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THE NINETY-FIVE THESES: SOME
HISTORICAL AND SEMANTIC ASPECTS

1. *The Posting of the Theses on
Oct. 31, 1517,
Presents a Historical Problem*

At the heart of the problem of the posting¹ of the theses is the question of historical evidences to indicate precisely what happened as the Ninety-five Theses became public information.² The modern discussion of the problem is a three-way debate.³ The first is the position of Hans Volz that if Luther nailed the theses to the Castle Church

¹ To "post" can mean to "nail" or to "mail"; in this study the term means only to "nail."

² Franz Lau, "Die gegenwärtige Diskussion um Luthers Thesenanschlag," *Luther-Jahrbuch*, 1967, XXXIV, 11—59, hereafter cited as "Lau," enumerates the 28 historical, literary evidences. Heinrich Bornkamm, "Thesen und Thesenanschlag Luthers" *Geist und Geschichte der Reformation*, Festgabe Hanns Rückert, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte, 38 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), 198—201, has attempted to reconstruct what probably took place on the basis of liturgical and ecclesiastical legislation prescriptive for All Saints' Day.

³ Kurt Aland, *Martin Luthers 95 Thesen: Mit den dazugehörigen Dokumenten aus der Geschichte der Reformation*, Furche-Bücherei, CCXI (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1966), 20 to 21, identifies the different lines of the problem. A translation of Aland's book, due to be published in October, is the only English summary of the issues with pertinent documentation. Lau, pp. 13—26, sees it essentially as a two-phase debate, 1957—61 and 1962 to the present.

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door, it was on Nov. 1, 1517.⁴ The second is the assertion by Erwin Iserloh that the theses posting did not take place.⁵ The third and most recent is the work of Klemens Honselmann, who dates the extant composition of the theses—the text of the Weimar Edition that is—as late as December 1517.⁶ The debate has been joined at all points by respondents,⁷ and the lines are clearly drawn.

The fact of the matter is that there is scant historical evidence for October and November 1517 on which historians can build. None of the extant materials states explicitly that Luther did nail the theses to the church door. The first explicit literary evidence is probably Philipp Melanchthon's preface to Luther's Latin works, found in the second volume of the Wittenberg Edition but dated 1546. Let it be noted immediately, however, that this is the same Melanchthon who arrived in Wittenberg less than 10 months after Oct. 31, 1517—on Aug. 25, 1518,⁸

⁴ From earlier articles and studies he produced a thorough examination of the history of the Ninety-five Theses in *Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag und dessen Vorgeschichte* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1959).

⁵ "Der Thesenanschlag fand nicht statt!" *Luthers Thesenanschlag: Tatsache oder Legende?* Institut für europäische Geschichte, Mainz, *Vorträge*, No. 31 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1962), p. 32.

⁶ Earlier lectures and articles led to the publication of *Urfassung und Drucke der Ablassthesen Martin Luthers und ihre Veröffentlichung* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1966).

⁷ For the continuing debate with frequent articles and reviews, see the last 6 years of the periodical *Luther*. Aland, notes to the Introduction and notes to the texts, presents good annotated bibliographies of parts of the problem.

⁸ WA Br 1, 192; *Supplementa Melanchthoniana*, VI, i, 49. Bornkamm, op. cit., 202—206, gives Melanchthon's preface a positive and appreciative review, admitting weaknesses and

when the debate was still raging. In fact, it was on Aug. 21, 1518, that Luther got his commentary on the theses, the *Resolutiones*, back from the printer and sent a copy to Spalatin.⁹ The evidence is convincing to some but late and inconclusive to others. On the other hand, some have felt that Luther's letter to Cardinal Albrecht of Mainz on Oct. 31, 1517,¹⁰ is inconsistent with a theses posting.¹¹ After a letter in which Luther speaks of his own "temerity," "obligation of my loyalty," "faithful service of my humble self," and closes with "your unworthy son," a call to debate publicly the subject of the letter (papal indulgences) might appear to some to be duplicity. The reference to the theses, however, is in a postscript and not part of Luther's appeal to Albrecht to re-evaluate the indulgence sales and his endorsement of them. Luther did not attempt to intimidate Albrecht by means of a public debate. Luther called attention to his concerns—even to the point that the issue of indulgences was in the process of being disputed under his own auspices. The posting of the theses, a commonplace act if not strictly routine, need not have received attention. So it is unfortunate that the posting has become both symbolic and problematic, because there is nothing distinctive about the act. The lack of evidence from 1517 does not constitute *proof* that the posting did not take place.

