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## THE GOSPEL EXPRESSED: LUTHER'S TEACHING ON ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS AS DIVINE GIFT | MARK OLIVERO

When exactly the levee is going to break is not easy to know, but when it does we all know. October 31, 1517 is the day the levee broke in the church of the West. It is not likely that Luther was aware he was laying his ax to the root. But that is what he was in fact doing. That “church split” continues, and with it our fascination with the reformer’s understanding of the meaning of the *Evangelium*.

Five hundred years on, we’re still asking: “What was Luther’s understanding of the gospel?” The answer is simple, but it should not be rendered simplistically. In this short essay we look at a few insights from before and after the time of the writing of the *Ninety-five Theses*. In a companion essay, ‘The Gospel Embodied,’ to be run in the next issue of this journal, Christopher Dorn examines how Luther applied his gospel understanding in relation to the Eucharist. The core truth of “divine gift” runs through both.



LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER, MARTIN LUTHER. 1529

said, “I broke through.” Luther’s breakthrough happened gradually, though, and he did not always see Rome as Goliath and himself as its David. In a way it is odd that the *Ninety-five Theses* is taken to be the crucial moment. In that document, he says nothing about “justification by faith,” nor does he oppose the Pope’s authority or indulgences *per se*, addressing instead only how they were administered.

Moreover, the *Ninety-five* were not the first set of theses he had propounded. About two months before that notable *Allerheiligentag*<sup>1</sup>, Luther had posted ninety-seven other theses for debate, in a document entitled *Disputatio Contra Scholasticam Theologiam*.<sup>2</sup> This set of theses is even more confrontational than the *ninety-five*. In between his acerbic comments against specific persons, we see early rudiments of his anthropology. In thesis 5 he writes, “It is false to state that man’s inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites. Indeed, the inclination is

### KEY GOSPEL DISTINCTIONS BEFORE AND AFTER 1517

Luther’s intellectual sparring partners changed over the years, but that same zeal to understand the *Evangelium* drove him, until, as he

1. All Hallows’ Eve

2. Though Luther identified scholasticism as his opposition, he was in reality opposing the Nominalist corruption of scholasticism and his own Occamist beginnings, exemplified in Gabriel Biel. For the value of philosophy in relation to theology see *Ad Fontes*, ‘Natural Theology and Reformed Orthodoxy’ by David Haines, May 2017 and *Ad Fontes*, whole issue, September, 2017, 2.1. Also, see Michael Allen, ‘Disputation for Scholastic Theology,’ inaugural lecture, Sept 6, 2017.

not free, but captive...” and in 17, “Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God...” Then, in 29, “The best and infallible preparation for grace and the sole disposition toward grace is the eternal election and predestination of God.”

As early as 1515 in his *Romans Lectures* he shows clear thinking about *gratia* and the *donum*.<sup>3</sup> For Luther the grace of God is not a substance stored up and dispensed, but the disposition of God’s heart to fallen man. The *donum* is the gift of righteousness by faith which comes to us by *gratia*. In making this distinction he essentially distinguished his understanding of grace from the notion of “infused grace” common to Rome then as now.

However, before that he was not so clear. For example in 1509 “...we find Luther facing in two directions in his marginal comments” to Lombard’s *Sentences*.<sup>4</sup> In that work, and elsewhere around this time, Luther shows an inner battle between his Augustinianism and a semi-pelagian strain common to his Occamist beginnings. We have a few of his sermons from the period of 1510-12. In one of these on John 3:16 Luther said that man’s free will could “by itself suffice for salvation.”<sup>5</sup> Luther realized later he failed to see a “...difference between Christ and Moses except the times in which they lived and their degrees of perfection.”<sup>6</sup>

In these early days, Luther was still grappling with certain key distinctions which are now common fare in Lutheran theology. A few of these distinctions would sustain his influence into streams of Reformed tradition. The most prominent distinction in Lutheran theology is the “Law and Gospel” distinction. Another key distinction Luther develops is *theologia crucis* (the Christian’s attitude of humility and willingness to suffer) contrasted with *theologia gloriae* (the practice of using religion for personal enhancement,) which appears for the first time in the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518. The *simul justus et peccator* distinction which only appears once in Luther’s writings has nonetheless remained an important Lutheran concept.<sup>7</sup> In the “just and sinner” distinction Luther confirms that though throughout our lives, we still confront sin (and grow away from it); we are at the same time assured of God’s full justifying grace.

## ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS IN LUTHER’S GOSPEL TEACHING

What is perhaps the central gospel distinction in Luther’s thought, however, can be seen most clearly in his 1518 sermon “Two Kinds

3. Martin Luther, “Lecture on Romans,” *Luther’s Works*, Volume 25, pp. 305-306

4. Denis R. Janz. *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology*. p. 10.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 12

6. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Volume 54, p. 442

7. Martin Luther, “Lecture on Galatians,” *Luther’s Works*, Volume 54, p. 442

of Righteousness.” Here, he speaks of *iusitia aliena*, righteousness outside us. This righteousness or judicial standing is that *donum* mentioned earlier. This he called righteousness *coram Deo*: in the presence of God. The second kind Luther called righteousness *coram mundo*, our good works in the world and for the world, which are not meritorious for saving grace.

The righteousness *coram Deo* becomes our righteousness by divine gift. It is not infused into us, nor does it inhere within us at some point. Luther says that it is a perfect righteousness acquired entirely from God in Christ, and given to us by the Spirit. It is this alien righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, by which we are made right with God, and it is received by faith.

In his early days Luther struggled to rid himself of his *Anfechtugen*, roiling angst about his guilt before a holy God. What little John Staupitz was able to do to console Luther’s troubled conscience was enough to turn his sights toward true North. Staupitz, Luther’s confessor, who remained a Benedictine monk to the end of his days, pointed him to a new understanding of Christ and his gifts. This life journey from before Wittenberg to Luther’s final days in Erfurt give rich meaning to his thesis 37: “Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has part in all the blessings of Christ and the Church; and this is granted him by God, even without letters of pardon” – *participationem omnium bonorum*, shares in all the blessings.

Luther called Christ’s righteous work for us the *fröhlicher Wechsel*, the “joyous exchange.”<sup>8</sup> In Luther’s *Large Catechism* we feel his sense of victory: “Before this I had no lord or king but was captive under the power of the devil...Those tyrants and jailers have now been routed and their place has been taken by Jesus Christ.” Erik Herrmann of Concordia Seminary has quipped that at that time Luther’s understanding of the gospel was indeed “a new perspective on Paul.” And so Luther found himself able to say, in the context of a vigorous defense of his view of the Eucharist, “...if Christ remains mine, everything remains mine; of this I am sure.”<sup>9</sup>

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8. Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*, p. 120

9. This affirmation about the centrality of Christ Luther made in the context of a vigorous argument for his view on the meaning of *Hoc Est Corpus Meum* in the Eucharist. *Luther’s Works*, Volume 37, p. 103

# INTRODUCTION TO LUTHER'S NINETY-FIVE THESES

BRADFORD LITTLEJOHN

*Excerpted from Davenant's forthcoming Reformation Theology volume.*

Few documents in Christian history have become as iconic as Martin Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*, the ringing denunciation of the corruptions of the late medieval church that was to spark the Protestant Reformation. Luther may or may not have posted them on the church door in Wittenberg (he almost certainly did not nail them, in any case, as later legend would have it), but his dissemination of them on October 31, 1517 marked a turning point not only in Luther's life but in the life of the whole Christian church.

The document itself, however, is an unlikely candidate for the role of revolutionary text or Protestant manifesto: composed chiefly for an academic disputation on a practice now long-forgotten and scarce understood, the theses are a bit bewildering to the modern reader looking for familiar Reformation slogans. Indeed, neither of Luther's two great principles—justification by faith alone and the authority of Scripture alone—are to be found in these pages, even though the former had already begun to influence Luther's thinking and underlies several of his concerns in the *Theses*.

Judged by the standard of Luther's later work (even his writings from two or three years later), the *Theses* are fairly conservative, and Luther hardly expected them to unleash a full-scale reconception of Christian theology and division of the church. Luther here is not so much interested in overthrowing the whole penitential system of the Catholic Church as he is in purifying it from obvious abuses, and he continues to accept many of the Pope's claims of authority. Indeed, in *Theses* 80-90 he says that one of his chief concerns is to defend the honor of the Pope against the easy attacks to which the careless teaching of the indulgence preachers had exposed him.

