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The 95 Theses as a Template for Lasting Liturgical Reform

So, it is 2017, and one wonders what liturgical heresy du jour the commemoration of Luther's 95 *Theses* will conjure up across the Lutheran spectrum. In 1617 the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation had the first opportunity to celebrate a centenary. My favorite bit of iconography from that time is an etching depicting Luther writing the *Theses* on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg with a quill pen long enough to be knocking the papal tiara off Pope Leo X's head in Rome.¹ 100 years later, in the Swabian town of Biberach, not far from where the author's relatives lived at the time, worship began on Saturday with a service of confession of sin, included on Sunday the celebration of the Lord's Supper—an exception to the four-times-a-year rule already very much in place—and involved Monday services in the cemetery at which the *Te Deum* was to be sung as well as other services at which good “Musique” was to be included.² Most importantly, the directives insisted that: “All extravagant eating and drinking, gaming and dancing in the inns is not permitted, and all unnecessary, irritating wandering

¹ See, for example, Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *Martin Luther's 95 Theses with Introduction, Commentary and Study Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), xiv [henceforth: *95 Theses*].

² *Beschreibung der Feier des Jubelfestes der Reformation zu Biberach, in den Jahren 1717 und 1817, zum Besten der Erwerbschule daselbst* (Ulm: Ebner, 1817), 9-14 (accessed 13 May 2017 at <https://books.google.com/books?id=QCNBAAAACAAJ&pg=PA44&lpg=PA44&dq=Biberach+Reformatio nsfeier&source=bl&ots=cyrzzUdVrt&sig=ZDu7-AohZpLjVXDrTi4Yxc6H2VY&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjn0pDss-zTAhXEJiYKHcqfB8QQ6AEIITAD#v=onepage&q=Biberach%20Reformationsfeier&f=false>).

to-and-fro and running about is to be avoided.” Those Pietists really ruined things for fun-loving Swabians! But the same ordinance stated:

In one week, on the 31st it will be a full 200 years since the almighty and omniscient God, out of his immeasurable, eternal love and mercy, through his elect, precious implement for defense and work, the eager teacher and true servant of the Word of God, namely, Dr. Martin Luther of blessed memory, made a longed-for and most joyous beginning to the Christian, saving, highly necessary Reformation of his completely besieged church.³

At least God was still the subject of the verb in 1717! But by 1817 we get a spate of etchings depicting a little boy on a ladder posting the *Theses* while Luther stands in front of the Castle Church pointing back to them. And by mid-century, Luther himself starts hammering away at the door—a pity, since such notices were usually hung on doors with wax or paste, not nails. That mythical depiction survived 1917 intact, when the Germans, still at war in Europe, made that year into a celebration of Germanness.⁴

But as the 450th anniversary approached, scholars had begun to question when and even whether the *Theses* had ever been posted, leading *Der Spiegel* to publish an article titled “Reformator ohne Hammer?” [Reformer without a Hammer?].⁵ That debate goes

³ Ibid, 14.

⁴ The Lutherhaus in Wittenberg has collected a range of such images in its permanent exhibit on the third floor.

⁵ *Der Spiegel* (January 3, 1966), 32-34 (accessed 13 May 2017 at: <http://magazin.spiegel.de/EpubDelivery/spiegel/pdf/46265199>). The original debate involved Kurt Aland, Hans Volz and Erwin Iserloh, all of whom published books and/or articles about the matter. In 2008 the

on, although most scholars now agree that the posting on Wittenberg's church door was not a declaration of war against the church but simply Luther following the regulations of his university, which required such posting of all theses for dispute on its bulletin board (aka the doors of Wittenberg's churches). Far more important was Luther's posting of the *Theses* in the mail to his archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, the primate of all churches in Germany, in whose territories Johann Tetzel was promulgating the so-called "Peter's Indulgence." That original letter in Luther's hand with the notation of when it was received in Halle, the archbishop's "capital" so to speak, still rests in a Swedish archive to this day. So, the *Theses* were mailed, though not necessarily nailed, posted in the mail but perhaps not on a door.⁶

2017 may well include all kinds of shenanigans in local churches, with young teens dressed in black bathrobes and equipped with hammer and nails and old or new theses, intending church reform, despite the fact that Luther insisted that only Christ could and would reform the church, and under the frankly un-Lutheran slogan of "*ecclesia semper reformanda.*"⁷ One of the most helpful steps in commemorating 2017 has come from the international Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue, which has provided

most recent book on the subject appeared, a collection of essays by those both in favor and against the posting: Joachim Ott and Martin Treu, *Luthers Thesenanschlag—Faktum oder Fiktion* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008). See also Volker Leppin and Timothy J. Wengert, "Sources for and against the Posting of the Ninety-Five Theses," *Lutheran Quarterly* 29 (2015): 373-98.