Hans Volz's claim that the theses were posted on Nov. 1, 1517, ultimately depends on two citations: the first is Luther's letter

mistakes, but insisting on its scholarly nature and overall reliability—apart from the consideration of his early arrival in Wittenberg.

⁹ WA Br 1, 189—91; WA 1, 522.

¹⁰ WA Br 1, 110—12.

¹¹ Aland's criticism (p. 114, textual note 50) of Iserloh's contention (p. 33) sums up both sides of the argument; but Lau's thorough examination of the evidence provides both rebuttal and interpretation of the arguments, pp. 15—17.

of Nov. 1, 1527, to Amsdorf,¹² and the other is the table talks recorded by Cordatus, dated Jan. 22 to March 28, 1532.¹³ The notation in the margin of the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's works also constitutes evidence and requires careful examination.¹⁴ While the documentary evidence and conclusiveness of Volz's arguments might leave something to be desired, his monograph sets a new starting point for a discussion of the history of the Ninety-five Theses.

Not so with Erwin Iserloh! In five preliminary arguments he builds up to his conclusion, saying finally:

The theses posting did not take place. The 31 October 1517 date is the anniversary of the Reformation not because Luther at that time nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg but because on this day he referred them to the proper ecclesiastical authorities . . . (p. 32)

The most striking thing about Iserloh's theory is that the five points do not lead to the conclusion. They are that (1) an academic disputation did not take place (p. 25);¹⁵

¹² WA Br 4, 275; the argument depends on the interpretation of *anno decimo Indulgentiarum conculcatarum* to mean "on the tenth anniversary—to the day—of the overthrow of indulgences," which the Latin text simply does not say.

¹³ WA TR 2, 467, No. 2455 a and b; the argument depends on a degree of accuracy in the table talks that is simply not demonstrable, as Aland has pointed out, pp. 120—21, textual note 93.

¹⁴ Aland, textual note 51, as expanded in the English translation. The margin says the theses were of Nov. 1, 1517; the text of Melancthon conflicts. Thus the evidence of the marginal notes is ambiguous; one may have attempted to correct the other.

¹⁵ Iserloh, it seems, did not use his most important source accurately: Ernst Wolf, "Zur wissenschaftsgeschichtlichen Bedeutung der Disputation an der Wittenberger Universität im 16. Jahrhundert," *450. Jahr Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg* (Wittenberg: Selbstverlag der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1952), I, 335—44, esp. the discussion

(2) Luther did not want to popularize the theses (p. 28); (3) Luther observes All Saints' Day as the anniversary of the overthrow of indulgences (p. 30);¹⁶ (4) there is no extant evidence of a *printed* version of the theses of Oct. 31, 1517, or before (p. 31);¹⁷ and (5) later Luther went far beyond what he said in 1517 and was even embarrassed by the wording of the theses (p. 32). Iserloh cannot come to grips with the real issues of the theses if he insists on such a scattershot method of dealing with historical "proofs."

