumstance is necessary for a proper understanding of the Ninety-five Theses, especially for Thesis 62. But it is even more important for a full understanding of that concept of grace which came to be the heart and center of the Reformation.

The problem posed by the sale of indulgences and the distribution of "confessional letters" was that people were being seduced away from their pastors, away from confession, away from genuine repentance, away from the Gospel. Bornkamm has summed it up. "Man wants to stand before God as righteous as possible . . . but at the same time he wants this

³ Ibid., pp. 170 ff.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1959), pp. 35 ff.

to be as convenient as possible.”⁵ Some of Luther’s own penitents, those to whom he was confessor and who were entrusted to his pastoral care, “who had often had to listen to hard words from him on account of their loose living,” took advantage of the presence of John Tetzel in nearby towns to purchase indulgence certificates and “confessional letters.”⁶ Tetzel was gone from the area when the Ninety-five Theses were drawn up and posted at the end of October. But the indulgence problem was not gone. An indication of this, perhaps more directly related to Tetzel’s doing business near Wittenberg, was a sermon preached by Luther Feb. 24, 1517. Here the basis for his concern becomes very clear. The rest of souls, says Luther, begins with Christ’s word, “Take My yoke upon you” (Matt. 11:29).

He does not say: Do this or that; but rather, come to me, get away from yourselves, and carry your cross after me. “He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” [Matt. 10:38]. For to come to Christ and go out from oneself is the great cross, which no one dreads more than he who is seeking to wash away his sins through his own works. Because all these desire to escape, not their sins, but the punishment of their sins — for they are slaves, they hate, not the sin, but the penalty of sin — therefore they seek to extinguish the fire of hell and escape the judgment by all kinds of sanctifications. But because the sin always remains, the punishment of conscience does not pass over. In other words, they are looking after their own interest [Phil. 2:21]. Therefore the wicked have no peace [Isa. 48:22; 57:21]. If they would give up

themselves and hate their sins, they would have no punishment and would not need to fear it; for when the sin is taken away the punishment ceases of itself. But they do not want to give up themselves and are afraid of Christ’s easy yoke. So they go on laboring under their burden, being afraid where there is nothing to be afraid of, and dragging their sin like a heavily laden wagon.⁷

Here the relationship between works and “cheap grace” is indicated. Men engage in “all kinds of sanctifications” because they desire to escape not sin but its punishment. Since this is the basic desire, the indulgence sale had no results except to increase “a great sense of self-security and licentious sinning.”

Would that I were a liar when I say that indulgences are rightly so called, for to indulge means to permit, and indulgence is equivalent to impunity, permission to sin, and license to nullify the cross of Christ. Or, if indulgences are to be permitted, they should be given only to those who are weak in faith, that those who seek to attain gentleness and lowliness through suffering, as the Lord here says, may not be offended. For, not through indulgences, but through gentleness and lowliness, so says he, is rest for your souls found. But gentleness is present only in punishment and suffering, from which these indulgences absolve us. They teach us to dread the cross and suffering and the result is that we never become gentle and lowly, and that means that we never receive indulgence nor come to Christ.⁸

This does not seem to be the contrast between “works” and “grace” with which we are familiar. “Grace” for the post-Refor-

⁵ Bornkamm, p. 46.

⁶ Boehmer, p. 180.

⁷ *Luther’s Works* (American Edition), 51, 30—31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

mation Protestant has often come to mean just what the indulgence represented in the 16th century: a release from the punishment, the penalty, the satisfaction. "God has done everything for our salvation," it is said; "all we must do is believe." Works, at this point, would seem to be a blasphemous contradiction of "grace." If we examine the host of hidden assumptions associated with such a concept of grace, we discover the problem. If "salvation" means escape from the punishment, or penalty, of sin, then our present existence needs an explanation. For it is evident that we do not escape anything at all — or at least the evidence is ambiguous. We still experience all of the sorrow and suffering that has always indicated the presence of evil. Worse, we still become the agents of evil, and sometimes we are caught red-handed. Our sins then do not go unpunished. Even when we are not overtly caught, the consequences of a pattern of life build up until we are unavoidably trapped. The lazy man finally cannot work — even when he wants to; the man for whom work becomes a god cannot relax — even when he wants to. The lot of Christians is not in any observable way different from that of non-Christians. If all other indications of punishment do not materialize, "at least the punishment of death remains in every case," wrote Luther in his "Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses,"⁹ If a man is saved, the question persists, why does the punishment for sin remain? It is at this point that "salvation" is often viewed as referring to an other-worldly escape from eternal punishment, the so-called "eternal death" in contrast to "tem-