⁶ *95 Theses*, 27-36.

⁷ A slogan not found in Luther or any other reformer and first coined, as near as the author can tell, by Dutch pietists of the seventeenth century, who wanted a way (as do most people who now use the slogan) a way to ignore or overturn the consequences of Luther's witness to the gospel.

an excellent educational resource, *From Conflict to Communion*, and ecumenical worship guidelines, which should foster a way of viewing 1517 not as church-dividing but as church-renewing.⁸

Rescuing the 95 Theses from Liturgical Obscurity

One of the problems over the past 500 years has been the complete ignorance regarding the *95 Theses* themselves, where so many have treated them as a cipher, an empty bucket into which they pour their own self-centered interests. Read in their own time and for their own church, the *Theses* provide a host of theological insights good not only for Luther's age but also for our own. The booklet I edited includes translations of the *Theses*, the letter to Albrecht and Luther's 1518 *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*, his attempt to explain the Latin *Theses* to the German-speaking world that unexpectedly turned him into the world's first living best-selling author overnight. Today, however, I want to focus on the liturgical insights scattered throughout the *Theses*, and then put them in the context of his other early writings—especially comments on the Third Commandment in his *Treatise on Good Works*.

The Exordium

The *95 Theses* began *not* with Thesis 1 but with a caption—rhetorically speaking the exordium—a point that Luther underscores in May 1518, when he pens for his *Explanations of the 95 Theses* an epistle dedicatory, addressed to Pope Leo X.

⁸ *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran—Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017: Report of the Lutheran—Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Paderborn: Bonifatius & Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013).

But nevertheless tales have spread throughout the taverns about the avarice of priests and the slanders of the keys of the Supreme Pontiff, so that [this] testimony has become a voice throughout the entire land. “For the zeal of Christ,” is what I confessed [in the *Theses*] and seemed reasonable to me, or, if you want, I was burning with the heat of youth....⁹

Thus, Luther begins his *Theses*, “Out of love and zeal for the truth....” These are no ordinary theses for calm debate over a glass of sherry. Luther’s motivation is *not* to reform the church; his commitment is to the truth of the gospel and its approach to confession and forgiveness and, of course, to indulgences. This same motivation spans his entire career in all facets of his thinking and acting. Thus, for example, we cannot fathom his commitment to the Western Christian liturgy unless we realize that it was not “change for the sake of change” or “final, God-ordained reform, returning liturgy back to some apostolic ideal” or even “rescuing tradition from the traditionalists.” He is interested only and always in “love and zeal for the truth.”

The Narration: Theses 1-4

As demonstrated in the introduction to the English translation of the *Theses*, Luther organizes the 95 *Theses* according to the Ciceronian rules of rhetoric.¹⁰ With this insight, one can more fully appreciate the shape of his arguments and how they cohere. After the exordium comes the narration of commonly accepted facts. As Luther reveals in his *Explanations to the 95 Theses*, published a little less than a year later, these first

⁹ WA 1: 528, 18-20.

¹⁰ 95 *Theses*, 5-8.

four theses were not up for debate. Instead, as is assumed in a *narratio*, everyone should take these theses as givens. The *Explanations* also reveal why Luther thought this way: he derived his arguments to a large degree from the very latest exegetical tool available to him, namely, Erasmus's *Annotations on the New Testament* of 1516, the companion volume to his Greek New Testament that pointed out and explained the errors in the Vulgate, the standard Latin translation. In this case, Erasmus commented on the Vulgate's rendering of Matthew 3:2 & 4:17 as "*Poenitentiam agite*," or "Do penance." The Greek, *metanoiete*, meant something far different and implied that this text could not be used to explain the sacrament of Penance. Here is what Erasmus said.

But our crowd considers "do penance" to mean paying some prescribed penalty imposed [on them], because with [early] Christians who publicly sinned, they were rejected from fellowship and publicly afflicted. And that satisfaction or punishment began to be called penance. Indeed, from this fact there was a not small error by some theologians who twisted what Augustine wrote about penance (that is, public satisfaction) into a sorrow of the soul, which they call contrition. However, *metanoia* is derived from *metanoiein*... In my judgment, it could be translated properly: "Recover your senses" or "Return to a [right] mind."¹¹

But what Luther writes in Thesis 1 actually improves upon Erasmus and completely changes the point of all liturgy—not just confession of sin. He adds these few words, "that the entire life of the Christian is to be one of penitence." The entire life!

