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THE NINETY-FIVE THESES IN THEIR THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

"A poor peasant's son, then a diligent student, an humble monk, and, finally, a modest, industrious scholar, Martin Luther had already exceeded the half of the life-time allotted to him, when—certainly with the decision characteristic of him, but with all the reserve imposed by his position in life and the immediate purpose of his action—he determined to subject the religious conceptions which lay at the basis of the indulgence-usages of the time to an examination in academic debate." This singularly comprehensive and equally singularly accurate statement of Paul Kalkoff's is worth quoting because it places us at once at the right point of view for forming an estimate of the Ninety-Five Theses which Luther, in prosecution of the purpose thus intimated, posted on the door of the Castle-Church at Wittenberg on the fateful October 31, 1517. It sets clearly before us the Luther who posted the Theses. It was—as he describes himself, indeed, in their heading—Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Theology, Ordinary Professor of Theology in the University of Wittenberg. And it indicates to us with equal clearness the nature of the document which he posted. It consists of heads for a discussion designed to elucidate the truth with respect to the subject with which it deals—as again Luther himself tells us in its heading. We have to do here in a word with an academic document, prepared by an academic teacher, primarily for an academic purpose. All that the Theses were to become grows out of this fundamental fact. We have to reckon, of course, with the manner of man this Professor of Theology was; with the conception he held of the

function of the University in the social organism; with the zeal for the truth which consumed him. But in doing so we must not permit to fall out of sight that it is with a hard-working Professor of Theology, in the prosecution of his proper academical work that we have to do in these Theses. And above everything we must not forget the precise matter which the Theses bring into discussion; this was, as Kalkoff accurately describes it, the religious conceptions which lay at the basis of the indulgence-traffic.

Failure to bear these things fully in mind has resulted in much confusion. It is probably responsible for the absurd statement of A. Plummer to the effect that "Luther began with a mere protest against the sale of indulgences by disreputable persons." One would have thought a mere glance at the document would have rendered such an assertion impossible; although it is scarcely more absurd than Philip Schaff's remark that the Theses do "not protest against indulgences but only against their abuse"—which Plummer elaborates into: "Luther did not denounce the whole system of indulgences: he never disputed that the Church has power to remit the penalties which it has imposed in the form of penances to be performed in this world." To treat the whole system of indulgences, as proclaimed at the time, as an abuse of the ancient custom of relaxing, on due cause, imposed penances, is to attack the whole system with a vengeance.

The general lack of discernment with which the Theses have been read is nothing less than astonishing. It is not easy to understand, for instance, how T. M. Lindsay could have been led to say that they are "singularly unlike what might have been expected from a professional theologian". He instances a "lack of precise theological definition and of logical arrangement". He speaks of them as simply unordered sledge-hammer blows directed against an ecclesiastical abuse: as such utterances as were natural to a man in close touch with the people, who, shocked at the reports of what the pardon-sellers had said, wished to contradict

some of the statements which had been made in their defence. One does not know how Lindsay would expect a professional theologian to write. But certainly these Theses lack neither in profundity of theological insight nor in the strictest logical development of their theme. They constitute, in point of fact, a theological document of the first importance, working out a complete and closely knit argument against, not the abuses of the indulgence traffic, and not even the theory of indulgences, merely, but the whole sacerdotal conception of the saving process,—an outgrowth and embodiment of which indulgences were. The popular aspects of the matter are reserved to the end of the document, and are presented there, not for their own sake, but as ancillary arguments for the theological conclusion aimed at. E. Bratke is right in insisting on the distinctively theological character of the Theses: they were, he says truly, "a scientific attempt at a theological examination"; and Luther's object in publishing them was a clearly positive one. "Not abuses," says Bratke rightly, "nor the doctrine of penance, but the doctrine of the acquisition of salvation, it was, for which Luther seized his weapons in his own interests and in the interests of Christianity."

Bernhard Bess may supply us, however, with our typical example of how the Theses should not be dealt with. He wishes to vindicate a Reformatory importance for them; but he has difficulty in discovering it. They do not look very important at first sight, he says. Everybody who reads them for the first time has a feeling of disappointment with them. Even theologians well acquainted with the theological language of the times have trouble in forming a clear notion of what they are about—what they deny, what they affirm. The few plain and distinct propositions as to the true penitence of a Christian and the forgiveness of sins, are buried beneath a mass of timid inquiries, of assertions scarcely made before they are half-recalled, of sentences which sound more like bon-mots than the well-weighed words of an academical teacher, of citations which

only too clearly betray themselves as mere padding. Everything is found here except the clear, thoroughly pondered and firmly grounded declarations of a man who knows what he is at. Naturally, in these circumstances, it has proved difficult for others to discover what Luther had it in mind here to say. A layman, on first reading these propositions, will understand little more than that the abuses with which the preaching of indulgences was accompanied, are here condemned. There have been learned theologians who have seen so little in them, that they have felt compelled to seek the motive for their publication outside of them. Catholics have found it in the jealousy of the Augustinian monk of the Dominican Tetzel; or in the fear that the indulgences offered by Tetzel should put out of countenance those connected with the Castle-Church at Wittenberg and its host of relics. Protestants have been driven back upon the notion that Luther is assaulting only the gross abuses of Tetzel's preaching—abuses which, however, better knowledge shows did not exist: Tetzel did not exceed his commission. Compelled to go behind Tetzel, A. W. Dieckhoff finds the ground of Luther's assault on indulgences in the rise of the doctrine of attrition by which all earnestness in repentance was destroyed and sin and salvation had come to be looked upon so lightly that moral seriousness was in danger of perishing out of the earth. Others, of whom Bess himself is one, call attention rather to the difference between indulgences in general and the Jubilee indulgences: the Jubilee indulgences alone are attacked by Luther—the Jubilee indulgences which had become a new sacrament, as John of Paltz declares, and a new sacrament of such power as to threaten to absorb into itself the whole saving function of the Church, and to substitute itself for the Gospel, for the cross.