On the other hand, it is easy to downplay too much the significance of the *Theses*. Luther was not, after all, just a random and inconsequential monk, as the Pope and his advisors were to try and dismiss him; he was at this time one of the highest-ranking leaders of the Augustinian Order in Germany and an increasingly renowned professor at one of its leading universities. Moreover, Luther did not compose the *Theses* on a whim; he had been long wrestling over the indulgences issue and was well aware that by attacking the practice, he would likely be earning himself some very powerful enemies. Finally, although theses were normally composed for academic disputations only, Luther seems to have intended these at the outset for a wider audience.

As scholar Timothy J. Wengert notes, the *Theses* are full of rhetorical flourishes that suggest Luther wanted to reach and persuade many educated readers, and very unusually for such theses, Luther from the first invited scholars from around Germany to respond to the theses in writing. Indeed, there does not ever seem to have been an academic disputation in Wittenberg as would normally have followed the proposal of such theses. Most striking of all, Luther took the extraordinary step of sending the *Theses* to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, the leading church authority in Germany, and exhorting him in no uncertain terms to restrain the indulgence preachers.

So who were these indulgence preachers and why was Luther so upset about them? The answer sheds light both on the astonishing depth of the corruption in the late medieval church and on the often misunderstood heart of Luther's protest against it.



ANONYMOUS. JOHANN TETZEL: THE SELLING OF INDULGENCES

The theology and practice of indulgences had been around for centuries, although it had gotten increasingly out of hand in the decades leading up to 1517. At its root lay a long medieval distinction between guilt and punishment: although true repentance of sins and confession to a priest could give the believer absolution from *guilt* and therefore from hellfire, sin still demanded some kind of temporal punishment. Some of this punishment could be handled by taking penitential actions prescribed by the priest,

but much of it would remain to be exacted after death. Accordingly, the medieval church came to increasingly teach the doctrine of purgatory, a place where the faithful must undergo a term (perhaps even hundreds of thousands of years) of purifying torment before they could enter heaven. But, there was some good news. By doing certain holy acts, like participating in or helping pay for a Crusade, Christians could receive an "indulgence" from the Pope, shortening their time in purgatory or perhaps even skipping it altogether. Eventually, recognizing in indulgences a potentially immense source of revenue, later popes began offering them for money more often than for good deeds, and needing to continue to expand the market to keep the revenues flowing, they started allowing the faithful to buy indulgences for their dead relatives already in purgatory.

Johann Tetzel's indulgence campaign that prompted Luther's protest in 1517, though, was an extraordinary illustration of the corruption that came from mixing such absolute spiritual power with the wide-reaching worldly power of the late medieval church. Ostensibly ordered to help finance the construction of St. Peter's basilica in Rome,

much of the money actually went into the coffers of Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. Albrecht needed it in order to repay the Fugger banking family for the immense debts he had contracted from them in order to buy from the Pope the most powerful church office in Germany at the age of 23. Since the most enthusiastic buyers of indulgences were the uneducated and gullible poor, Tetzel's indulgence campaign constituted an extraordinary redistribution of wealth upward from the poorest to the richest in Christendom.

Such exploitation of the poor infuriated Luther, and in thesis 45, he decries those who, instead of helping the needy, as Christ commanded for the truly penitent, spent all their spare money on indulgences. More fundamentally, though, Luther worried that indulgences were a form of cheap grace, a way for people to purchase false security for their souls without truly facing the depth of their sin and repenting from the heart. The earlier distinction between guilt and punishment had been thoroughly blurred so that indulgences had in the minds of the public, encouraged by salesmen like Tetzel, become a substitute

for true repentance, purchasing freedom from guilt as well as punishment. This point is key to grasp, given how readily Luther's gospel of salvation by faith alone is often distorted. Luther's concern with the late medieval church was less that it had made salvation too hard (by endless works rather than simple faith) and more that it had made salvation too easy (by thoughtless outward works or transactions rather than heartfelt repentance, being crucified with Christ). The real gospel of Christ, charged Luther, was both much more serious, more frightening, and more liberating than the spiritual economy the popes had created to fill their own coffers.

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# MARTIN LUTHER'S NINETY-FIVE THESES

TRANSLATED BY C.M. JACOBS

*Excerpted from Davenant's forthcoming Reformation Theology volume.*

Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter.