¹¹ Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Annotationes in Novum Instrumentum* (Basel: Froben, 1516), 241.

Here Luther expresses what many Lutherans know as the *simul iustus et peccator*, that a believer is at the same time a righteous person and a sinner. What Luther opposes here is the myth that there is a before and after in the Christian life, that—to use the modern version of this position—one starts out as a sinner but by committing one’s life to Jesus one becomes saved, justified, sanctified and whatever else one can think of. For Luther and for the witness to the church catholic that he fostered, there is no graduation from one thing to another. Instead, *the entire life* of a Christian is one of penitence. Moreover, as the other theses of the narration explain, this penitence is internal and external—that is, encompassing the entire Christian life—and it lasts until death.

In the years to come, Luther then takes this central insight and applies it squarely to baptism—a sacrament that until Luther was almost completely neglected, since “before-and-after” Christianity always assumes that whatever may have been gained in baptism is lost through subsequent sin or that baptism is only a mark of Christian commitment to God and not a work of God on us. For Luther, Baptism is everything. Already in his 1519 *Sermon on the Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, when writing about the significance of being thrust into the water and drawn out again, Luther insists that “the significance of baptism is a blessed dying to sin and a resurrection in the grace of God...” and he insists that this significance “is not fulfilled completely in this life. Indeed this does not happen until a person passes through bodily death...”¹² He goes on to say that “As long as your binding to God [in Baptism] stands, God in turn is gracious and binds himself to you, not imputing to you the sins that remain in your nature

¹² *The Annotated Luther*, ed. by Hans Hillerbrand, et al., vol. 1: *The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 208 [henceforth: AL 1: 208].

after baptism: neither taking them into account nor condemning you because of them.”¹³ It is faith, he opines, by which “in baptism a person becomes innocent, pure, and sinless, and yet remains full of evil inclinations ... they are pure through God’s gracious reckoning, not on account of their own nature.” This insistence then moves him to link the sacrament of penance—or as Luther and other reformers preferred to call it, the sacrament of absolution—to baptism. “The sacrament of penance thus renews and points again to the sacrament of baptism. It is as if in the absolution the priest were saying, ‘See, God has now forgiven you your sin, as God long since promised you in baptism, and has commanded me, by the power of the keys, to assure you of this forgiveness. So now you come again into the work and power of baptism.’”¹⁴ Therefore, for Luther, all liturgy is addressed to the one who is both saint and sinner.

The Main Point of Controversy: Thesis 5

Thesis 5 sums up Luther’s chief point of debate: “The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.”¹⁵ Here is the culmination of ten months of intense study of indulgences. It began when Luther, preaching an indulgence of 200 days at the anniversary of the Castle Church’s dedication on 17 January 1517, admitted that he did not know how to preach

¹³ AL 1: 213.

¹⁴ AL 1: 213.

¹⁵ *95 Theses*, 14.

true repentance and an indulgence at the same time.¹⁶ His subsequent reading of Archbishop Albrecht's instructions to the indulgence preachers and his hearing rumors of these preachers' exaggerations heightened his concerns. His study of Erasmus on the New Testament, of canon law on the origins of indulgences, and of one of the most recent defenses of indulgences by a deceased Augustinian professor from Erfurt, Johann von Paltz, still alive when Luther entered the monastery there, all combined to intensify his suspicions that indulgences had been completely abused.

What Luther discovered was that originally bishops were indulgent with excommunicated flagrant, public sinners regarding their seven-year punishment for each such sin. If they were close to death or demonstrated especially noteworthy sorrow for sin, the sentence of ecclesiastical punishment could be reduced. As Erasmus had already noted and as Luther discovered in the earliest decrees of canon law, indulgences thus had nothing to do with a believer's standing before God and were never intended to lift the God-ordained consequences for sin. Presuming that indulgences lifted God's penalty for sin (that is, discipline or chastisement of the old creature) completely subverted true contrition. That is what Luther had already expressed in his January sermon at the anniversary of the Castle Church's dedication.