The fact that Honselmann attempted to clarify the fourth point of Iserloh's chain of arguments is of little comfort. Honselmann's thesis is that the copy of the theses that Silvester Prierias used in Rome to refute Luther is from the correspondence of Luther to Albrecht of Mainz. The editions of the theses from the north were much later, theses were changed and added, and the salu-

about the *Zirkulardisputationen*, p. 337. Care must be exercised in distinguishing the different classifications of disputations. Part of Iserloh's claim is that Luther did not want a disputation. This theses themselves, Luther's references to them, and the *Resolutiones* tend to disprove. Paul Drews, *Disputationen Dr. Martin Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895), xvii, says the *Resolutiones* are probably a *praeparatorium*, a preliminary exposition of the theses drawn up explicitly for the debate itself. And Johannes Luther, *Vorbereitung und Verbreitung von Martin Luthers 95 Thesen*, Greifswalder Studien zur Lutherforschung und neuzeitlichen Geistesgeschichte, 8 (Berlin, Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1933), pp. 7—13, calls attention to the preparation of the theses, perhaps in the *Freitagsbesprechungen*—not necessarily for the *Freitagsbesprechungen*, because the day of posting was Saturday—and to the deliberate care in organizing a multipronged attack on indulgences.

¹⁶ Aland, textual note 72, in the expanded English version.

¹⁷ There is no need for a printed version, as Honselmann points out, pp. 17—29. In both cases (Iserloh and Honselmann), the conclusion does not appear to follow from the arguments.

tation was added to predate the literary form of the theses. The key argument is that the original(s) of the theses is (are) not extant and that variants in the texts of the theses are obvious. But it is not at all unusual that the manuscript or the first printed edition of a key work in the earlier phases of the Reformation is not extant. Does this prove that the work was not transmitted faithfully?¹⁸ The Nuremberg imprints in German translation and Latin copy are not extant either, but they are noted. Are they not also keys to the text transmission?¹⁹ The most damaging criticism against Honselmann is that his considerations and arguments are incomplete to the point of gross distortion. That photographic reproductions were cut and spliced from Prierias' *Dialogue* and made to look like a continuous text of the theses detracts from the overall reliability and integrity of Honselmann.

The historical problem comes to the point where one must ask whether he is satisfied with the later testimony of Melanchthon and the silence of earlier authors, or whether the silence of earlier sources vitiates the story of Melanchthon. One must ask whether such a

¹⁸ Aland, textual note 72, enlarged in the English version, takes up both the problem of Christoph Scheurl's correspondence and the line of argument developed by Iserloh and Honselmann. Lau speaks frequently of a need for a number of copies of the theses if Honselmann's theory is to hold true. The point-by-point refutation of Honselmann by Bornkamm, op. cit., 206—10, leaves little to be said of the usefulness of Honselmann's work.

¹⁹ The key to the text of the original theses, according to Honselmann, is the *Dialogue* of Prierias; with the conspicuous absence of Scheurl's correspondence from Nuremberg, of course, this theory can at least be posited for the moment. But as soon as Scheurl's response is taken into consideration, it would appear that the entire theory of Honselmann is jeopardized. Bornkamm's analysis, op. cit., 208, like Aland's, turns Prierias' own words against Honselmann's arguments.

commonplace activity as posting the theses requires explicit documentation at the moment. And yet it would be a mistake to stop here.

2. *The Meaning of the Theses: Penitence*²⁰ *and Indulgence*

The title of the Ninety-five Theses is *Disputation for an Explanation of the Power of Indulgences*, and the first thesis is:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent [or Maintain penitence (*Penitentiam agite*)]," He wished the entire life of the faithful to be penitence (*penitentiam*).²¹

Penitence and indulgence are at the heart and core of Luther's concern: indulgence gives false hope and leads to sin, while penitence is not a matter of specified activity but rather the whole life of Christians.

The problems of semantics and nomenclature are all but insuperable when dealing with the term penitence and, to a lesser extent, with the term indulgence. Of course, philological concerns for a Biblical theology and a practice consistent with it are evident from Luther's time to the present. But the tangled, snarled meanings and ambiguities and interpretations of penitence all but defy resolution.

