

Virginia Synod Luther Studies 2016-17

Introduction to Luther's 1518 *Theses on the Remission of Sins*

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Introduction

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We have done a lot of spade work in the last few months uncovering the core message of the 95 Theses. We have learned that Luther was originally no foe of the idea of spiritual purgation of desire. He believed in the Spirit's work of making saints holy and thought therefore that the chief problem with contemporaneous depictions of purgatory was that they delayed sanctification to the next life. "Purgatory now! Purgatory without delay!" you might say, is one way to capture the thrust of the 95 Theses. The cheap grace of buying remission from punishment was therefore to be actively renounced by true followers of Christ for the costly grace of following Christ through the cross to the crown.

But you cannot squeeze this blood out of a turnip. Another twist came as Luther realized that it is only true Christians, as those confident of the forgiveness of their guilt, who can and do undertake this lifelong work of sanctification. This twist matures into Luther's chief doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. Up to this point, Luther's teaching could be read to say something, contrary to his intention, like this: By hating yourself you earn the love of God, by despairing of yourself you merit hope in God, by repenting to a state of true humility you win exaltation to God's favor. That interpretation would be the final, subtle but devastating denouement of justification by works.

But Luther's Bible told him that faith has already now peace with God. Faith already now rests in God's favor. Faith already now possesses the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen. All this is summed up in Theses 11 of today's reading, "Christ did not want the salvation of people to consist in the action or decision of humans." This clarification marks an advance on the theology of the 95 Theses. It is made in the 1518 *Theses on the Remission of Sins*, previously unpublished in English, which we gratefully borrow from Sarah Hinlicky Wilson and Theodor Dieter who published it in *Lutheran Forum* (Winter, 2010, pp. 34-5; their brief introduction, reprinted below, gives the bibliographical details).

For pastors, who still minister to troubled consciences, there are any number of gems to be gleaned from this brief work: "The promise of Christ the savior is certain." Otherwise, we "make God a liar" because we "want to ensure the word and faith, rather than be assured by the word and faith." It is a sufficient sign of contrition when a penitent "seeks absolution and faith in it." Pastors are therefore to urge and impress the word of Christ on troubled consciences, "Believe, my son, your sins are forgiven." As the priest speaks these words externally to the ear, the Spirit works internally "elicit[ing] at the same time the faith through which the sinner is justified internally." While the power of the keys can be abused, abuse does not disqualify the word of God, however mishandled. "Even a frivolous and game-playing priest or one who knowingly acts against a restriction truly baptizes and truly absolves." The confessional therefore is not to be abused tyrannically under the supposition that penitents are "obligated to confess all mortal sins" for that is "utterly impossible." Confidence is to be placed, not in the quality of confession of sins and contrition, but solely in "the abyss of the mercy of God."

Do we see our ministry any longer as consolation of troubled consciences? Do we think of pastoring as creating by Word and Sacrament a community of conscience, of responsibility to God for our world? In precisely that light do we see why it is an “utter impossibility” to “confess all mortal sins” in that lethal sin is a destructive power captivating us, one and all, consciously but especially unconsciously?

On Reformation Sunday I preached on Luther’s 95 Theses. Pointing forward then to the upcoming election, I said: “If we get the politics we deserve, then we all have something to be ashamed of. Therefore, ‘when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent!, he meant for the entire life of the believer to be one of repentance.’”

We will take our winter break from this series now and resume in February when we will complete this five year study in Luther’s theology in preparation for the 500th Anniversary by tracing the fallout of the 95 Theses to Luther’s excommunication.



“FOR THE SAKE OF INVESTIGATING THE TRUTH AND COMFORTING TERRIFIED CONSCIENCES”

Martin Luther

Editor's Note: These fifty theses on the remission of sins were framed by Luther for university debate in 1518. The prominent Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer considers them to qualify as the first true “Reformation” writing by Luther, since the emphasis is placed on the declaration of promise in the absolution, not the sincerity of repentance in the Christian. (Which means, of course, that in Bayer’s view, the Ninety-Five Theses do not yet qualify as real Reformation theology!) To my knowledge, these theses have not yet appeared in English. The Latin original can be found in Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 57 vols., eds. J. F. K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff), 1,630–633.

The following theses will be debated under the venerable Augustinian father Martin Luther according to our habitual circular disputation. 1518.

1. Of the two kinds of remission, namely the remission of punishment and the remission of guilt, the remission of guilt is by far the more excellent.

2. Remission of guilt makes the heart to be at rest and takes away the greatest of all punishments, namely consciousness of sin.

3. Remission of punishment sometimes exacerbates a bad conscience, sometimes nurtures a presumption that is even worse.

4. Remission of guilt reconciles a person with God, remission of punishment reconciles a person with other people, which means with the church.

5. If guilt is remitted and the guilty conscience is taken away, then there is no punishment in punishment, but only joy in the affliction.

6. Without remission of punishment a person can still be saved, however in no case without remission of guilt.

7. It is more helpful to salvation if the one who is acquitted of guilt refrains from asking for the remission of punishment.