You see, therefore, how dangerous a thing the preaching of indulgences is, which teaches a mutilated grace, namely, to flee satisfaction and punishment.... For how easily can true contrition and so easy and bountiful an indulgence be preached at one and the same time, when true

¹⁶ Timothy J. Wengert, "Martin Luther's Preaching an Indulgence in January 1517," *Lutheran Quarterly* 29 (2015): 62-75.

contrition desires a rigid exaction [of punishment on the flesh] and such an indulgence relaxes it too much?¹⁷

Here we can recognize Luther's insistence that the Christian life moves from death to life, that is, in his later parlance, from law to gospel. You only get to new life by having the old creature put to death. In the Theses 39-40 he puts it this way: "It is extremely difficult, even for the most learned theologians, to lift up before the people the liberality of indulgences and the truth about contrition at one and the same time. The 'truth about contrition' seeks and loves penalties [for sins]; the 'liberality of indulgences' relaxes penalties and at very least gives occasion for hating them."¹⁸

Thesis 5 is Luther's solution to this dilemma. His argument is simple. As soon as one realizes that papal or episcopal indulgences have only to do with ecclesiastical penalties for sin, then the pastoral problem of preaching a churchly indulgence that avoids the law's condemnation of sin disappears. This limitation completely reorients the office of anyone who presides in the Christian assembly. One's own, personal authority as pastor resides in applying or suspending *human* rules, making sure that a congregation or synod or district functions properly by encouraging, disciplining, reconciling those in one's care—but only in relation to the Christian community. There the congregation or church body conveys authority to the person in office. The biggest temptation of such presiders is to imagine that they are exercising a divine authority in such matters. To use

¹⁷ Wengert, "Martin Luther's Preaching," 67.

¹⁸ 95 *Theses*, 19.

later Lutheran terminology, church discipline falls under an ecclesiastical first or civil use of the law and not under the gospel.

The Confirmation: Proving Luther's Point in Theses 6-80

The bulk of the *95 Theses* consists of what Cicero called the "*confirmatio*" or proof of Luther's main point and stretches from thesis 6-80. Of these several reveal Luther's understanding of liturgy.

Thesis 6: "The pope cannot remit any guilt except by declaring and confirming its remission by God...."

This simple statement is the flip side of thesis 5. What the pope or any bishop or priest can do in relation to God's authority (and thus *not* on their own authority) is to forgive sin. When a pastor after the confession of sin turns and faces the congregation and declares, "As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ and by his authority I announce to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins," he or she is simply acting upon Thesis 6 of the *95 Theses*. That some insist on making no reference to one's office in the absolution uncovers a profoundly anti-Lutheran view of ministry and worship. Either the one forgiving sin in the assembly has divine authority to do so publicly, or that one should sit down and shut up. Far from giving the pastor too much authority, this completely limits the office. Indeed, I have suggested that from time to time a pastor ought instead say, "If it were up to me, I wouldn't forgive a single one of you, given how you've treated me lately. However, as a called and ordained servant of Christ, who forces me to do it as the burden of my office, and by his authority, you are forgiven."

The other foolishness regarding the absolution comes when people imagine that it is *not* a sacrament. To be sure, Luther insisted that Penance was not a sacrament *per se* but a return to God's promises in baptism, as he already stated in his 1519 sermon. In the sacraments we have declarations of forgiveness, life and salvation (as Luther points out in the *Small Catechism*). One does not say at Baptism, "May you be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—if you're lucky." And certainly at the Supper, one does not approach the communicant and say, "I sure hope this is the body of Christ for you, but then again, if you don't really believe it, it may just be bread and wine with no forgiveness at all." On the contrary, in both cases one simply proclaims, "out of love and zeal for the truth" and in the person of Christ, "I baptize you," and "The body of Christ for you." For this reason, absolution must be absolute. "May you be forgiven," they say, or "God forgive you." "Well," I want to ask, "Does God or doesn't God?" The absolute, unconditional nature of the promise makes this truly the *Sacrament* of Absolution.

Thesis 21: "And so, those indulgence preachers err who say that through the pope's indulgences a person is released and saved from every penalty."

Theses 6-20 contain the basic proof for thesis 5. Theses 21-40 applies the results of this first proof to the indulgence preachers, who are first mentioned in thesis 21. This reveals the true target of Luther's *Theses*: an attack on bad preaching. This plea stands at the heart of his 31 October 1517 letter to Albrecht. This also stands at the heart of worship in the Christian assembly. When preachers replace preaching God's divine, unmerited, unlimited, unconditional, absolute forgiveness with "human opinions" (Thesis 27), then they are simply joining Johann Tetzel and the gang. Luther insists that preachers stop with the moralisms and the manipulation (often to increase giving)! Part

of the problem today rests with our confusing the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (as human institutions) with “God’s inestimable gift” (Thesis 33). These institutions are no more divine than were the pieces of paper handed out by Tetzl. Luther attacks how such preachers confuse human practices—however noble—with the unconditional, unmerited mercy of God.