We are moving here, no doubt, on the right track, but we are moving on too narrow-gauged a road, and we are not moving far enough. We must distinguish between the immediate occasion of Luther's protest and its real motive

and purport. The immediate occasion was, no doubt Tetzel's preaching of the Jubilee indulgences in his neighborhood. But what Luther was led to do was to call in question, not merely the abuses which accompanied this particular instance of the proclamation of the Jubilee indulgences, or which were accustomed to accompany their proclamation; and not merely the peculiarities of the Jubilee indulgences among indulgences; and not even merely the whole theory of indulgences; but the entire prevalent theory of the relation of the Church as the institute of salvation to the salvation of souls. Thus the Theses become not merely an anti-indulgence proclamation but an anti-sacerdotal proclamation. And therein consists their importance as a Reformation act. Luther might have repelled all the abuses which had grown up about the preaching of indulgences and have remained a good Papalist. He might have rejected the Jubilee indulgences, *in toto,* and indeed the whole theory of indulgences as it had developed itself in the Church since the thirteenth century, and remained a good Catholic. But he hewed more closely to the line than that. He called in question the entire basis of the Catholic system and came forward in opposition to it, as an Evangelical.

That this could be the result of a series of Theses called out in opposition to the preaching of Jubilee indulgences is in part due to the very peculiarity of these indulgences. They included in themselves the sacrament of penance; and their rejection, not in circumstantials only but in principle, included in itself the repudiation of the conception of salvation of which the sacrament of penance was the crown. When Luther affirmed, in Theses 36 and 37, the culminating Theses of the whole series: "Every truly contrite Christian has plenary remission from punishment and guilt due to him, even without letters of pardon. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has a share given to him by God in all the benefits of Christ and the Church, even without letters of pardon",—there is included in these

"letters of pardon", expressly declared unnecessary, the whole sacerdotal machinery of salvation; and Luther is asserting salvation apart from this machinery as normal salvation. Reducing the ecclesiastical part in salvation to a purely ministerial and declaratory one, he sets the sinful soul nakedly face to face with its God and throws it back immediately on His free mercy for its salvation.

The significance of the Theses as a Reformation act emerges thus in this: that they are a bold, an astonishingly bold, and a powerful, an astonishingly powerful, assertion of the evangelical doctrine of salvation, embodied in a searching, well-compacted, and thoroughly wrought-out refutation of the sacerdotal conception, as the underlying foundation on which the edifice of the indulgence-traffic was raised. This is what Walther Köhler means when he declares that we must recognize this as the fundamental idea of Luther's Theses: "the emancipation of the believer from the tutelage of the ecclesiastical institute"; and adds, "Thus God advances for him into the foreground; He alone is Lord of death and life; and to the Church falls the modest role of agent of God on earth—only there and nowhere else." "The most far-reaching consequences flowed from this", he continues: "Luther smote the Pope on his crown and simply obliterated his high pretensions with reference to the salvation of souls in this world and the next, and in their place set God and the soul in a personal communion which in its whole intercourse bears the stamp of interiorness and spirituality." Julius Köstlin puts the whole matter with his accustomed clearness and balance—though with a little wider reference than the Theses themselves—when he describes the advance in Luther's testimony marked by the Indulgence controversy thus: "As he had up to this time proclaimed salvation in Christ through faith, in opposition to all human merit, so he now proclaims it in opposition to an external human ecclesiasticism and priesthood, whose acts are represented as conditioning the imparting of salvation itself and as in and of themselves, even without

faith, effecting salvation for those in whose interests they were performed."

How, in these circumstances, Philip Schaff can say of the Theses, "They were more Catholic than Protestant", passes comprehension. He does, no doubt, add on the next page, "The form only is Romish; the spirit and aim are Protestant"; but that is an inadequate correction. They are nothing less than, to speak negatively, an anti-sacerdotal, to speak positively, an evangelical manifesto. There are "remainders of Romanism" in them, to be sure, for Luther had not worked his way yet to the periphery of his system of thought. These "remainders of Romanism" led him in after years to speak of himself as at this time still involved in the great superstition of the Roman tyranny (1520), and even as a mad papist, so sunk in the Pope's dogmas that he was ready to murder any one who refused obedience to the Pope (1545). But these strong expressions witness rather to the horror with which he had come to look upon everything that was papist than do justice to the stage of his developing Protestantism which he had reached in 1517. The remainders of Romanism imbedded in the Theses are, after all, very few and very slight. Luther was not yet ready to reject indulgences in every sense. He still believed in a purgatory. He still had a great reverence for the organized Church; put a high value on the priestly function; and honored the Pope as the head of the ecclesiastical order. It is even possible to draw out from the Theses, indeed, some sentences which, in isolation, may appear startlingly Romish. We have in mind here such, for example, as the sixty-ninth, seventy-first and seventy-third. It is to be observed that these are consecutive odd numbers. That is because they are mere protases, preparing the way, each for a ringing apodosis in which the gravamen of the assertion lies.

