

## THE REAL REFORMATION DAY

APRIL 26, 2018 · SPENCER STEWART

On October 31, 2017, the Protestant world celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, commemorating the day Martin Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*<sup>1</sup> was posted on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. The irony is that Martin Luther himself was not reformed at that point! He did not yet understand the Gospel. In fact, within three years he had published that he regretted what he wrote in his *Ninety-five Theses* and its *Explanations*, admitting that at the time he "still clung with a mighty superstition to the tyranny of Rome."<sup>2</sup> A better anniversary for the start of the Reformation would be today, five hundred years after the Heidelberg Disputation of April 26, 1518.<sup>3</sup>

### The Roman Catholicism of the Ninety-five Theses

Though Luther had been breaking from scholastic and nominalist theologians on certain issues over the previous year, in writing the *Ninety-five Theses*, Luther was trying to be a good Catholic. He wasn't arguing against indulgences, but the abuse of indulgences (explained below). He just wanted an academic debate to clean up a legitimate process. Luther later reflected, "I certainly thought in this case I should have a protector in the pope, on whose trustworthiness I then leaned strongly, for in his decrees he most clearly damned the immoderation of the indulgence preachers."<sup>4</sup>

Since at least the time of Augustine, the Catholic Church thought of justification as the impartation of God's righteousness into an infant at baptism, so that the infant's nature actually became righteous. That baby would grow up and commit sins that would ruin his righteousness and lose justification.

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<sup>1</sup> See [bookofconcord.org/95theses.php](http://bookofconcord.org/95theses.php).

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. in Stephen J. Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 93. Luther wrote in 1545, "Above all things, I beseech the Christian reader and beg him for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ to read my earliest books very circumspectly and with much pity, knowing that before now I too was a monk, and one of the right frantic and raving papists. When I took up this matter against Indulgences, I was so full and drunken, yea, so besotted in papal doctrine that, out of my great zeal, I would have been ready to do murder – at least, I would have been glad to see and help that murder should be done – on all who would not be obedient and subject to the pope, even to his smallest word" (qtd. in Dr. Carl Trueman, "Context of the Reformation II" in "The Reformation," Westminster Theological Seminary, 29 Sept 2014 ([itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/3-context-of-the-reformation-ii/id924126015?i=1000319521348&mt=2](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/3-context-of-the-reformation-ii/id924126015?i=1000319521348&mt=2))).

<sup>3</sup> So also Dr. Carl Trueman: "And, for me, the Heidelberg Disputation is where the Reformation really begins, because it is the first, really, public platform where Luther is able to give expression to a theology that is developing almost weekly at this point, rapidly developing, before an audience that will contain some of the men who will go on to be profoundly influential in the Reformation all over Europe, not least a man called Martin Bucer" ("The 95 Theses" in "The Reformation," Westminster Theological Seminary, 29 Sept 2014 [[itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/4-the-95-theses/id924126015?i=1000319521349&mt=2](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/4-the-95-theses/id924126015?i=1000319521349&mt=2)]).

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Nichols, 35. Cf., e.g., theses 73, 74, and 91.

Therefore, he had need of penance to recover that righteousness.<sup>5</sup> (Jerome had mistranslated Jesus' Greek command in Matthew 4:17, "repent," into Latin that meant "do penance.")<sup>6</sup> Penance included contrition, confession, and works of satisfaction. They believed God forgives the eternal guilt of sin, but there remained temporal punishments that must be paid by the sinner through penance. Prescribed by the priest, penance could involve acts of self-denial, prayers, pilgrimages, and/or offerings, depending upon the severity of the sin(s). If a person died in a state of grace, but without having satisfied the temporal punishments due for his sins, then he would go to purgatory, a hellish place of purging and preparation for heaven.

Some super-saints, however, finished life with more merit than they needed to bypass purgatory and be welcomed into paradise. Their merits, along with the merits of Christ and Mary, were stored in a heavenly bank, The Treasury of Merit. Official papal declarations in 1343 and 1476 claimed that popes possess the keys to the Treasury of Merit and the authority to transfer that merit to souls on earth or in purgatory in order to cancel out their demerits. An indulgence is the official receipt of the remission of sin's temporal punishment.<sup>7</sup> Indulgences could be partial or plenary (full). They could be earned by a pilgrimage or, from 1063 to 1270, a crusade against the Muslims (or Christian "heretics"). Or, indulgences could be bought.