Recently, a pastor asked: “Don’t you have to teach responsibility?” It would seem that he could not imagine that the entire Christian life is *simul iustus et peccator*. Instead, he had to fashion some kind of life *after* the gospel, in which one talked about responsibility. He also could not imagine that the Word of God actually puts to death and brings to life, but his comment implied that we rather observe and receive some interesting information about sin and grace, after which (*nota bene*) we must respond. But most importantly, he could not imagine that God’s grace and mercy are unconditional, but he was eager to build some sort of caveat into the system. Luther writes, “Any truly remorseful Christian has a right to full remission of guilt and penalty” and “Any true Christian ... possesses a God-given share in all the benefits of Christ.”¹⁹ This eliminates *all* works and leads us back to our Baptisms. That is all preaching is. As Luther wrote in *Freedom of a Christian*:

I believe that it has become clear that it is not sufficient or even Christian if, as those who are the very best preachers today do, we only preach Christ’s works, life and words just as a kind of story or as historical exploits (which would be enough to know in providing an example of how

¹⁹ *95 Theses*, 18-19.

to conduct our lives). Much worse is when there is complete silence about Christ, and human laws and the decrees of the fathers are taught instead of Christ. Moreover, some even preach Christ and recite stories about him for this purpose: to play on human emotions either to arouse sympathy for him or to incite anger against the Jews. This kind of thing is simply childish and over-emotional nonsense.²⁰

If this sketches bad preaching, Luther then describes the alternative this way:

Preaching, however, ought to serve this goal: that faith in Christ is promoted. Then he is not simply “Christ” but “Christ for you and me,” and what we say about him and call him affect us. This faith is born and preserved by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and gave, and what are the needs and the fruit that his reception entail. This kind of preaching occurs where Christian freedom is rightly taught, freedom that we gain from him and that makes us Christians all kings and priests.²¹

Luther addresses this kind of preaching in the assembly throughout the *95 Theses* and in his *Explanations of the 95 Theses*. Thesis 62 insists that: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”

²⁰ AL 1:508.

²¹ AL 1:508.

Thesis 45: “Christians are to be taught that anyone who sees a destitute person and, while passing such a one by, gives money for indulgences does not buy [gracious] indulgence of the pope but God’s wrath.”

As Gordon Lathrop has often argued, there is a connection between Christian worship and care for the poor.²² Our “self-chosen spirituality,” as Colossians 2 calls it, often prevents us from loving our neighbor. Works are not forced out of individuals by yelling at them to “Be responsible.” Instead, insofar as we are reborn, we do good out of “a free and merry spirit.”²³ Luther emphasizes the spontaneity of good works throughout the second half of *Freedom of a Christian*. The believer, as believer, does these things spontaneously, just as a good tree bears good fruit. Moreover, if Jesus is right, it would seem that they do good works without even knowing it—like split-brain patients who do not know their left from their right hand or like sheep who think they are goats. Thus, in the *95 Theses* Luther contrasts all self-indulgent preaching or liturgy to helping the poor.

Thesis 80: “The bishops, parish priests, and theologians who allow such sermons free course among the people will have to answer for this.”

The final part of the confirmation deals with Luther’s instructions to church leaders (Theses 69-80), which describe some of the worst exaggerations of indulgence preachers. This again underscores that bad preaching was Luther’s chief concern. It also

²² Gordon W. Lathrop & Timothy J. Wengert, *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 16.

²³ Solid Declaration, art. VI, par. 17 in: *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb & Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 590.

places on pastors, bishops, district presidents and seminary teachers that same responsibility. Perhaps at least for this year, Lutheran pastors should only preach “Christ for you,” moving from death to resurrection, from drowning to rising, from law to gospel. In 2017 preachers could pretend to be Balaam’s donkey for a year, before getting back on their high, moralistic horses, which frankly belongs in the elder brother’s stable.