poral death."¹⁰ With salvation regarded as other-worldly deliverance, it is not difficult for grace to be viewed as a doctrine to be "believed." By believing the doctrine one is supposedly delivered from all the penalties that really matter, from hell and eternal damnation. Such "cheap grace," says Bonhoeffer,

means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The Church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, *ipso facto* a part in that grace. In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.¹¹

The "believing" of such "grace" is really a form of unfaith, the same kind of unfaith that went hand in hand with the purchase of indulgence. It has the effect of preventing true repentance, of giving the man of unfaith a false sense of security. It permits him to live life as usual without pangs of conscience. The continued proclamation of the Gospel becomes unnecessary, for the man of unfaith already knows all about it. He is then either bored by the repetition of the Gospel or he can avoid it with impunity. When such a Gospel is called the "true treasure of the Church," the man of unfaith nods his vigorous assent, thanks God that he belongs

¹⁰ Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), pp. 624 ff. Cf. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953) 510.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, p. 35.

⁹ *Luther's Works*, 31, 89.

to the right church with this "true treasure," and continues to live in the secure knowledge that when he arrives at the "pearly gates, St. Peter will have the welcome mat out." That much of this represents a "popular" misconception of the writings of various theologians makes it no less serious. The indulgence abuses were also "popular" misconceptions. This did not minimize their detrimental effect.

There are other possibilities, however. The specter of doubt may remain. A constant need for the assurance of divine favor may develop. The assurance is sought in the form of *deliverance* from illness, sorrow, misfortune, defeat, or failure. The presence of any or all of these becomes the occasion for further doubt about the goodness or benevolence of God, or even the occasion for bitter questioning and complaint. "Why did this happen to me?" "What have I done to deserve this?" Substitutes for the Gospel proliferate. For some it becomes impossible to be wrong. Their religion consists in constant self-justification in the full sense of that term. For others the traditional religious "works" are practiced with a fervent sense of duty — going to church, praying, receiving the sacrament, giving money and time for church work. For still others new "works" arise to replace the old. Participation in social "causes" allows them to trust in themselves that they are righteous and despise others (Luke 18:9). For still others religion becomes the occasion to feel good aesthetically or psychologically. If worship or religion can accomplish this, then the divine favor has demonstrated itself. A warm glow, an inner harmony, pervasive optimism become the indicators of assurance, the guarantors of gospel.

The easy gospel, because it is not gospel, either deceives by giving security where there is no security or betrays man into doubt, despair, rebellion, and/or new "works."

What then is the "most holy gospel" which is "the true treasure of the church?" Luther identifies that treasure as "the keys of the church, given by the merits of Christ" (Thesis 60). The "keys" refer, of course, to the exercise of the office of confessor, to the power of absolution conferred in Matt. 16:19. But this is not an arbitrary and independent activity of the church. The "keys" have their substance and power only from Christ. Thus in Luther's own comments on Thesis 62, he writes:

The gospel is a preaching of the incarnate Son of God. . . . The gospel comes and says . . . "behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Behold that one who alone fulfills the law for you, whom God has made to be your righteousness, sanctification, wisdom, and redemption, for all those who believe in him.¹²

This concentration on Christ as the content of the Gospel has its basis in Luther's understanding of existence apart from Christ. Such existence stands under the law of God. The "Law" does not mean simply the Decalog, for all the commandments and relationships of the Decalog already presuppose the structures of existence into which we are placed by birth. These structures are the basis on which the legislation of God establishes itself. Every structure of existence is already law in itself because within it we are subject not to the chaos of "chance" but to the

¹² *Luther's Works*, 31, 231.

regulative power and rule of God. We cannot suddenly *be* something other than we are—pigs rather than people, women rather than men, white rather than black, Russian rather than German, and so forth. Thus being bound by creation to the structures of creation provides us with a certain security. If we don't jump from the top of the Wrigley Building or leap under a speeding train, we will continue to live. "Law" is initially a law of life.