In the Name our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said *Poenitentiam agite*, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.
3. Yet it means not inward repentance only; nay, there is no inward repentance which does not outwardly work divers mortifications of the flesh.
4. The penalty [of sin], therefore, continues so long as hatred of self continues; for this is the true inward repentance, and continues until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.
5. The pope does not intend to remit, and cannot remit any penalties other than those which he has imposed either by his own authority or by that of the Canons.
6. The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring that it has been remitted by God and by assenting to God's remission; though, to be sure, he may grant remission in cases reserved to his judgment. If his right to grant remission in such cases were despised, the guilt would remain entirely unforgiven.
7. God remits guilt to no one whom He does not, at the same time,

- humble in all things and bring into subjection to His vicar, the priest.
8. The penitential canons are imposed only on the living, and, according to them, nothing should be imposed on the dying.
9. Therefore the Holy Spirit in the pope is kind to us, because in his decrees he always makes exception of the article of death and of necessity.
10. Ignorant and wicked are the doings of those priests who, in the case of the dying, reserve canonical penances for purgatory.
11. This changing of the canonical penalty to the penalty of purgatory is quite evidently one of the tares that were sown while the bishops slept.
12. In former times the canonical penalties were imposed not after, but before absolution, as tests of true contrition.
13. The dying are freed by death from all penalties; they are already dead to canonical rules, and have a right to be released from them.
14. The imperfect health [of soul], that is to say, the imperfect love, of the dying brings with it, of necessity, great fear; and the smaller the love, the greater is the fear.
15. This fear and horror is sufficient of itself alone (to say nothing of other things) to constitute the penalty of purgatory, since it is very near to the horror of despair.
16. Hell, purgatory, and heaven seem to differ as do despair, almost-despair, and the assurance of safety.
17. With souls in purgatory it seems necessary that horror should grow less and love increase.
18. It seems unproved, either by reason or Scripture, that they are outside the state of merit, that is to say, of increasing love.
19. Again, it seems unproved that they, or at least that all of them, are certain or assured of their own blessedness, though we may be quite certain of it.

20. Therefore by “full remission of all penalties” the pope means not actually “of all,” but only of those imposed by himself.

21. Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope’s indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved;

22. Whereas he remits to souls in purgatory no penalty which, according to the canons, they would have had to pay in this life.

23. If it is at all possible to grant to any one the remission of all penalties whatsoever, it is certain that this remission can be granted only to the most perfect, that is, to the very fewest.

24. It must needs be, therefore, that the greater part of the people are deceived by that indiscriminate and high sounding promise of release from penalty.

25. The power which the pope has, in a general way, over purgatory, is just like the power which any bishop or curate has, in a special way, within his own diocese or parish.

26. The pope does well when he grants remission to souls [in purgatory], not by the power of the keys (which he does not possess), but by way of intercession.

27. They preach man who say that so soon as the penny jingles into the money-box, the soul flies out [of purgatory].

28. It is certain that when the penny jingles into the money-box, gain and avarice can be increased, but the result of the intercession of the Church is in the power of God alone.

29. Who knows whether all the souls in purgatory wish to be bought out of it, as in the legend of Sts. Severinus and Paschal.

30. No one is sure that his own contrition is sincere; much less that he has attained full remission.

31. Rare as is the man that is truly penitent, so rare is also the man who truly buys indulgences, i.e., such men are most rare.

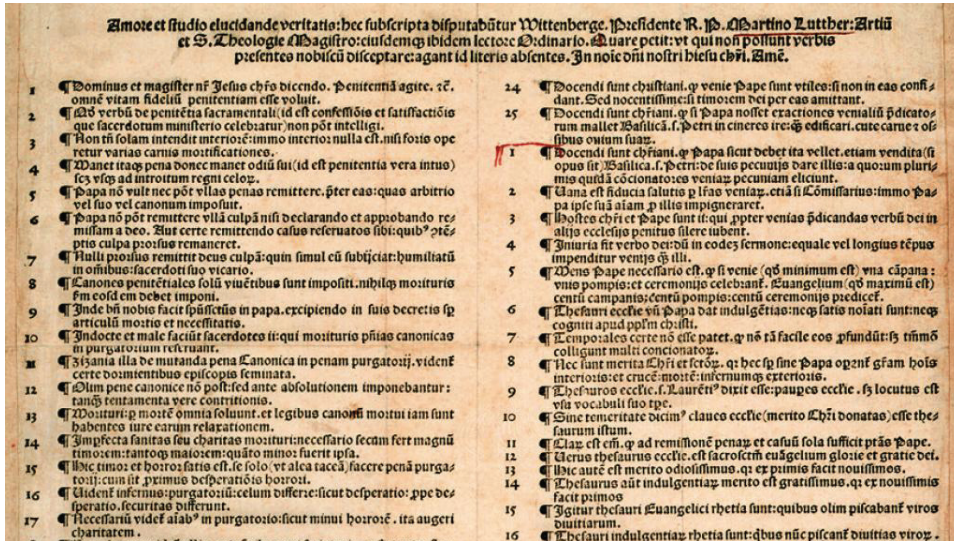
32. They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon.