Luther has reached the stage in his argument here where he has the crying abuses connected with the preaching of indulgences in view. He declares, to be sure, "It is incum-

bent on bishops and curates to receive the commissaries of the apostolical pardons with all reverence." But that is only that he may add with the more force: "But much more is it incumbent on them to see to it with all their eyes and to take heed to it with all their ears that these men do not preach their own dreams instead of the commission of the Pope." He proclaims, it is true, "He who speaks against the truth of apostolic pardons, let him be anathema and accursed." But that is only to give zest to the contrast: "But he who exerts himself against the wantonness and license of speech of the preacher of pardons, let him be blessed." If he allows that "the Pope justly fulminates against those who use any kind of machinations to the injury of the traffic in pardons", that is only that he may add: "Much more does he intend to fulminate against those who under pretext of pardons use machinations to the injury of holy charity and truth." If Luther seems in these statements to allow the validity of indulgences, that must be set down to the fault of his antithetical rhetoric rather than of his doctrine. These protases are really of the nature of rhetorical concessions, and are meant to serve only as hammers to drive home the contrary assertions of his apodoses. Luther has already reduced valid indulgences to the relaxation of ecclesiastical penances, and curbed the Pope's power with reference to the remission of sin to a purely declaratory function. "The Pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties, except those which he has imposed by his own authority or by that of the Canons. The Pope has no power to remit any guilt except by declaring and approbating it to have been remitted by God." These two Theses cut up sacerdotalism by the roots.

We must be wary, too, lest we be misled by Luther's somewhat artificial use of his terms. He persistently means by "indulgences", "pardons", not the indulgences which actually existed in the world in which he lived—which he held to be gross corruptions of the only real indulgences—

but such indulgences as he was willing to admit to be valid, that is to say relaxations of ecclesiastically imposed penances; and he repeatedly speaks so as to imply that it is these which the Pope really intends—or at least in the judgment of charity ought to be assumed really to intend—by all the indulgences which he commissions. Even more persistently he means by "the Pope", not the Pope as he actually was, but the Pope as he should be; that is to say, a "public person" representing and practically identical with the ecclesiastical Canons. Thus, when he declares in the ninety-second Thesis that "it is not the mind of the Pope that the buying of pardons is comparable to works of mercy", he explains in his *Resolutions* (1518) that what he really means is that the Canons do not put the two on a par. "I understand the Pope," he says, "as a public person, that is, as he speaks through the Canons: there are no Canons which declare that the value of indulgences is comparable to that of works of mercy." At an earlier point he had said with great distinctness (on Thesis 26), "I am not in the least moved by what is pleasing or displeasing to the supreme Pontiff. He is a man like other men; there have been many supreme Pontiffs who were pleased not only with errors and vices but even with the most monstrous things. I hearken to the Pope as Pope; that is when he speaks in the Canons and speaks according to the Canons, or when he determines with a Council: but not when he speaks according to his own head—for I do not wish to be compelled to say, with some whose knowledge of Christ is defective, that the horrible deeds of blood committed by Julius II against the Christian people were the good deeds of a pious pastor done to Christ's sheep." The Pope to Luther was thus an administrative officer: not precisely what we should call a responsible ruler, but rather what we should speak of as a limited executive. The distinction he draws is not between the Pope speaking *ex cathedra* and in his own private capacity; it is rather between the Pope speaking of himself and according to his mandate. Only when the Pope spoke ac-

cording to his mandate was he the Pope, and Luther repeatedly in the Theses ascribes to the "Pope" what he found in the Canons, and denies to the "Pope" what the actual Pope was saying and doing, because it was not in the Canons. To him the Pope was not so much authoritative as what was authoritative was "the Pope".

What Luther found it hardest to separate himself from in the Catholic system, was the authoritative ministration of the priest, God's representative, to weak and trembling souls. The strength and purity of the evangelicalism of the Theses is manifested in nothing more decisively than in their clear proclamation of the dependence of the soul for salvation on the mere grace of God alone. But Luther could not escape from the feeling that, in some way, the priest had an intermediating part to play in the application of this salvation. This feeling finds its expression particularly in Thesis 7: "God never remits guilt to anyone at all, except at the same time He subjects him, humbled in all things, to the priest, His vicar." In the exposition of this Thesis in the *Resolutions* he has much ado to discover an essential part in salvation for the priest to play. When the dust clears away, what he has to say is seen to reduce to this: "The remission of God, therefore, works grace, but the remission of the priest, peace." We may be saved without the priest, but we need his ministration to know that we are saved. The awakened sinner, by virtue of the very fact that he is awakened, cannot believe that he—even he—is forgiven, and needs the intermediation of God's representative, the priest, to assure him of it. The mischief is that Luther is inclined, if not to confuse, yet to join together these two things, and to treat salvation itself as therefore not quite accomplished until it is wrought *in foro conscientiae* as well as *in foro coeli.* "The remission of sin and the donation of grace is not enough," he says, "but there is necessary also the belief that it is remitted." It makes no difference to him, he says, whether you say that the priest is the *sine qua non* or any other kind of cause of the

remission of sin: all that he is exigent for is that it be allowed that in some way or other the priestly absolution is concerned in the remission of sin and guilt.