Luther's use of the term *Busse* is divided by the lexicographer Philipp Dietz into two confusing categories defined as *poena* (punishment) and *poenitentia* (penitence), stem-

ming from an earlier ambiguity.²² The particular Latin phrase, *penitentiam agere*, and the Greek infinitive, *metanoein*, were brought to literary Gothic by Ulfilas with the idiom *brinwa tuon* or *brinwa wurchan* (*Reue tun* or *Reue wirken*).²³ Centuries later Luther used a similar idiom, *Busse tun* (but not *wirken*).²⁴ Then he proceeded to strip *Busse tun*, or *penitentiam agere*, of its scholastic definition: contrition, confession, and satisfaction.²⁵ In so doing he removed also the three-part division of satisfaction (*gnugthuung*) into prayer, fast, alms.²⁶ Ultimately the evangelicals replaced their major di-

²² *Wörterbuch zu Dr. Martin Luthers deutschen Schriften* (Leipzig, 1870—72), reprint (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1961), 365. Luckily both *Busse* and *Abläss* occur in the alphabet before the end of this incomplete dictionary, which ends with Vol. II, Fasc. 1, "hals."

²³ Jakob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1854—), II, 571.

²⁴ It is difficult to say whether this is a matter of careful distinction or simple consistency with Luther; the transitive sense of *ihun* is treated extensively in Grimm, XI, 1, 435—49.

²⁵ WA 1, 243: "Czum ersten solt yhr wissen, dass etlich new lerer, als Magister Sententiarum, S. Thomas und yhre folger geben der puss drey teyll, Nemlich die rew, die peycht, die gnugthuung, unnd wie woll diszer unterscheid noch yrer meynung schwerlich adder auch gar nichts gegruendet erfundenn wirt ynn der heyligen schrift, noch yn den alten heyligen Christlichen lerern, doch wollen wyr das itz sso lassenn bleyben und nach yhrer weyss reden." Luther then proceeded to remove the bases for the threefold division of *Busse*. See also *Smalcald Articles*, III, III, 11—13; in the articles the longest section is on *poenitentia*.

²⁶ On Feb. 17, 1966, the legislation of Roman Catholicism was changed by the promulgation of the apostolic constitution "Paenitemini," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, LVIII, 3 (March 31, 1966), 177—98. Such a pronouncement on such a critical issue should have warranted detailed treatment by Lutherans, especially on the eve of the 450th anniversary year of Luther's call for reevaluation. See also WA 1, 244.

²⁰ "Penitence" is used as a neutral term between the loaded (by evangelicals) repentance and (by Roman Catholics) penance; "penitence" is intended to be an English equivalent of the Latin *poenitentia*. For examples of the ambiguities of all three terms, see *The Oxford English Dictionary*, VII, 632—33, 642—43; VIII, 464—65.

²¹ WA 1, 233. See *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, later Fortress, Press, 1955—), 31, 25; hereafter cited AE.

visions of penitence with a definition in two parts: contrition and faith.²⁷ Consequently the element *Reue*, or *contritio*, is fully retained in the Lutheran understanding of penitence. The element of confession is intimately tied to absolution, which retains sacramental character.²⁸ But the reconstruction leaves the third element, satisfaction, and its aspects of prayer, fast, and alms unaccounted for in the first round. In order to deal with the whole problem, these aspects must be considered even if, as was deemed necessary at the time of the Reformation, they are subsumed under different categories. That prayer, fast, and alms were removed from the discussion of evangelical penitence does not mean that they were no longer practiced or encouraged.²⁹

Indulgence was unequivocally evil, as Luther saw it. In 1517 and 1518 it was his opposition to a practice thoroughly obnoxious to him that kept Luther insistent that changes would have to take place in the church.³⁰ While the final dogma on indulgence had not been pronounced, the teachings of the church were clear.³¹ Extensive changes took place during and after the Reformation,

²⁷ Augsburg Confession, XII, 3—5.

²⁸ Especially in his Small Catechism, V, 15—29; see also Apology, XII, 41.

²⁹ The fourth, fifth, and sixth articles of the Augsburg Confession — on justification, the ministry of the church, and new obedience — are lumped together in the fourth article of the Apology, showing their intimate relation. The Lutheran practice of prayer, fast, and alms requires a definitive study.