33. Men must be on their guard against those who say that the pope’s pardons are that inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to Him;

34. For these “graces of pardon” concern only the penalties of sacramental satisfaction, and these are appointed by man.

35. They preach no Christian doctrine who teach that contrition is not necessary in those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessionals.

36. Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.



HELL, PURGATORY, AND HEAVEN SEEM TO DIFFER THE SAME AS  
DESPAIR, FEAR, AND ASSURANCE OF SALVATION.

37. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has part in all the blessings of Christ and the Church; and this is granted him by God, even without letters of pardon.

38. Nevertheless, the remission and participation [in the blessings of the Church] which are granted by the pope are in no way to be despised, for they are, as I have said, the declaration of divine remission.

39. It is most difficult, even for the very keenest theologians, at one and the same time to commend to the people the abundance of pardons and [the need of] true contrition.

40. True contrition seeks and loves penalties, but liberal pardons only relax penalties and cause them to be hated, or at least, furnish an occasion [for hating them].

41. Apostolic pardons are to be preached with caution, lest the people may falsely think them preferable to other good works of love.

42. Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend the buying of pardons to be compared in any way to works of mercy.

43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons;

44. Because love grows by works of love, and man becomes better; but by pardons man does not grow better, only more free from penalty.

45. Christians are to be taught that he who sees a man in need, and passes him by, and gives [his money] for pardons, purchases not the indulgences of the pope, but the indignation of God.

46. Christians are to be taught that unless they have more than they need, they are bound to keep back what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on pardons.

47. Christians are to be taught that the buying of pardons is a matter of free will, and not of commandment.

48. Christians are to be taught that the pope, in granting pardons, needs, and therefore desires, their devout prayer for him more than the money they bring.

49. Christians are to be taught that the pope’s pardons are useful, if they do not put their trust in them; but altogether harmful, if through them they lose their fear of God.

50. Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the pardon-preachers, he would rather that St. Peter’s church should go to ashes, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep.

51. Christians are to be taught that it would be the pope’s wish, as it is his duty, to give of his own money to very many of those from whom certain hawkers of pardons cajole money, even though the church of St. Peter might have to be sold.

52. The assurance of salvation by letters of pardon is vain, even though

the commissary, nay, even though the pope himself, were to stake his soul upon it.

53. They are enemies of Christ and of the pope, who bid the Word of God be altogether silent in some Churches, in order that pardons may be preached in others.

54. Injury is done the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or a longer time is spent on pardons than on this Word.

55. It must be the intention of the pope that if pardons, which are a very small thing, are celebrated with one bell, with single processions and ceremonies, then the Gospel, which is the very greatest thing, should be preached with a hundred bells, a hundred processions, a hundred ceremonies.

56. The “treasures of the Church,” out of which the pope grants indulgences, are not sufficiently named or known among the people of Christ.

57. That they are not temporal treasures is certainly evident, for many of the vendors do not pour out such treasures so easily, but only gather them.

58. Nor are they the merits of Christ and the Saints, for even without the pope, these always work grace for the inner man, and the cross, death, and hell for the outward man.

59. St. Lawrence said that the treasures of the Church were the Church’s poor, but he spoke according to the usage of the word in his own time.

60. Without rashness we say that the keys of the Church, given by Christ’s merit, are that treasure;

61. For it is clear that for the remission of penalties and of reserved cases, the power of the pope is of itself sufficient.

62. The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.

63. But this treasure is naturally most odious, for it makes the first to be last.

64. On the other hand, the treasure of indulgences is naturally most acceptable, for it makes the last to be first.

65. Therefore the treasures of the Gospel are nets with which they formerly were wont to fish for men of riches.

66. The treasures of the indulgences are nets with which they now fish for the riches of men.

67. The indulgences which the preachers cry as the “greatest graces” are known to be truly such, in so far as they promote gain.

