

## The 95 Theses – God’s Work

Written by K B Napier

Saturday, 21 October 2017 19:57

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Some doubt Luther pinned his 95 Theses on the church door, but, personally, I see no real reason to doubt it. What he did was not in itself a revolutionary act (as claimed by Rome in its current publications and in a special DVD), but quite normal at that time. It was a prompter for other monks and clerics to join the debate Luther hoped to begin. But, instead of having a simple debate about a worrying movement (the selling of indulgences for the dead), his words began something far greater!

The Theses themselves are not that remarkable in content, and anyone who has actually read them will realise that what are called '95 theses' are fewer – possibly 15 theses or propositions, with sub-notes in support. They are not written as theological statements but as complaints against something Luther and others were critical of. Not remarkable, that is, for us in modern times with centuries of accrued knowledge. But, highly dangerous in the Middle Ages.

How many Christians, celebrating the 500 years anniversary of pinning the Theses to the door, have actually read the Theses? And how many think Luther was arguing against indulgences? In truth, he was NOT speaking against indulgences, nor against them being sold! He supported the indulgences system so long as they were issued by, or accepted by, the pope. What he criticised was the gratuitous selling of indulgences by money-grabbing priests, even for the dead. Indeed, his support of popes is well documented in the 95 Theses. (It is my view that at that time Luther was himself thinking very deeply about biblical truths, but as ideas they were quite mixed and the start of forming truth in his mind).

When he pinned his paper on the front door of Wittenberg church, he expected some dissent, but also a debate. He wanted others of the Catholic faith to present their own arguments, for or against, so that the issue could be dealt with. It is obvious from the contents that he was writing as a good Catholic, not as a revolutionary. Though Luther did not intend to cause an European tumult, he began to examine his own heart and beliefs following the sharp and violent reaction of Rome and Romanists to his Theses, eventually coming to salvation. But, a truly 'biblical salvation' does not appear in the Theses, the writing of which was apparently prompted by his university.

Remember that when Catholics use the same terms and words as those used by Protestants, they do not mean the same things. Thus, what might appear to be Protestant in the Theses, was not... Luther had yet to settle his various ideas in his own mind. Therefore, some of what he says in the theses was true, but not meant in the biblical manner. For example, in his opening introductory paragraph, he spoke of *“love and concern for the truth”*, he meant love and truth as

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defined by the popes and Rome. Thesis one speaks of ‘repentance’ – but we must bear in mind it was repentance as defined by Rome, and so on. And thesis 3 says repentance is not just in the heart but also in ‘mortifications’.

Thesis 5 clearly indicates that the pope cannot remit any penalties (for sin) except by his own discretion or by canon law... but nothing referring to what God says in His word. What he later spoke of, the truth, came later as he progressed in his theology and faith.

In Thesis 6 he comes close to truth by saying the pope cannot remit guilt, but can only ‘declare and confirm’ that it has been remitted by God. Scripture says (speaking about Peter as the ‘small stone’ and Christ as ‘the Rock’, not Peter) that the apostles could only accept or reject repentance if God has already done so in Heaven (Matthew 16:19). Thus, Christ held the keys, not apostles or later popes (Revelation 1:18). Yet, Luther implied that popes only follow the biblical pattern... which they have never done. They claim to hold the keys to it all, because the keys were first given to the ‘first pope, Peter’. Not so! There is no evidence at all that Peter was ever in Rome, and the text tells us that the Rock Who held those keys was Christ. Even so, Luther said (Thesis 7) that God NEVER remits guilt UNLESS the one repenting submits to the priest... even though Jesus Christ completely cast off the priestly system of Judaistic religion, along with Judaism itself.

Next, Luther shows complete acceptance of the heresy of purgatory. He says it is wrong for priests to “retain canonical penalties on the dead in purgatory”, but does not say he condemns the idea of purgatory. Thus, he agreed with purgatory but NOT with people supposedly held there and penalised by “ignorant priests”. He adds that the great fear felt by those who were dying is sufficient punishment whilst in purgatory (Thesis 15).

Luther also suggested that souls in purgatory are not “*outside the state of merit, or unable to grow in grace*” (Thesis 18), even though scripture states bluntly that once we die we can do nothing about changing our spiritual state – we are either saved before death or we are not.

He indicates (Thesis 23) that only the “*most perfect*” can be granted plenary remission, so the majority, those who feverishly buy indulgences, cannot expect to have their guilt remitted by priests who promise relief from penalty. He said that popes, bishops and priests, have the same authority over purgatory (Thesis 25).

Luther gloried in the claim that the pope “*does excellently*” to grant remission to souls in purgatory after others seek Masses to be said on their behalf (Thesis 26). He alludes to a quote (made by sellers of indulgences) commonly referred to:

*“There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of the purgatory immediately the money clinks in the bottom of the chest”*

(Thesis 27)... but, it is more likely that when the coin hits the bottom,

*“avarice and greed increase”* (

28). He was angry that people on the breadline or lower were expected to pay for indulgences to shorten the time their dead relatives spent in purgatory. He declared that once dead a person cannot have his sins made void. (Before all this, Rome only obtained money from people still alive).