He will have, however, no *opus operatum;* and despite this magnifying of the part of absolution in salvation, he puts the priest firmly in his place, as a mere minister. It is after all not the priest, by virtue of any powers he may possess, but the man's own faith which in his absolution brings him remission. "For you will have only so much peace," he declares, "as you have faith in the words of Him who promised, 'whatsoever you loose, &c.' For our peace is Christ, but in faith. If anyone does not believe this word, he may be absolved a million times by the Pope himself, and confess to the whole world, and he will never come to rest." "Forgiveness depends not on the priest but on the word of Christ; the priest may be acting for the sake of gain or of honor—do you but seek without hypocrisy for forgiveness and believe Christ who has given you His promise, and even though it be of mere frivolity that he absolves you, you nevertheless will receive forgiveness from your faith . . . your faith receives it wholly. So great a thing is the word of Christ, and faith in it." "Accordingly it is through faith that we are justified, through faith also that we are brought to peace,—not through works, penances or confession." There is no lack even here, therefore, of the note of salvation by pure grace through faith alone. There is only an effort to place the actual experience of salvation in some real connection with the ministrations of the Church. And underlying this there is a tendency to confuse salvation itself with the assurance of it. Both these points of view lived on in the Lutheran churches.

The part played, in the line of thought just reviewed, by Luther's conception of evangelical repentance ought not to be passed over without notice. This conception is in a sense the ruling conception of the Theses. The Christian, according to Luther, is a repentant sinner, and by his very nature as a repentant sinner must suffer continuously the

pangs of repentance. By these pangs he is driven to mortifications of the flesh and becomes even greedy of suffering, which he recognizes as his appropriate life-element. So strong an emphasis does Luther place on suffering as a mark of the Christian life, indeed, that he has been sometimes represented as thinking of it as a good in itself, after the fashion of the mystics. Walther Köhler, for example, cries out, "The whole life a penance! Not only as often as the Church requires it in the confessional, no, the Christian's whole life is to be a great process of dying, 'mortification of the flesh',—up to the soul's leaving in death its bodily house. . . . The mystical warp is visible in this through and through personal religion." This, however, is a misconception. Luther is not dealing with men as men and with essential goods; he is speaking of sinners awakened to a knowledge of their sin, and of their necessary experience under the burden of their consciousness of guilt and pollution. He is giving us not his philosophy of life in the abstract, but his conception specifically of the Christian life. This, he says, is necessarily a life of penitent pain. In the fundamental opening Theses, he already points out that suffering, the suffering of rueful penitence, necessarily belongs to every sinner, so long as he remains a sinner—provided that he remains a repentant sinner. Without this compunction there is no remission of sin (36); with it there is no cessation in this life of suffering. The very process of salvation brings pain: no man, entering into life, can expect anything else for the outer man but "the cross, death, and hell' (58); nor does he seek to escape them, but he welcomes them rather as making for his peace (40, 29). And so, preaching "the piety of the cross" (68), Luther arrives at length at those amazing closing Theses in which, invoking a curse on those who cry, Peace, peace! when there is no peace, and pronouncing a blessing on those who call out, "The cross, the cross!"—though it is no real cross to the children of God—he declares that Christians must strive to follow Christ, their Head, through pains, deaths, and hells,

and only thus to enter heaven through many tribulations,—rather than, he adds, striking at the indulgence-usages, "through the security of peace". There is a note of *imitatio Christi* here, of course; but not in the mystical sense. Rather there speaks here a deep conviction that the Christian life is a battle, a struggle, a strenuous work; and a great cry of outrage at the whole tendency of the indulgence system to ungird the loins, and call men off from the conflict, lulling their consciences into a fatal sleep. Luther is not dreaming here of the purchase of heaven by human suffering or works. He has a Christian man in mind. He is speaking of the path over which one treads, who, in his new life, is journeying to his final bliss. Clearly he does not expect to "lie down" on the grace that saves him. He looks at the Christian life as a life of strenuous moral effort. His brand of "passive" salvation is all activity.

Its lack of moral earnestness was to earnest minds the crowning offence of the system of indulgences. In the midst of a system of work-salvation it had grown up as an expedient by means of which the work might be escaped and the salvation nevertheless secured. The "works" could not, to be sure, be altogether escaped: there must be something to take their place and represent them. That much the underlying idea of work-salvation demanded. That something was money. The experience of young Friedrich Mecum (we know him as Myconius) may instruct us here. As a youth of eighteen he heard Tetzel preach the indulgences in 1510 at Annaberg. He was deeply moved with desire to save his soul. He had no money, but had he not read, posted on the church door, that it was the wish of the holy Father that from now on the indulgences should be sold for a low price and even indeed given gratis to those unable to purchase them? He presented himself at Tetzel's dwelling to make his plea. The high commissary himself he could not see; but the Priests and Confessors in the antechamber pointed out to him that indulgences could not be given, and if given would be worthless. They would bene-

fit only those who stretched out a helping hand. Let him go out and beg from some pious person only so much as a groschen, or six pfennigs—and he could purchase one for that. This was not mere heartlessness. It was intrinsic to the system. An indulgence was a relaxation of penance. and penance was payment: provision might be made for less payment but not for no payment at all. At the bottom of all lies the fundamental notion that salvation must be paid for: it is only a question of the price. Indulgences thus emerge to sight as a scheme to evade one's spiritual and moral debts and to secure eternal felicity at the least possible cost.