But the fact that death has final power within the structure of existence points to the fact that "law" is ultimately the law of death. It is the Law itself that challenges the relative security we may find in it. The challenge is final. Death shows us that the structure of existence is a structure of retribution, of reward and punishment, which uncovers the sinner in man. The Law presupposes sin. That is, the Law is not a composite of divine legislation confronting a man as one who is free to keep or break it. That would mean that we would not become sinners until and unless we transgressed one or another command. Rather, in death the totality of our existence comes under divine condemnation. Hence in life we are compelled to justify the totality of our existence before God. The fact that we consider ourselves either excused or accused (Rom. 2: 15) is the indication in us that this judgment is taking place. Death is the fact that says that we are *not* excused, that we have not justified ourselves. Hence the Law as law of death reveals our opposition to God and thus our guilt. It is our *existence* that is condemned in death. Hence we are subject to the law of death by our very birth. This is what it means to be

born into sin, to be sinners by virtue of our origin. No one can escape this sin of origin. The law of God is thus that fate which no one can evade—whether he is aware of it or not. To be sure, the Law preserves order in the world. God does not allow His world to fall prey to the destructive power of evil. But that which preserves also condemns. Hence the ultimate function of the Law is summarized by Melancthon: *Lex semper accusat*, "the Law always accuses." (Ap. IV 38)

Men, to be sure, are always seeking to evade this accusation. Man lives as if he were no sinner, or at least as if he were not guilty. This is the impulse behind every quest for cheap grace—whether of the medieval indulgence or Protestant variety. This is the impulse behind every legal structure employed by man in his religion—the attempt to "balance the books" and thus be rid of accountability! Hence Luther's passionate pastoral objection to the indulgence traffic, for it is an illusion in a double sense. It deceives man both with respect to the Law and the Gospel! The universal attempt to escape the Law *is* our opposition to the Law. It is the denial of and rebellion against the judgeship of God. The whole fabric of our existence is illusory, and this illusory existence now *makes* us guilty, pushes us farther into guilt, and thus justifiably condemns and executes us. The man who extends his observation of life and death to this outer edge comes to the point of ultimate despair. Here we experience the dread of that God who, in the very fact of giving us life, forces upon us the weapons by which we must fight against Him, who then slays us because we resist Him and shouts, on

top of it all, "this is your fault." We meet here no ultimate love, no mercy. Rather we meet the opposite: God as the absolute enemy, the one whom Luther calls the *deus absconditus*, "the hidden god."¹³

There is in all of our observation and experience no inner-worldly encounter with God's ultimate favor. Thus any treasure based on our own experience or analysis can only be temporary, illusory, the product of our own wishing or desiring. All of our hoping for God's favor does not make it so or bring it into existence. Forgiveness is never within the seeker's power. It can only be conferred from outside ourselves. Hence that "most holy gospel" which alone is "the treasure of the Church" is "the incarnate Son of God." Luther describes the treasure of the Gospel in Christ as "the glory and grace of God." The "grace" of which Luther speaks is the conferral of a new relationship with God. Christ confers that which can only be a gift: the forgiveness of God by which He reconciles us to Himself and restores Himself to us as Father. Jesus Christ is God in search of sinners, creator of the new relationship in which God is Father. In the parables of Luke 15, writes Luther,

Christ paints His own portrait so that we could learn who He is and why He has come. For everything depends on this, that He be rightly known and regarded as the right man — not as another Moses, but as

the one who seeks out the one hundredth sheep.¹⁴

Thus the great parable of the Prodigal Son is not a parable about someone other than Jesus. It is a parable about Jesus Himself. He was being criticized as the one who "receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Hence in this story He accepts the criticism. That is why He has come. He is not teaching a new concept of God. Rather, He is the embodiment of God's forgiveness, a forgiveness in which the Forgiver bears the sin, takes the hurt into Himself. Jesus is the one in whom God places Himself under the retribution of the Law by His birth and baptism (Gal. 4:5). His death is what it means to be made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). His resurrection proclaims that His death was not just one more tragic indication of the wrath of God. He was "designated Son of God . . . by His resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). In Christ we encounter the "friend of sinners,"¹⁵ the ultimate mercy and love of God, which exists nowhere else. This is pure gift. It is grace.