In Luther's day, Pope Leo X was going bankrupt building the Sistine Chapel in St. Peter's Basilica. Albert of Brandenburg already had two bishoprics<sup>8</sup> and wanted a third (Mainz). So they struck a deal. Albert borrowed money from German bankers, the Fugers, to "gift" the Pope. So that Albert could afford the loan and interest payments, the Pope authorized Albert to sell indulgences. The Pope got a cut from those, too, of course. And Albert could also tax his new bishopric. Win-win. Albert commissioned a salesman, Johann Tetzel, who employed jingles, such as, "When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs!"<sup>9</sup> He profanely promised, "Even if you had violated the Virgin Mary, my indulgence would square it away."<sup>10</sup>

Luther couldn't keep quiet. He objected to pilfering the poor by selling forgiveness to build a basilica.<sup>11</sup> And he objected to giving false hope to those who bought an indulgence without repentance in their heart.<sup>12</sup> Luther pointed people to the Cross and the Gospel,<sup>13</sup> but he himself did not yet understand them. Luther wrote theses that show he still believed in the pope,<sup>14</sup> purgatory, and indulgences, if preached properly.<sup>15</sup> But, he questioned the current system<sup>16</sup> and struck a nerve in a Renaissance society primed to revolt against the authority of Rome. Translated copies of the *Ninety-*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1453.

<sup>6</sup> See Luther's first two theses in the *Ninety-five Theses*, following Erasmus, who was following Lorenzo Valla's *Annotations on the New Testament*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1471.

<sup>8</sup> A bishopric is a district under the control of a bishop.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Luther's theses 27 and 28 (also 33, 35, 50, 51, 57, 71, 72, 75, 77, 79, 80).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Luther's thesis 75.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. theses 46, 50, 51, 66, 82. Dr. Carl Trueman stresses the pastoral nature of Luther's motivation for the Ninety-five Theses ("The 95 Theses"; see n. 3 above).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. theses 7, 21, 24, 28, 31, 32, 35, 39, 45, 49, 52, 54, 66, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. theses 55, 62, 63, 65, 78, 79, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. theses 6, 7, 9, 25, 26, 38, 48, 50, 51, 55, 61, 69, 78, 90, 91. See also n. 2 (above).

*five Theses* catapulted Luther into the spotlight, and that pressure catalyzed his thinking. So I don't mind commemorating October 31, 1517, in the providence of God. But if all we ever heard from Luther was the content that he believed in 1517, there would be no reason for celebration.

### The Protestantism of the Heidelberg Disputation

The pope dismissed Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* as the ramblings of a drunken German monk. "He'll think differently when he's sober." He charged Luther's Augustinian Order to straighten him out. Therefore, Luther submitted twenty-nine theses for debate at Heidelberg on April 26, 1518.<sup>17</sup> This was the first public display of Luther's emerging Reformation theology.<sup>18</sup> This is where we first see him trumpet the Gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone, which was conspicuously absent from the *Ninety-five Theses*.

In Heidelberg theses one through twelve, Luther boldly claims that the works that humans do *before* trusting in Christ alone and in order to establish *our own* righteousness are dead works and, as such, mortal sins.<sup>19</sup> (The Catholic Church had forced a distinction between mortal sins, which destroy the grace of justification and endanger the soul, and venial sins, which are less serious.) Romans 14:23 teaches, "everything that is not from faith is sin." And according to Romans 3:10-12, no one does good, not even the one trying to do good in order to please God – if not from faith in Christ. Thesis eight claims these works are even more deadly when producing self-security in the worker, as though he is accruing merit before God (cf. Rom. 4:2). To suggest otherwise, thesis nine states, is "perilous surrender of the fear of God." Dr. Trueman exposts, "What Luther's talking about here is... the true believer will not stand on his own works. The true believer will know that his works fall far short of the standards of God because he so fears God's righteousness."<sup>20</sup> In Luther's proof of thesis four, argued in May of that year, he says, "To trust in works... is equivalent to giving oneself the honor and taking it from God.... But this is completely wrong..."<sup>21</sup>

In thesis 16, Luther asserted, "The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty."<sup>22</sup> The work doesn't come from faith (trust in Christ alone), so even the good work is sin. And, the sinner trusts in his work to garner favor from God, which doubles his sin and guilt (cf. Gal. 2:21, 3:10, 5:2-4; Rom. 9:30–10:4). Thesis 18: "It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of

<sup>15</sup> Cf. theses 15-19, 25, 29, 31, 34, 38, 39, 41, 56, 57, 64, 68, 71, 72, 73, 82, 83, 91.