The Confutation (Theses 81-91) & Peroration (Theses 92-95)

Every good Ciceronian speech included a refutation of anticipated objections by one’s opponents. Luther includes such a section but with a surprising twist. He lists many of the standard objections and complaints about indulgences and then, in Thesis 91 claims that if they were limited, as he argued in Thesis 5 (namely to ecclesiastical penalties) then all of these sharp questions of the laity would disappear. Although the connection of these arguments to liturgy is somewhat weak, when Luther comes to the peroration he both summarizes the entire argument, and appeals again to the reader. Now the stakes are higher, as Luther uses, not the word “preacher” but the Hebrew Scripture’s equivalent: prophet. Echoing the likes of Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11 and Ezekiel 13: 10 & 16, he repeats the condemnation by the Hebrew prophet: “Away with all those prophets who say to Christ’s people, ‘Peace, peace,’ and there is no peace.” That is, away with the televangelists and the purpose-driven preachers; away with the new age gurus promising our people a mess of meditative pottage instead of divine absolution; away with pastors who think preaching only succeeds when making people responsible; away with all who, in any way, shape or form, proclaim a gospel that makes people self-reliant and thus destroys faith.

What is the alternative? “May it go well for all of those prophets who say to Christ’s people, ‘Cross, cross,’ and there is no cross.” This profoundly paradoxical statement finds its best explanation in a letter Luther wrote in 1516 to a deposed Augustinian prior under his care, who had clearly bemoaned the injustice of his fate.

Are you ignorant, most honorable father, that God ... places his peace in the midst of no peace, that is, in the midst of all trials? ... Therefore, that person whom no one disturbs does not have peace—on the contrary, this is the peace of the world. Instead, that person whom everyone and everything disturbs has peace and bears all of these things with quiet joy. You are saying with Israel, “Peace, peace, and there is no peace”; instead say with Christ, “Cross, cross, and there is no cross.” For as quickly as the cross ceases to be cross so quickly you would say joyfully [with the hymn], ‘Blessed cross, among the trees there is none such [as you].’²⁴

Luther is quoting “*Pane lingua*,” “Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle.” Perhaps one could add, “Away with those who want to destroy the liturgy and hymnody of the church through the ages and who refuse to sing anything written before 1965 or after 1985.” Lutherans can champion the *ordo* of the western liturgical tradition and, above all, its hymns not because they are old or we like them or they are traditional but rather because they—like some modern hymns and songs—bear the gospel. For Luther, the cross is the crucifixion of the Old Creature. As one goes through the cross to the birth of the new creature, just as quickly the cross stops being merely death and threat and has within it

²⁴ WA Br 1:27, 38-46.

the proclamation of life and comfort, so that we, too, may sing, “Blessed cross, among the trees there is none such as you.”

The Treatise on Good Works: Celebrating the Supper, Preaching, and Communal Prayer

One thesis especially important for its ties to liturgy is Thesis 26: “The pope does best in that he grants remission to souls [in purgatory] not by ‘the power of the keys,’ which he does not possess [vis-à-vis Purgatory], but ‘by way of intercession.’” In a few years Luther would completely, but mostly quietly, drop all references to purgatory, in large part because there is no need for a place of purgation or purification before entering heaven, when the absolution bestows remission of all guilt and penalties because of Christ’s meritorious death and resurrection.

In Thesis 26, however, the argument is somewhat more complicated. First, indulgences were first applied to the souls of the dead in 1476, when Sixtus IV allowed the indulgence commissioner in Saintes, France, Raimund Peraudi, to offer an indulgence for the dead souls in purgatory. (This same Peraudi would preach an indulgence in 1502 in Erfurt, when Luther was a student there, and would dedicate the Castle Church on 17 January 1503, proclaiming the 200-day indulgence that Luther later preached.) Those who stressed papal power over everything included Johann Eck (Luther’s later nemesis), who in a tract from 1516 insisted that the pope could exercise the keys (to unlock the kingdom of heaven by forgiving sin and its punishment) even after death to souls in purgatory. Luther, who found such claims to ascribe outrageous power to the papal see, sided with St. Bonaventure that the only power the pope has over the dead is by way of

intercession. That is, the pope (or bishop, priest or any Christian) could beg God on behalf of the dead.