But how is this treasure of the Gospel in Christ also "glory"? The word "glory" is not to be understood in the sense of the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, where Luther introduces the opposition between a "theology of glory" and a "theology of the cross."¹⁶ There Luther writes:

Now is it not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the

¹³ This description of the human condition is based on a consensus of Luther research. From the many works of Luther that form the basis for this analysis, see the 97 Theses Against Scholastic Theology, *Luther's Works*, 31, 9—16; also the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, *Luther's Works*, 31, 39—42; also *The Bondage of the Will* (Westwood, N.J.: The Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), pp. 203—238.

¹⁴ D. Martin Luthers *Evangelien-Auslegung*, III, ed. Erwin Muelhaupt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954), 227.

¹⁵ Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), pp. 182 ff.

¹⁶ *Luther's Works*, 31, 40, (Thesis 21).

cross. . . . So, also, in John 14, where Philip spoke according to the theology of glory: "Show us the Father." Christ forthwith set aside his flighty thought about seeing God elsewhere and led him to himself, saying, "Philip, he who has seen me has seen the Father." For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ." . . . God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are dethroned and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified.¹⁷

"Glory" in the Heidelberg Disputation thus is identical with "law" and the condemnation and terror of the "hidden god." In Thesis 62 of the Ninety-five Theses "glory" is used in the sense of the Fourth Gospel. There the word "glory" is that action of God which is focused in the cross, in the death of Jesus (John 17:1-5), and numerous other instances. Grace and glory thus belong together. For grace is no arbitrary attitude on the part of God. The gift of forgiveness always involves the bearing of the hurt. The grace of God is created in the glory of the cross. The sonship revealed in Jesus is the sonship of suffering, the sonship of death. It is thus in the death to sin, in the destruction of sin through death, that God is "glorified."

That is how the Gospel of grace *and* glory is shared with us. In Christ we are the sons of God. His sonship is our sonship. That is the *opposite* of being relieved of the "penalty of sin." To bear the penalty of our sin is to put to death the "flesh," the old Adam. To bear the penalty

of our sin is to die to sin, to be separated from sin. Thus our suffering in the slaying of the old Adam, our death as separation from our sin, is how we share Christ's sonship. This is how we take up the cross and follow Him. We are "children of God . . . provided we suffer with Him" (Rom. 8:16-17). This does not mean that we must first suffer in order to *become* children of God. That would destroy the "grace" character of the Gospel. Rather because we *are* children, we undergo the cross, the death to sin, which characterizes the only-begotten Son of God and all who are adopted sons in Him. There is a double action here. Because we encounter God's total and unconditioned love for us in Christ, we *want* the penalties, the cross, for we are thus separated from our sins. And in the midst of the continuation of the penalties we need the constant encounter with God's total and unconditioned love for us to preserve us from the despair which the penalties induce in us. We note how Luther expresses this in the Ninety-five Theses. "The entire life of believers [is] to be one of repentance" (Thesis 1). This repentance involves "various outward mortifications of the flesh" (Thesis 3). "The penalty of sin remains as long as the hatred of self . . . until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven," that is, until our death (Thesis 4). "A Christian who is truly contrite seeks and loves to pay penalties for his sins; the bounty of indulgences, however, relaxes penalties and causes men to hate them" (Thesis 40). "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 heaven through many tribula-

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 52—53.

tions rather than through the false security of peace." (Thesis 95)

It is evident, then, that Luther's concern is to restore the proper practice of private confession. This is why he identifies the "treasure" as the "keys of the church" (Thesis 60). For it is in the confession of sins to one's confessor that we die to our sins.

Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride. To stand there before a brother as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable. In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful, shameful death before the eyes of a brother. Because this humiliation is so hard we continually scheme to evade confessing to a brother. Our eyes are so blinded that they no longer see the promise and the *glory* in such abasement.