We need not insist here on the peculiarities of the Jubilee indulgences with which Luther was most immediately concerned, and the characteristic feature of which was that it included the sacrament of penance within itself. All indulgences in their developed form made a part of the sacerdotal system and worked in with the sacrament of penance: they were not offered to the heathen but to Christians, to men, that is, who had been baptized and had access to the ordinary ghostly ministrations. The fundamental idea embedded in them—of which they are, indeed, the culminating illustration—is that the offices of the Church may be called in not merely to supplement but to take the place of the duties of personal religion and common morality: they thus put the capstone on sacerdotal religiosity. It may be a coarse way of putting it, to say that in this system a man might buy his way into heaven; that he might purchase immunity for sin; that he might even barter for license to sin. But with whatever finessing the direct statement may be avoided, both in theory and practice it amounts to that. Baptism, penance, indulgence—these three provisions taken together provide a method by which a man, through the offices of the church, might escape every evil consequence of his sin, inborn and self-committed; and by the expenditure of only a little ceremonial care and a little money, assure himself of unmerited salvation. He who is baptized

is brought into a state of grace and through penance may maintain himself in grace—and, in the interests at once of the comfort of weak souls and of the power of the Church, the efficacy of penance is exalted, despite the defects of contrition and the substitution for it of mere attrition. Relieved by these offices of the eternal penalties of their sin, indulgences now come in to relieve men of their temporal penalties. Both the eternal and the temporal penalties being gone, guilt need not be bothered with: hell and purgatory having both been abolished, guilt will take care of itself. Thus a baptized man—and all within the pale of the Church are baptized,—by shriving himself, say, every Easter and buying an indulgence or two, makes himself safe. The Church takes care of him throughout, and it costs him nothing but an annual confession and the few coins that rattle in the collection box. Adolf Harnack sums up the matter thus: "Every man who surrenders himself to the Catholic Church . . . can secure salvation from all eternal and temporal penalties—if he act with shrewdness and find a skilful priest."

It was one of the attractions of the indulgences which Tetzel hawked about that they gave the purchaser the right to choose a confessor for himself and required this confessor to absolve him. They thus made his immunity from all punishment sure. Marvellous to say, the vendors of indulgences were not satisfied with thus selling the justice of heaven; they wished to sell the justice of earth, too. Luther, it is true, in a passage in his *Resolutions* denies that "the Pope" "remits civil or rather criminal penalties, inflicted by the civil law", but he adds that "the legates do do this in some places when they are personally present"; and in another place he betrays why he wishes to shield "the Pope" from the onus of this iniquity, saying that "the Pope" cannot be supposed to have the power to remit civil penalties, because in that case "the letters of indulgence will abolish all gibbets and racks throughout the world"—that is to say, would do away altogether with the punishment of

crime. In point of fact the actual as distinguished from Luther's ideal Pope did issue indulgences embodying this precise provision, and those sold by Tetzel were among them. Henry Charles Lea remarks upon them thus: The power to protect from all secular courts "was delegated to the peripatetic vendors of indulgences, who thus carried impunity for crime to every man's door. The St. Peter's indulgences, sold by Tetzel and his colleagues were of this character, and not only released the purchaser from all spiritual penalties but forbade all secular and criminal prosecution. . . . It was fortunate that the Reformation came to prevent the Holy See from rendering all justice, human and divine, a commodity to be sold in the open market."

It is very instructive to observe the superficial resemblance between the language in which the indulgences were commended and that of the evangelical proclamation. Both offered a salvation that the recipient had not earned by his works, but was to receive from the immense mercy of God. "We have been conceived in sin,"—Tetzel's preaching is thus summarized by Julius Köstlin,—"and are wrapped in bonds of sin. It is hard—yes, impossible—to attain salvation without divine help. Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy, God has saved us. Therefore, put on the armor of God." The attractiveness of indulgences arose from this very thing,—that they offered to men relief from the dread of anticipated punishment and reception into bliss, on grounds less onerous than the "works or righteousness" or "merit-making" involved in the ordinary church system. To the superficial view this could be given very much the appearance of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith. In both the pure mercy of God to lost and helpless sinners could be pointed to as the source of the salvation offered. In both the merits of Christ could be pointed to as the ground of the acceptance of the sinner. The Romanists included in their "Treasure" also, it is true, the merits of the saints, and Luther therefore couples the two in Thesis 58, although telling us in his