What this reveals, in light of Luther's comments on the third commandment ("Remember the Sabbath day") in the *Treatise on Good Works*, is the central place of prayer in Luther's understanding of liturgy. Luther's main goal in that 1520 treatise was to demonstrate that the Ten Commandments simply teemed with opportunities for good works, so that believers would scarcely have time to search for them in "self-chosen spirituality" or even in the so-called counsels of the New Testament, supposedly fulfilled by those under a vow and thus on a higher plane of perfection.²⁵ Standing before the Decalogue all Christians are equal. In this context, the "first work" of the third commandment is "unsophisticated and easily grasped: attending Mass, praying, and listening to the sermon...."²⁶ For Luther, however, all commandments relate back to the first, so that he immediately reminds the reader that the actions of this first work are only effective when done in faith, which is the central "work" of the first commandment. He bemoans the fact that where the works of the third commandment do not arise from faith: "It is all external, so that we do not consider that we receive something from the Mass into our hearts; learn and retain something from the sermon; and seek, desire, and expect something from prayer."²⁷

²⁵ Not that monks and nuns were perfect but rather that they were in a state of perfection, rendering their good works more meritorious and their sins less harmful to them.

²⁶ AL 1:303.

²⁷ AL 1:303.

This is the true *Sitz im Leben* for worship and liturgy. The greatest temptation in the modern liturgical movement would be to sever this connection between the external actions and faith. One may celebrate the Three Days, keep every Easter season, pray the most stunning Eucharistic prayers—but without faith they are all empty. That famous Danish bell, ringing away its invitation to Bath, Table, Word and Prayer, is an empty, clanging cymbal not simply without love but without faith.²⁸ Yet, as Luther makes clear earlier in this tract and throughout his career, faith is not a human work that merits God’s mercy but rather an act of God’s mercy that creates our relation with God and bubbles over with activity. We cannot by our own intellect or will believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him. All depends on the Holy Spirit working through the Word, lest faith in God rests on our ability to think about Christ or decide for Jesus.

In the remaining comments on this first work of the third commandment, Luther rings the changes on this very theme. He begins with the Eucharistic liturgy. “At Mass,” he writes, “it is necessary that we be present with our heart as well; this happens when we practice faith in our hearts.”²⁹ Chiefly this occurs when we hear the Words of Institution and believe that they are spoken to us and for us. Thus, Luther’s description of true, evangelical preaching in *Freedom of a Christian* applies directly to the Mass as well. As Luther writes here, “With these words, Christ established for himself a memorial or anniversary Mass to be celebrated for him daily throughout Christendom. And he attached to it a glorious, rich, and generous will and testament, which grants and

²⁸ See Lathrop & Wengert, *Christian Assembly*, XX.

²⁹ AL 1:304.

establishes for us ... the forgiveness of all our sins, grace, and mercy unto eternal life....”³⁰

The second item, the sermon, is the center of his concerns already in the 95 *Theses* but also in *Freedom of a Christian*, published later in 1520. Here, too, Luther laments that: “sermons wander around in completely useless fables with the result that Christ is forgotten.”³¹ Instead, he writes, “The sermon should be nothing other than the proclamation of this testament [from the Lord’s Supper].”³² Every sermon should invite to this feast. “Here is Christ for you,” we must cry out, because in every reading God proclaims, “I am the Lord of mercy, and you are not!” As much as not listening to a sermon is sin, “A much graver sin, however, is committed by those who do not preach the gospel and thereby allow those who would gladly have heard it to go to ruin....”³³

Finally, Luther turns to prayer. In a world where the point of prayer was to recite the words, which were effective by the mere saying of them (i.e., *ex opere operato*), Luther rails against clicking beads and turning pages in a book. Prayer was being taught in such a way as to destroy faith and exalt works. Citing the famous, “Ask and it shall be given you,” Luther thunders: “Who is so callous and hardhearted that such powerful words [of promise] do not move such a person to pray joyously, gladly, and with complete trust? But think how many prayers [we] would have to rewrite to pray rightly

³⁰ AL 1:304.

³¹ AL 1: 305.

³² AL 1:305.

³³ AL 1:306.

according to these words [of Jesus]! ... For where this faith and trust are lacking in prayer, then it is dead and nothing but toil and effort.”³⁴ Prayer simply lays all one’s needs before God and falls off neither on the right side through unbelief or on the left by testing God.

It appears that few comprehend the radicality of Jesus’ saying because they miss the outrageous, antithetical nature of the promises, forgetting that all human beings have in daily life asked in vain, sought and not found, knocked when no one was home. That is the truth of our situation. But Jesus comes and promises the impossible—when judged from human terms. God always gives, causes to be found and opens.