It was none other than Jesus Christ himself who suffered the scandalous, public death of a sinner in our stead. He was not ashamed to be crucified for us as an evildoer. It is nothing else but our fellowship with Jesus Christ that leads us to the ignominious dying that comes in confession, in order that we may in truth share in his Cross. The Cross of Jesus Christ destroys all pride. We cannot find the Cross of Jesus if we shrink from going to the place where it is to be found, namely, the public death of the sinner. And we refuse to bear the Cross when we are ashamed to take upon ourselves the shameful death of the sinner in confession. In confession we break through to the true fellowship of the Cross of Jesus Christ, in confession we affirm and accept our cross. In the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation before a brother—which means, before God—we experience the Cross of Jesus as our rescue and salva-

tion. The old man dies, but it is God who has conquered him. Now we share in the resurrection of Christ and eternal life.¹⁸

This is Bonhoeffer's commentary on Luther's 7th Thesis: "God remits guilt to no one unless at the same time he humbles him in all things and makes him submissive to his vicar, the priest." The Gospel as *grace* makes our confession possible. Only God as *friend* in Christ confronts us with the fact that our pretense of goodness, our illusion about ourselves, is not necessary. The Law can tell us that our pretending not to be sinner is *impossible*. But the Gospel alone lets us truly *be* sinners. Christ is the friend *only* of sinners, for the righteous have no need of a physician. At the same time, the Gospel as *glory* makes our confession necessary, for that is the only sonship there is, sonship in the suffering and cross of Christ. For Luther, therefore, the accent in private confession falls upon the absolution. When the pretense and illusion of our existence is stripped away in confession, we must either despair or be given the Gospel to believe. As Luther puts it a man "has neither peace nor consolation unless he flees to the power of the church and seeks solace and relief from his sins and wretchedness which he has uncovered through confession."¹⁹ Confession therefore belongs essentially to justification.

When God begins to justify a man, he first of all condemns him; him whom he wishes to raise up, he destroys; him whom he wishes to heal, he smites; and the one to whom he wishes to give life, he kills. . . . He does this, however, when he de-

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 114.

¹⁹ *Luther's Works*, 31, 100.

stroys man and when he humbles and terrifies him into the knowledge of himself and of his sins, in order that the wretched sinner may say, "There is no health in my bones because of my sins; there is no soundness in my flesh because of thy indignation."²⁰

The true treasure of the church is indeed the Gospel. Not "cheap grace" but "costly grace," the grace that costs the forgiver and the forgiven one their lives, the grace that involves the death of the Savior *and* the death of the sinner, the glory and grace that occur in confession and absolution. This is what Luther urged as a corrective to the abuse of indulgences. However, as Werner Elert points out, Luther was taking a great risk in doing so,²¹ the risk that the old Adam would hear only what he wants to hear, that man the sinner will fasten upon the "grace" without the "glory," upon forgiveness without confession, upon sonship without suffering and the cross. Twelve years after the Ninety-five Theses, in the Large Catechism of 1529, Luther included a "Brief Exhortation to Confession" in which he noted:

We have the advantage of knowing how to use confession beneficially for the comforting and strengthening of our conscience.

Everyone knows this now. Unfortunately, men have learned it only too well; they do whatever they please and take advantage of their freedom, acting as if they will never need or desire to go to confession anymore. We quickly understand whatever benefits us, and we grasp with uncommon ease whatever in the Gospel is mild and gentle. But such pigs,

as I have often said, are unworthy to appear in the presence of the Gospel or to have any part of it. . . . What would happen if you wished to enjoy the Gospel's benefits but did nothing about it and paid nothing for it? . . . The rabble who will not obey the Gospel deserve just such a jailer as God's devil and hangman. To others who hear it gladly, however, we must always preach, exhorting, encouraging, and persuading them not to lose this precious and comforting treasure which the Gospel offers. Therefore we must say something about confession to instruct and admonish the simple folk.²²

"Persuading them not to lose this precious and comforting treasure." It is almost as if these words were written for us here in 1967 instead of back in 1529. For the true treasure of the Gospel is always in danger. The use made of the office of the keys, the practice of private confession and absolution, indicates to all of us what an uneasy grasp the church has on its true treasure. Grace without the glory of the cross is neither grace nor Gospel. This is why we still need the voice of the Reformation, the call of the Ninety-five Theses. They are not part of an ancient struggle against a particular party in the church, against indulgence preachers long since vanished from the scene. They are a summons to struggle against the inroads of "cheap grace" that have become evident in our lives, in our parishes. They are a summons to lifelong repentance, to confession, to a hearing of the Gospel, which alone frees us from illusion and deception, to the Christ, who alone opens us to die to our sins—and not in them.

River Forest, Ill.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

²¹ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), pp. 90 ff.

²² *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), pp. 457—58.