<sup>16</sup> Consider that Luther introduces the questions of others in 82-89 as "shrewd" in 81. Yet he assumes the Pope would want to correct the abuses of the current system (91). Cf. also 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> See [bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php](http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php).

<sup>18</sup> Trueman, "Context of the Reformation II" and "The 95 Theses" (see nn. 2 and 3, above).

<sup>19</sup> Thesis 2 calls them "human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts." Thesis 9 calls them "works without Christ." Thesis 10 makes the connection between being "dead works" and "mortal works." Cf. Hebrews 6:1 for part of the foundation of basic Christian teaching: "repentance from dead works."

<sup>20</sup> Trueman, "The 95 Theses." There are more riches in Luther's Heidelberg Disputation than I can devote space to here, especially in Luther's distinction between a theologian of (vain)glory and a theologian of the cross. I heartily recommend the running commentary on the Heidelberg theses in Dr. Trueman's lecture linked in note 10.

<sup>21</sup> [bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#7](http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#7)

<sup>22</sup> In previous lectures, Luther had parroted Gabriel Biel and the theologians of the *Via Moderna*, that "God will not deny grace to the one who does what is in him" (i.e., tries his best). E.g., his first Psalms lectures (1513-15) and first Romans lectures (1515-16). See Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, Third Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 106-108. Thus, thesis 16 is a direct refutation of the *Via Moderna* and Old Luther.

Christ.” We can do nothing to merit grace. As long as we are outside of Christ, says thesis 23, everything we do remains condemned.

For a couple of years, Luther had been coming to see sin as less of a wound that needs curing by more effort, and more as a status of spiritual death such that we can contribute nothing good on our own. Our condition instead requires divine intervention, resurrection. That is the bad news that we must believe.

Now the good news. Thesis 25: “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.” Thesis 26: “The law says ‘Do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done.” This is Gospel! Beautiful statements of the Gospel of grace! Luther is echoing the Apostle Paul in Romans 4:4-6:

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works....<sup>23</sup>

Works earn a paycheck, which is antithetical to a gift – and righteousness *is* a gift, a gift received by faith, apart from works (see Rom. 3:24-25, 5:17; Eph. 2:8-9). Luther here has shifted from a penance-based, inherent righteousness to imputed righteousness – that is, the righteousness of Christ credited to those who simply believe in Him and *His* finished work. If you trust in Christ, then you have already done everything required of you for right standing with God because Christ’s obedience counts as yours, through faith and union with Christ<sup>24</sup> (cf. Rom. 5:12-21; Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Because Luther was accused by Catholics, as are Protestants today, of excusing sin and laziness, it is worth noting that theses 27-28 teach that our works *after* trusting in Christ are pleasing to God because God is the One working them in us (cf. Heb. 13:20-31, Phil. 2:12-13 – and because we are not trusting in them, cf. theses 7-12). The final thesis (28) reads, “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it....” We do not merit anything before God but condemnation and wrath. Yet His merciful, gracious love removes the heart of stone, gives the gift of faith and righteousness in Christ, and then works that which is pleasing in believers.<sup>25</sup>

There is no room for confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3), no room for human boasting (Rom. 3:27–4:2; Eph. 2:9; 1 Cor. 1:30-31). To God alone be the glory on April 26, 1518, now, and forevermore!

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<sup>23</sup> In his proof of thesis 25, argued in May 1518, Luther quoted, “‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’ (Rom. 1:17), and ‘Man believes with his heart and so is justified’ (Rom. 10:10),” and 1 Cor. 1:30 (Christ as our righteousness; see [bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#25](http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#25)).

<sup>24</sup> In his proof of thesis 26, argued in May 1518, Luther wrote, “For through faith Christ is in us, indeed, one with us. Christ is just and has fulfilled all the commands of God, wherefore we also fulfill everything through him since he was made ours through faith” ([bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#26](http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#26)). See [ProjectOne28.com/luthers-reformation](http://ProjectOne28.com/luthers-reformation) for Luther’s use of the marriage metaphor to teach justification through union with Christ by faith.

<sup>25</sup> See Ezek. 36:26-27, Heb. 13:20-21. In his proof of thesis 25, Luther wrote, “Not that the righteous person does nothing, but that his works do not make him righteous, rather that his righteousness creates works. For grace and faith are infused without our works. After they have been imparted the works follow.... Therefore man knows that works which he does by such faith are not his but God’s. For this reason he does not seek to become justified or glorified through them, but seeks God” (<http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#25>).