Resolutions that the saints have no merits to offer, and if they had they would do us no good. It does not go deeply enough to say that the difference between the two proclamations lies in this—that Luther demands for this free salvation faith alone, while Tetzel proposes to hand it over for money down—in accordance with the quip attributed to Cardinal Borgia, that God desires not the death of sinners, but that they shall pay and live. The fundamental difference between the two doctrines is the fundamental difference between evangelicalism and sacerdotalism. Evangelicalism casts man back on God and God only; the faith that it asks of him is faith in God's saving grace in Christ alone. Sacerdotalism throws him into the hands of the Church and asks him to put his confidence in it—or, in the indulgences, very specifically in the Pope. He is to suspend his salvation on what the Pope can do—whether directly by his own power or in the way of suffrage—transfering to his credit the merits of Christ and His saints. This difference is correlated with this further one, that the release offered in the indulgences was from penalty, that sought in evangelicalism very distinctly from guilt. Transposed into positive language, that means that in the one case desire for comfort and happiness holds the mind, in the other a yearning for holiness. The one is non-ethical and must needs bear its fruits as such. The other tingles with ethicism to the finger tips. The mind, freed by its high enthusiasm from debilitating fear of suffering, is fired to unceasing endeavor by a great ambition to be well-pleasing to God. The gulf which separated Luther and the proclamation of indulgences and compelled him to appear in opposition to it was therefore radical and goes down to the roots of the contradictory systems of doctrine. It was not the abuses which accompanied this proclamation which moved him, though they shocked him profoundly. It was indeed not the indulgences themselves, but what lay behind and beneath the indulgences. J. Janssen is perfectly right, then, when speaking of the abuses of the traffic, he writes: "It was not, however, espe-

cially these abuses which occasioned Luther to his procedure against indulgences, but the doctrine of indulgences itself, particularly the church doctrine of good works which was contrary to his conceptions about justification and the bondage of the human will."

The Roman Curia had no difficulty in perceiving precisely where Luther's blow fell. The lighter forces rushed, of course, to the defence of the peripheral things: the papal authority, the legitimacy of indulgences. The result was that, as Luther says in the opening words of *The Babylonish Captivity,* they served as teachers for him and opened his eyes to matters on which he had not perfectly informed himself before. He had preserved reverence for the Pope as head of the Church. They taught him to look upon him as Antichrist. He had not wished totally to reject indulgences. "By the kind aid of Sylvester and the Friars", he now learned that they could properly be described only as "the mere impostures of Roman flatterers, by which they took away both faith in God and men's money". In his *Assertio* of the Articles condemned by Leo's Bull, written in the same year (1520), he, with mock humility, retracts his statement, objected to, to the effect that indulgences were pious frauds of believers—a statement apparently borrowed from Albert of Mainz who calls them pious frauds by which the Church allured believers to pious works—and now asserts that they are just impious frauds and impostures of wicked popes. But the Curia in its immediate action went deeper than these things. When Luther appeared before Cardinal Cajetan in October, 1518, the representative of the Pope laid his finger on just two propositions which he required him absolutely to recant. These were the assertion in the fifty-eighth Thesis that the merits of Christ work effectually without the intervention of the Pope and therefore cannot be the "Treasure" drawn upon by the indulgences; and an assertion in the *Resolutions* on the seventh Thesis to the effect that the sacraments do not work effectively unless received by faith. Obviously in these two

propositions is embodied the essence of evangelicalism: salvation the immediate gift of Christ; faith and faith alone the real instrument of reception of grace.

Cajetan's entire dealing with Luther consisted in insistence on his recanting just these two assertions. Luther gives a very amusing account of an undignified scene in which Cajetan pressed him to recant the fifty-eighth Thesis, on the basis of an Extravagant of Clement VI's. He would listen to no explanations, but simply demanded continuously, pointing at the Extravagant, "Do you believe that or do you not?" At last, says Luther, the Legate tried to beat him down with an interminable speech drawn from "the fables" of St. Thomas, into which Luther a half a score of times attempted in vain to break. "Finally," he proceeds in his description, "I too began to shriek, and said, 'If it can be shown that that Extravagant teaches that the merits of Christ are the treasure of indulgences, I will recant, according to your wish.' Great God, into what triumphant gestures and scornful laughter he now broke out! He seized the book suddenly and read furiously and snarlingly until he came to the place where it says that Christ purchased a treasure by His suffering, &c. Here I said, 'Listen, reverend Father, note well the words—"He purchased". If Christ purchased the treasure by His merits, it follows that the treasure is not the merits, but that which the merits have purchased—that is the keys of the Church. Therefore my thesis is true.' Here he became suddenly confused; and since he did not wish to appear confused he jumped violently to other subjects and sought to have this forgotten. But I was (not very respectfully, I confess) incensed, and broke out thus: 'Reverend Father, you must not think that Germans are ignorant of grammar also;—"to be a treasure", and "to purchase" are different things.' "

We must confess that Luther escaped by the skin of his teeth that time. Fortunately he had better reasons for contending that the Scriptures do not teach the doctrine in question than that Clement and Sixtus do not. In his written

answer to Cajetan he deals with the matter more seriously. He argues the question even there, however, with the understanding that his business is to show that his Thesis is not in disharmony with the Papal teaching; and he not very safely promises to adopt as his own whatever the Pope may declare to be true, a promise which two years afterwards he could not have repeated. On the real evangelical core of the Thesis, however,—that the merits of Christ work grace independently of the Pope,—and on the second proposition which he was required to recant,—that the sacraments are without effect in the absence of faith—he was absolutely unbending. He throws his assertion concerning faith, moreover, into such a form as to make it include assurance,—a matter of some interest in view of the presence of a phrase or two in the Theses and in the letter to Albert of Mainz enclosing a copy of them to him, which might be incautiously read as denying the possibility of assurance, but which really mean only to deny that assurance can be derived from anything whatever except Christ alone. What he declares to Cajetan to be "absolutely true", is "that no man can be just before God except alone through faith"; and therefore, he adds, "it is necessary that a man certainly believe that he is just and not doubt that he receives grace. For if he doubt it, and is uncertain of it," he argues, "then he is not just but opposes grace and casts it away from him."