But Luther also realizes that the weak in faith hear the commands connected to these promises as judgment. He is not as evil as the charlatans who run around demanding faith and promising miracles, admonishing those who do not receive that they simply do not believe enough—a more demonic message has never been uttered on earth! Instead, he adds:

Now you may ask, ‘What if I cannot believe that my prayer will be heard and is pleasing to God?’ Answer: this is why faith, prayer and other good works are commanded, so that you might see what you can and cannot do. Then, when you find that you are unable to believe ... you may humbly lament this before God and with a small spark of faith you may begin to

³⁴ AL 1: 307.

strengthen it more and more... For there is no one on earth who has not been afflicted with a weakness of faith.³⁵

When one is confronted by such poverty of faith, one can even thank God for revealing this weakness. What a different approach to this problem! No wonder that one of Luther's favorite verses comes from Mark 9: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." And when individuals worry that they are not worthy, Luther encourages them to "look to God's commandment, hold it up to the devil and declare: 'Nothing is instigated because of my worthiness and nothing is prevented because of my unworthiness.'"³⁶ Indeed, the Decalogue itself along with the Lord's Prayer functions as a mirror to reveal our needs and what we have to pray for. Instead of trying to be pure before we pray, Luther thinks that only the impure, the sinner prays from the heart. Otherwise: "We are so blind that we run to God with physical ailments and needs, but for illnesses of the soul we run away from God and are determined not to return until we are cured..."³⁷

One might think that with this remarkable exposition on the nature of prayer Luther would go on to other aspects of this commandment, but then comes a section, not often expressed in his later expositions (although he certainly still held it to be true), which concentrates on corporate prayer and is thus an exposition of Bonaventure's line: "*per modum suffragii*" (by means of intercession), not simply for the dead but for all. Luther writes: "The kind of prayer, however, that actually belongs to this commandment

³⁵ AL 1: 309.

³⁶ AL 1: 311.

³⁷ AL 1: 313.

and is designated a work of the Sabbath is much better and more significant and should be offered for the assembly of all Christians, for the needs of all people, enemies and friends, and especially for those who reside in one's own parish or diocese."³⁸ Why do this?

So that the needs of all penetrate our hearts and, while actually suffering with them, we pray for them in faith and trust. If that kind of prayer is not offered during the Mass, it is better to have no Mass at all. For how does this square with coming together bodily in a house of prayer—given that the act of gathering itself shows we ought to pray in common for the whole community—if we scatter the prayers and divide them up so that each person prays only for personal needs and no one bothers with or cares for the needs of anybody else?³⁹

Luther attacks this disassembled notion of the assembly, reminding people that the ancient practice, still in use in his day, of praying for all after the sermon but from the pulpit, what we call the prayers of the church. But Luther also insists that outside of that common prayer, people should be praying for others throughout the service. And we know that this happens regularly to this day—when a grieving family worships or a beaming, newly minted grandpa or a nation whose tallest building has just been reduced to rubble. It would not be a bad thing to encourage folks by reminding them at the very outset what the needs of the parish are that day, which the general prayer will later draw

³⁸ AL 1:314.

³⁹ AL 1:314.

together. Our people are already praying such heartfelt prayers. We can only encourage them, as did Luther. He was so frustrated with the lack of communal praying that he burst out: “What is God supposed to do when you come to church with your mouth, a prayer book, and a rosary and set your mind on nothing other than getting through the words the prescribed number of times?”⁴⁰ It’s no wonder, he muses, that so many churches are struck by lightning! Failing to pray for the neighbor is so important to Luther that he can even contrast it to what people imagined were the saintliest of lives.

If you do not do this, how would it help you even if you performed every miracle of all the saints, or strangled all the Turks and yet were found guilty of not having heeded the needs of your neighbor and therefore having sinned against love? On the last day, Christ will not ask how often you prayed for yourself, fasted, made a pilgrimage, and did this or that, but how often you did something good for others, especially for the least of all. Among the least are also those who live in sins, spiritual poverty, captivity, and need....⁴¹

Concluding Remarks

So this lies at the heart of the early Luther’s liturgical theology: the Mass, the sermon and prayer, all tied to faith and baptism. As we continue to witness to God’s renewal of Christian liturgy in our midst, Luther provides us with some of the Christian church’s richest resources. Every action done in the Christian assembly—bath, meal,

⁴⁰ AL 1: 316.

⁴¹ AL 1:320.

proclamation, prayer or praise—arises from God’s merciful Word and promise alone. It stems from faith and aims toward faith alone. It champions not human works of any kind but the gracious work of God alone. And in the center of all of our worship stands not our human crosses but rather the one cross toward which all our crosses point and, even more, there stands the Crucified and Risen savior of the world, Christ alone. As we commemorate in 2017 let us celebrate the lover of our souls, Christ, our priceless treasure. Amen.