68. Yet they are in truth the very smallest graces compared with the grace of God and the piety of the Cross.

69. Bishops and curates are bound to admit the commissaries of apostolic pardons, with all reverence.

70. But still more are they bound to strain all their eyes and attend with all their ears, lest these men preach their own dreams instead of the commission of the pope.

71. He who speaks against the truth of apostolic pardons, let him be anathema and accursed!

72. But he who guards against the lust and license of the pardon-preachers, let him be blessed!

73. The pope justly thunders against those who, by any art, contrive the injury of the traffic in pardons.

74. But much more does he intend to thunder against those who use the pretext of pardons to contrive the injury of holy love and truth.

75. To think the papal pardons so great that they could absolve a man even if he had committed an impossible sin and violated the Mother of God—this is madness.

76. We say, on the contrary, that the papal pardons are not able to

remove the very least of venial sins, so far as its guilt is concerned.

77. It is said that even St. Peter, if he were now pope, could not bestow greater graces; this is blasphemy against St. Peter and against the pope.

78. We say, on the contrary, that even the present pope, and any pope at all, has greater graces at his disposal; to wit, the Gospel, powers, gifts of healing, etc., as it is written in I Corinthians xii.

79. To say that the cross, emblazoned with the papal arms, which is set up [by the preachers of indulgences], is of equal worth with the Cross of Christ, is blasphemy.

80. The bishops, curates and theologians who allow such talk to be spread among the people, will have an account to render.

81. This unbridled preaching of pardons makes it no easy matter, even for learned men, to rescue the reverence due to the pope from slander, or even from the shrewd questionings of the laity.

82. To wit:—“Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial.”

83. Again:—“Why are mortuary and anniversary masses for the dead continued, and why does he not return or permit the withdrawal of the endowments founded on their behalf, since it is wrong to pray for the redeemed?”

84. Again:—“What is this new piety of God and the pope, that for money they allow a man who is impious and their enemy to buy out of purgatory the pious soul of a friend of God, and do not rather, because of that pious and beloved soul’s own need, free it for pure love’s sake?”

85. Again:—“Why are the penitential canons long since in actual fact and through disuse abrogated and dead, now satisfied by the granting of indulgences, as though they were still alive and in force?”

86. Again:—“Why does not the pope, whose wealth is to-day greater than the riches of the richest, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?”

87. Again:—“What is it that the pope remits, and what participation does he grant to those who, by perfect contrition, have a right to full remission and participation?”

88. Again:—“What greater blessing could come to the Church than if the pope were to do a hundred times a day what he now does once, and bestow on every believer these remissions and participations?”

89. “Since the pope, by his pardons, seeks the salvation of souls rather than money, why does he suspend the indulgences and pardons granted heretofore, since these have equal efficacy?”

90. To repress these arguments and scruples of the laity by force alone, and not to resolve them by giving reasons, is to expose the Church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies, and to make Christians unhappy.

91. If, therefore, pardons were preached according to the spirit and mind of the pope, all these doubts would be readily resolved; nay, they would not exist.

92. Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, “Peace, peace,” and there is no peace!

93. Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, “Cross, cross,” and there is no cross!

94. Christians are to be exhorted that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell;

95. And thus be confident of entering into heaven rather through many tribulations, than through the assurance of peace.

# LUTHER AS A SPIRITUAL ADVISER: THE INTERFACE OF THEOLOGY AND PIETY IN LUTHER'S DEVOTIONAL WRITINGS,

BY DENNIS NGIEN

WIPF & STOCK, 2007

REVIEW BY IAN CLARY

In his 2007 book *Luther as a Spiritual Adviser*, Dennis Ngien provides a scholarly yet accessible contribution to our understanding of Martin Luther as a pastor and spiritual counsellor. In its pages readers do not encounter the Luther of Worms, resisting the Holy Roman Emperor, nor the Luther of the Wartburg, casting inkwells at the devil. Instead, we find the Luther of the Stadtkirche, a model pastor who offered cross-centered care to his flock in their variety of trials.

Dennis Ngien is well suited to this task. He is Professor of Systematic Theology at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto, Canada. He is also the founder of the Centre for Mentorship and Theological Reflection, a ministry that focuses on the interface between theology and piety in the life of the church. The book under review functions as a kind of post-script to his earlier published doctoral work on Luther's theology of the cross. Here, as a theologian of the cross, Luther the pastor applies the comforts of the crucified and resurrected Christ to suffering Christians. Ngien has since continued his project of Luther and cruciform comfort in a work on Luther and the lament Psalms. The three books together provide a theological, biblical, and practical account of how Luther understood the relevance of the cross for the Christian life.