What Luther is eager to do is, not to leave men in uncertainty as to their salvation, but to protect them from placing their trust in anything but Christ—certainly not in letters of pardon (Thesis 32: "Those who believe that through letters of pardon they are made sure of their own salvation, will be eternally damned along with their teachers"), or in the assurances of any man whatever, no matter what his assumed spiritual authority may be (Thesis 52: "Vain is the hope of salvation through letters of pardon, even if a commissary—nay, the Pope himself—were to pledge his soul for them"): but just as certainly not in their own contrition (Thesis 30: "No man is sure of the reality of his

own contrition, much less of the attainment of plenary remission",—a thesis which Luther declares in the *Resolutions* not to be true in his sense but only in that of his opponents). "May all such teaching as would persuade to security and confidence (*securitatem et fiduciam*) in or through anything whatever except the mercy of God, which is Christ, be accursed", he cries out in the *Resolutions* when speaking of Thesis 52. "Beware of confiding in thy contrition", he says when commenting on Thesis 36—and the comment is needed, lest the unwary reader might suppose that Thesis to counsel this very thing—"or of attributing the remission of sins to thy sorrow. God does not look with favor on thee because of these things, but because of thy faith with which thou hast believed his threatenings and promises and which has wrought such sorrow." "Guard thyself, then," he says again (on Thesis 38), "against ever in any wise trusting in thy contrition, but only in the mere word of thy best and most faithful Savior, Jesus Christ: thy heart can deceive thee, He cannot deceive thee—whether thou dost possess Him or dost desire Him."

How pure the evangelicalism here expressed is may be perceived by reading only a few lines of the positive comment on the great central Theses 36, 37. "It is impossible that one should be a Christian without Christ; but if anyone has Christ, he has with Him all that is Christ's. For the holy apostle speaks thus— . . . Rom. 8:32: 'How shall he not with Him also give us all things.'" "For this is the confidence of Christians, and the joy of our consciences, that by faith our sins become not ours but Christ's, on whom God has put our sins and He has borne our sins,—He who is the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. And again all Christ's righteousness is ours. For He lays His hands upon us and it is well with us; and He spreads His robe over us and covers us—the blessed Savior for ever, Amen!" "But since this sweetest participation and joyful interchange does not take place except by faith—and man cannot give and cannot take away this faith—I think it

sufficiently clear that this participation is not given by the power of the keys, or by the benefit of letters of indulgence, but rather is given before and apart from them by God alone; as remission before remission, and absolution before absolution, so participation before participation. What participation then does the Pope gives in his participation? I answer: They ought to say as was said above of remission in Thesis 6, that he gives participation declaratively. For how they can say anything else I confess I do not understand." "Why then do they magnify the Pontiff because of the keys and think of him as a terrible being? The keys are not his, but rather mine, given to me for my salvation, for my consolation, granted for my peace and quiet. In the keys the Pontiff is my servant and minister; he has no need of them as a Pontiff, but I." Through all it is faith that is celebrated. "You have as much as you believe." The sacraments are efficacious not because they are enacted, but because they are believed. Absolution is effective not because it is given, but because it is believed. Only—the penitent believer needs the authoritative priestly word that he may believe that he—even he—can really be sharer in these great things. "Therefore it is neither the sacrament, nor the priest, but faith in the word of Christ, through the priest and his office, that justifies thee. What difference does it make to thee if the Lord speak through an ass or a jenny, if only thou dost hear His word, on which thou dost stay thy hope and rest thy faith?"

It is not, however, only in a sentence here and there that the evangelical note is sounded in the Theses. What requires to be insisted upon is that they constitute in their entirety a compact and well-ordered presentation of the evangelical position in opposition to sacerdotalism. This presentation was called out by the preaching of indulgences and takes its form from its primary reference to them. But what it strikes particularly at is the sacerdotal roots of indulgences, and what it sets in opposition to them is the pure evangelical principle. It must not be imagined that

these Theses were hastily prepared merely to meet a sudden emergency created by Tetzel's preaching at Jüterbog. Luther had preached on indulgences on the same day, October 31, of the preceding year, and in the midsummer (July 27) before that. And—this is the point to take especial note of—the Theses repeat the thought and much of the language of these sermons. They are therefore the delibrate expression of long-meditated and thoroughly matured thought; in substance and language alike they had been fully in mind for a year and more. The *Resolutions,* published the next year—and manifesting next to no advance in opinion on the Theses which they expound—show that Luther was thoroughly informed on the whole subject and had its entire literature at easy command. His choice of October 31, the eve of All Saints' Day, for posting the Theses, has also its very distinct significance. This choice was determined by something more than a desire to gain for them the publicity which that day provided. All Saints' Day was not merely the anniversary of the consecration of the church, elaborate services on which were attended by thousands. It was also the day on which the great collection of relics accumulated by the Elector was exhibited; and to the veneration of them and attendance on the day's services special indulgences were attached. It was, in a word, Indulgence Day at Wittenberg; and that was the attraction which brought the crowds thither on it. Luther, we have just pointed out, had preached a sermon against indulgences on the preceding October 31. On this October 31 he posts his Theses. The coincidence is not accidental. The Theses came not at the beginning but in the middle of his attack on indulgences, and have in view, not Tetzel and his Jubilee indulgences alone, but the whole indulgence system. That the preaching in Germany of the Jubilee indulgences was the occasion of Luther's coming forward in this attack on indulgences, he tells us himself. He explains somewhat objectively how he was drawn into it when writing to his ecclesiastical superior: "I was asked