Those who are “*certain of their own salvation by means of letters of indulgence, will be eternally damned, together with their teachers*” (32). It sounds good, but ‘salvation’ must

be interpreted in Romish terms. Luther was saying that if a man relies only on buying an indulgence, then his damnation was assured. No, he must also rely on remission given not by wandering priests selling these bits of paper, but on the forgiveness granted by the pope. He was not, then, against indulgences or purgatory, but against greedy priests making money from people’s fears. That is, indulgences by the pope plus ‘merits’ will give salvation. However, Luther soon thought otherwise.

Christians, says Luther, must understand that papal indulgences should only be preached with caution (Thesis 41) so that people do not forget “*other good works*”. He adds that the pope warns against thinking indulgences are greater than ‘the works of mercy’. So, doing good works for others is better than buying indulgences just to cynically avoid penalties in purgatory (43). This agrees with papal teaching on salvation: grace plus works equals salvation... plus a few other demands.

Luther seemed unaware of the historical greed of popes. He said that the pope would much rather have prayers said for him, than to collect money from indulgences (48). Later, he poses questions on behalf of the ‘laity’, asking why the pope does not use his own fabulous wealth to build St Peter’s, rather than take cash for indulgences from the poor (86). History proves substantially that popes would rather have hard cash! Also see Thesis 51... Luther had what might be called an undue reverence for popes and a few theses look at the building of St Peter’s in this regard. However, his respect soon began to evaporate.

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Luther opposed the idea that we can receive salvation just by buying indulgences, but, his meaning of these terms is vastly different from our own. After referring to the ‘merits’ and ‘treasures’ of ‘the church’ (that is, Roman-style), Luther says these ‘treasures’ are *“the keys of the church, and are bestowed by the merits of Christ”*

(60). Of course, we know that the keys were never given to the popes (through the ‘first pope, Peter’, though he was never a pope), but were/are always in the possession of the Lord Jesus Christ.

*“The power of the pope suffices, by itself, for the remission of penalties and reserved cases”* (61).

He said *“the treasure of indulgences is most acceptable”* (64), Obviously, Luther had a very long way to go to be called one of the true brethren!

*“In former times”*

he says, the

*“treasures of the Gospel”*

were nets to catch the wealthy (65), but in his day indulgences were comparable nets (66).

Whilst he speaks in derogatory terms of wanton selling and buying of indulgences for the dead, and says they are not comparable to the grace of God and the compassion shown on the Cross, he does not mean these in the way Protestants use them. For, he adds, bishops and curates were

*“duty bound”*

to revere genuine indulgences (69).

Then, in Thesis 71, we have an awful statement showing that Luther was almost, but not yet, saved: *“Let him be anathema and accursed who denies the apostolic character of the indulgences”* !

On the other hand, people would be *“blessed”* if they were on guard against licentious selling and buying of indulgences (72).

The pope, said Luther, *“rightly excommunicates”* anyone who derogates the *“trade in indulgences”* (73).

Luther also had a Catholic regard for Mary (75), and says that it was blasphemy against Peter and the pope to imply that popes cannot give greater grace (77). In all of this Luther speaks as a real Catholic and not as a saved man. This is why he tried to protect the pope from criticism (81).

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Luther said the pope saw the dead as ‘redeemed’ so he should pay back money paid for masses etc (83). Again we must see all this in Romanist terms, not in the way we understand it as Protestants. Luther, to my mind, used these queries from the ‘laity’ as a front for his own queries - a kind of protection.

I have only given a very broad view, abstracted from my longer commentary (A-845) on the Theses, that, at the time of their publication, Luther’s aim was to support the pope and criticise the rampant selling of indulgences for its own sake, to obtain money, by travelling priests. On the other hand he accepted and taught indulgences from the pope to be good, and cursed any who were critical.

Which leads me to a conclusion: Luther’s Theses were not a theological ‘front’ for his complaint, nor a sign of his salvation (in biblical terms). The Theses were critical but within a Romanist framework. In themselves the Theses were not of real use. What mattered is not Luther or the Theses, but what God intended for them to be used for. Frankly, the Theses are of no value except as an historical recognition of an underlying grumbling against indulgences by the ‘laity’ and a few priests.

However, when we look at the bigger picture (which Luther at that time could not see), we can glorify the Lord for taking what would otherwise just be a blip of Roman Catholic history, and turning it into a catalyst for massive change. Instead of being untouched by the growing storm for his criticism, he was forced to escape. From this came teaching others and gaining the ears of royal leaders, a peasants’ revolt (not initiated by him personally), and, finally, Luther’s own salvation in real terms and a very big change in how he regarded popes and scripture.

The biggest conclusion, then, is that though Luther’s aims and results for the Theses were significant to Romanists, God promoted them into another sphere, using them to bring about a European movement of the heart and mind, eventually bringing the Reformation. But, God’s plan for all this was not restricted to the past, for the battle-cry is still the same – reformed and reforming! And it is all of God, not man. Luther was just a channel through which God poured His blessings upon people hungry for truth. And so Luther, in the end, realised what was behind his earlier Theses.

We must keep on reforming. This was God’s purpose in using the Theses. Let us not forget what was done in the first Reformation, but build upon them and continue to reform as individuals and as the Church-visible.