8. Remission of guilt is based neither on the contrition of sinners nor on the office or authority of priests.

9. It is based rather on faith, which directs itself to the Word of Christ, as he said: “Whatever you loose...” etc. [Matthew 16:19].

10. For it is true that it is not the sacrament of faith, but

rather faith in the sacrament that justifies (which means, not because the sacrament is performed, but rather because it is believed).

11. Christ did not want the salvation of people to consist in the action or decision of humans,

12. but rather as it is written: “He carries everything with the word of his power” [Hebrews 1:3] and “he purifies the hearts of people through faith” [Acts 15:9].

13. The error of those who claim that remission of guilt is uncertain because of the uncertainty of contrition is nothing less than unbelief.

14. The priest and the sinner alike may have any degree of uncertainty about the quality of the contrition, nevertheless the absolution is valid when the sinner believes that he is absolved.

15. Therefore it is certain: the sins are remitted when you believe that they are remitted, because the promise of the savior Christ is certain.

16. The one who has been absolved by the power of the keys should prefer to die and renounce the whole of creation rather than doubt his absolution.

17. Whoever doubts that his absolution is pleasing to God doubts at the same time that Christ is truthful, as he said, “Whatever you...” [Matthew 16:19].

18. Those who base forgiveness on contrition build on sand [Matthew 7:26], which means, they build trust in God on a human work.

19. It is an injustice against the sacrament and a trick that leads to despair not to believe in the absolution until the contrition is certain.

20. Yes indeed, to want to place the confidence of one’s conscience in contrition means to make God into a liar and oneself into the truthful one.

21. Such people rely in the most pernicious way not on the mercy and word of Christ, but rather on their own works and powers.

22. Yes, even more so, in a most inverted way they themselves want to ensure the word and faith, rather than be assured by the word and faith.

23. The priests are not the originators of forgiveness, but rather servants of the word for faith in forgiveness.

24. The power of the keys works a dependable and infallible work through the word and command of God, as long as one doesn't willfully abuse it.

25. The priest has sufficient apparent signs of contrition when he senses that the sinner requests absolution and has faith in it.

26. Indeed, one must much more ascertain whether he believes that he is absolved than whether he is worthily contrite.

27. The priest must also beware of probing the state of contrition alone so strongly that the person believes that he will be absolved because of it.

28. Much more must the word of Christ be pressed upon him: "Believe, my son, your sins are forgiven you" [Matthew 9:2] than his worthiness be ascertained.

29. From that it follows that the word of Christ: "Whosoever sins you remit" [John 20:23] refers not to punishments but to guilt.

30. Just as the priest is the one actually teaching, baptizing, and distributing communion, and yet these are the works of the internally operating Spirit alone,

31. so also [the priest] is the one actually forgiving sins and absolving guilt, and yet this is the work of the internally operating Spirit alone.

32. In all of this, as he offers the word of Christ, he elicits at the same time the faith through which the sinner is justified internally.

33. For nothing justifies except faith in Christ alone, for which the administration of the word through the priest is necessary.

34. Without this faith, contrition over sins is a work that leads to despair and offends God more than it reconciles.

35. The priest can abuse the power of the keys and sin in this way, if he absolves someone whom he was not allowed to absolve because he was not authorized to do so.

36. But the absolution is not void on that account, unless the faith of the absolved is also void.

37. Just as the priest by baptism and distribution of communion really baptizes and distributes communion, even if the power of the keys is restricted or stands under prohibition,

38. so also he really absolves during penance, as much as it may be prohibited, if only there is no deception on the part of the absolved.

39. Even a frivolous and game-playing priest or one who knowingly acts against a restriction truly baptizes and truly absolves.

40. Imagine a case (however impossible) that one who is to be absolved is not contrite yet believes anyway that he is being absolved: he truly is absolved.

41. Here no reservation of cases [to a higher authority] or a restriction can be an obstacle [to the absolution granted], assuming that it was done unknowingly and remains so.

42. The sacraments of the new covenant are not in this way efficacious signs of grace such that it is sufficient for their reception that nothing hinders them.

43. Yes, a person who comes to any of the sacraments without faith comes to them as a hypocrite and through

them brings himself under judgment.

44. The sacraments of the old and of the new covenants are distinguished from one another in that those [sacraments] were acts of justification in the flesh, while these [sacraments] are acts of justification in the spirit.

45. In the new [sacraments], the word of the one who promises and therefore the faith of the one who receives remission is present; in the old [sacraments] this was lacking.

46. As venial sins do not belong to confession and absolution through the power of the keys, so also not all mortal sins.

47. If a person were obligated to confess all mortal sins and be absolved of them, he would be obligated to do something utterly impossible.

48. No one knows how often he commits mortal sins, even in good deeds, because of empty boasting.

49. He must confess only what is certainly mortal sin for him or for others, namely crimes.

50. Despairing on account of all his other sins, he must throw himself with confidence into the abyss of the mercy of God, who promises [mercy] faithfully.

In summary:

The righteous will live not from works of the law, and also not from the law, but from faith. Romans 1[:17, 3:28].

LF

MARTIN LUTHER was an Old Testament professor, pastor, reformer of the Western church, husband, and father. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson translated the text with the assistance of Theodor Dieter.