*Luther as a Spiritual Adviser* is divided into six chapters, each treating an aspect of the reformer's spirituality as applied in the church. The first chapter grounds Luther's spirituality in Christ, the "earnest mirror," as described in *Meditation on Christ's Passion* from 1519. The second, titled "The Art of Dying," offers a summary of Luther's advice on how to prepare for death, more of which in a moment. Chapter Three is on Luther's meditations on evil and the blessings found in the balance between Word and Spirit. In the fourth chapter, Ngien focuses on Luther's description of the Eucharist as "sacramental piety." Chapter Five is devoted to Luther's teaching on prayer. And the final chapter is on the cross as a "method of comfort."

This brief sketch of the book's arrangement will point towards its focus on Luther's practical spirituality. Luther was, Ngien explains,

a spiritual advisor in many important areas of the Christian life: how to meditate aright on Christ's passion; how to prepare to face the terror of death; advice for the sick; how to approach the sacrament of the altar correctly; why and how to pray aright; the benefits to be gained from the Lord's Prayer; and how to live out a life of discipleship under the cross. (xvii-xviii)

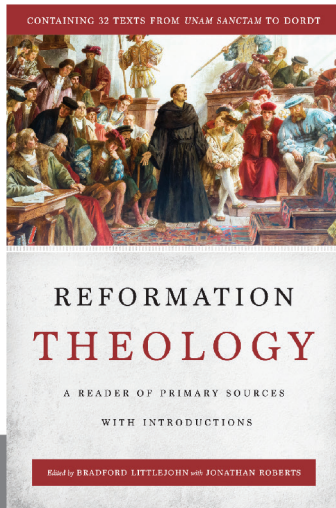
This picture of Luther highlights his role as a pastor of great use for Christians involved in day-to-day ministry as well as those struggling through personal suffering. The broad strokes of his biography demonstrate that Luther was no stranger to suffering both pastorally and personally. In a day of archaic medical practices and higher death rates it was common to find distressed people looking to the church for solace. Thus the practical benefit of Ngien's book is to see how Luther pointed to Christ as a source of solace. To take one example from the many that Ngien highlights, we see the depth of wisdom in Luther's counsel to the dying, one of the hardest aspects of a minister's work. Luther's *Sermon on Preparing to Die* (1519) was written to comfort a local landowner who was plagued with fears of death. Luther "described various strategies to prepare for death which should strengthen the sufferer's conscience against the temptation to despair in the final hour ... Luther sought to inculcate pastorally the benefits Christ has acquired by the cross and through the resurrection, if we only believe" (29).

Christians are to "contemplate Christ, the 'glowing picture'" when facing death (33). "Christ's death is the chief object of meditation" (33). After thinking on the dying and resurrected Christ himself, Luther advises the Christian to consider sin and hell and be reminded that Christ "objectively gained victory over the images of death" (35).



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Though the experience of death can be fearful, its final end is to enter into that victory that Christ obtained for us. Moreover, this kind of contemplation was not meant to be experienced alone, as it too often is, but should take place within the “community of the saints” (38). Thus we have an example of Luther’s ecclesial approach to counsel; so much for Luther the individualist. This is but one example of the wisdom to be found in Luther’s spiritual writings, and Ngien has done an admirable job in distilling and applying all of them.

Though Ngien’s writing is clear and even a person with little background knowledge of Luther would not get lost, there is theological terminology to be grappled with. A simple example: readers learn that when Luther spoke of Christ’s death as *pro nobis* we learn of the depths of Christ being “for us.” The specialist jargon is there, but Ngien handles it in such a way he adds affective depth to these phrases. The terminology does not bog the reader down, nor make the book

only fit for experts, but rather enriches our understanding of Luther’s pastoral and theological thought.

As a contribution to Luther scholarship, *Luther as a Spiritual Advisor* serves an important role, showing him as not just reformer and theologian, but as pastor. And, surprisingly, it turns out to be a work of practical devotion: a book that feeds the soul. It is therefore a book that students of Luther and students of spirituality will want to read. More importantly, pastors who earnestly seek to meld theology with piety and offer godly counsel to the flock should consider the words of Martin Luther— with Dennis Ngien as reliable guide.

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