³⁰ Luther contrasted his strong feelings with the prelates' indifference when he addressed them at Augsburg in 1530, WA 30², 278—86; AE 34, 14—18.

³¹ A helpful key is the *Index systematicus rerum* in Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1965), J 10 b—e, pp. 909—10. Pope Paul VI's new emphases in *Paenitemini* conspicuously omit legislation in indulgence as such.

many of them at Trent.³² Serious attempts are being made in modern Roman Catholicism to use the conferring of indulgence as a matter of responsible pastoral care.³³ So far as Luther was concerned, however, a term that appears to be intimately associated with indulgence — at least by definition — is *theologia gloriae*, the theology of glory,³⁴ which turns the tables on the virtue and necessity of Christian suffering. The debate on indulgences from Oct. 31, 1517, and the debate on scholastic theology from Sept. 4, 1517³⁵ intersect at the discussions at Heidelberg in April 1518 as the Augustinians assembled there. In fact, one might say that the two debates are joined by the definition of *theologia gloriae*. The most articulate exposition of the *theologia crucis*—*theologia gloriae* conflict is in Luther's commentary on the seven penitential psalms, which was published at the beginning of 1517 as he was launching his attack on scholastic theology.³⁶ Just a few excerpts from the Heidelberg disputations give some indication of the power of Luther's *theologia crucis*:

Thesis 19: *That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. . . .*

Thesis 20: *He deserves to be called a*

³² Denzinger-Schönmetzer, 1835.

³³ K[arl] Rahner et al., "Ablass," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2d ed., ed. Josef Höfer and Karl Rahner, I (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1957), 46—54, esp. the sec. "Theologische Deutung," 51—53.

³⁴ In his collection of Luther's writings in *Theologie des Kreuzes* (Stuttgart: J. F. Steinkopf, 1961?), Georg Helbig makes the key work the commentary on the penitential psalms (WA 1, 154—220), which Luther wrote and had printed as the other two issues of scholastic theology and indulgences were emerging.

³⁵ WA 1, 221—28.

³⁶ For pertinent bibliography (pp. 421 to 422) and selected sources see the edition by Georg Helbig.

theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. . . . Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering. . . .

Thesis 21: *A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.* This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. . . . It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.³⁷

In the Ninety-five Theses Luther said:

Thesis 40: 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 — at least it furnishes occasion for hating them.

And this theme is carried through to Thesis 68; the commentary to Theses 42 and 58 in the *Resolutiones* stresses the same points.

Therefore, when discussing the meaning of penitence in the Reformation era, we must examine three areas: sacramental and/or evangelical penitence, confession, and disci-

pline (or new obedience). It is insufficient to say that Luther did away with satisfaction in sacramental penitence. Where indulgence would lessen satisfaction by relieving people of ecclesiastical punishments, Luther called upon Christians to carry their *full load* of punishments and suffering as from God. But today in an age when men are inclined to go to almost limitless expense to be comfortable, when Christians feel their pastors must be fully qualified as counselors to relieve anxieties and fears, and when the problems of relief for the poor and of personal contact with and commitment to the welfare of the aged and sick and imprisoned tend to be institutionalized and administered in oblivious departments, then mortification — that self-discipline or new obedience that sees the need and blessing of real suffering — may become worse than a sick joke. Satisfaction used to consist in prayer, fast, alms; new obedience has often taken these same categories in the Lutheran tradition. But perhaps the pastor has prayed too long in Elizabethan periods and Cranmerian cant; prayers can be composed intentionally to sound artificial and quaint. A people whose greatest burden is obesity ought to diet first before they can learn to fast. When the administration of synods and dioceses cost millions of dollars a year, expenses and alms become difficult to distinguish and finally the institutional subsistence of a particular form of the church can become hopelessly confused with acts of mercy.

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³⁷ WA 1, 361—62; AE 31, 52.