by many strangers as well as friends, both by letter and by word of mouth, for my opinion of these new not to say licentious teachings; for a while I held out—but in the end their complaints became so bitter as to endanger reverence for the Pope." Similarly he declares in the *Resolutions:* "I have been compelled to lay down all these positions because I saw that some were infected with false opinions, and others were laughing in the taverns and holding up the holy priesthood to open ridicule, because of the great license with which the indulgences are preached." This is not to say, however, that in meeting this call upon him, Luther was not moved by a deeper-lying motive and did not wish to go to the bottom of the matter. When writing privately to his friends he did not hesitate to say as early as the middle of February 1518, that "indulgences now seem to me to be nothing but a snare for souls and worth absolutely nothing except to those who slumber and idle in the way of Christ", and to explain his coming forward against them thus: "For the sake of opposing this fraud, for the love of truth, I entered this dangerous labyrinth of disputation."

The document itself however is the best witness to the care given to its preparation and to the depth of its purpose as an anti-sacerdotal manifesto. There are no sings of haste about it, and, in point of fact, the question is argued in it from the point of sight of fundamental principles. In its opening propositions, Luther begins by laying down in firm lines the Christian doctrine of penitence. It is, he says, of course the very mark of the penitent sinner that he is penitent; and of course he can never cease to be penitent so long as he is, what as a Christian he must be.—a penitent sinner. His penitence is not only fundamentally an interior fact: but if it is real, it manifests itself in outward mortifications. This being what a Christian man essentially is, what now has the Pope to do with the penalties which he suffers—which constitute the very substance and manifestation of the penitence by virtue of which he is a penitent as distinguished from an impenitent sinner?

Luther's answer is, Nothing whatever. With reference to the living he declares that the Pope can relieve a man only of penalties of his own imposing; with respect to penalties of God's imposing he has only a declarative function. With reference to the dying, why, by the very act of dying they escape out of the Pope's hands. There is, of course, purgatory. But purgatory is not a place where old scores are paid off; but a place where imperfect souls are perfected in holiness; and surely the Pope neither can nor would wish to intermit their perfecting. Clearly, then, it is futile to trust in indulgences. There is nothing for them to do. They cannot release us from the necessity of being Christians; and if we are Christians, we can have no manner of need of them. In asserting this, Luther closes this first and principal part of the document—constituting one third of the whole—with the great evangelical declarations: "Every truly contrite Christian has of right plenary remission of penalty and guilt—even without letters of pardon. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has given to him by God, a share in all the benefits of Christ and the Church—even without letters of pardon."

Having thus laid down the general principles, Luther now takes a new start and points out some of the dangers which accompany the preaching of indulgences. There is the danger that the purchase of indulgences should be made to appear more important than the exercise of charity, or even than the maintenance of our dependents. There is the danger that the head of the Church may be made to appear more desirous of the people's money than of their prayers. There is the danger that the preaching of indulgences may encroach upon or even supersede the preaching of the Gospel in the churches. After all, the preaching of the Gospel is the main thing. It is the true treasure of the Church: indeed, it is the only treasure on which the Church can draw. The section closes with some pointed antitheses, contrasting the indulgences and the Gospel: the indulgences which make the last to be first and seek after men's riches, and the Gos-

pel which makes the first to be last and seeks after those men who are rich indeed: indulgences are gainful things no doubt, but grace and the piety of the cross—they belong to the Gospel.

A third start is now taken, and Luther sharply arraigns the actual misdeeds of the preachers of pardons and their unmeasured assertions (*licentiosa pradicatio*). Of course the commissaries of the apostolical pardons are not to be excluded from dioceses and parishes: they come with the Pope's commission and the Pope is the head of the Church. But bishops and curates are bound to see to it that the unbridled license of their preaching is curbed within the just limits of their commission. As it is, they have filled the world with murmurings and it is not easy to defend the Pope against the sharp questions which the people are asking. Luther adduces eight of these questions as specimens: they constitute a tremendous indictment against the whole indulgence traffic from the point of view of practical common sense, and are all the more effective because repeated out of the mouth of the people. They are such as these:—If the Pope has the power to release souls from purgatory, why does he not, out of his mere charity, release the whole lot of them, and not dole their release out one by one for money? If souls are released from purgatory by indulgences, why does the Pope keep the endowments for masses for these same souls, after they have been released? Why should the money of a wicked man move the Pope to release a soul from purgatory more than that soul's own deep need? Why does the Pope treat dead Canons as still alive and take money for relaxing them? Why does the rich Pope not build St. Peter's out of his own superfluity and not tax the poor for it? What is it, after all, that the Pope remits to those whose perfect contrition has already gained their remission? What is the effect of accumulating indulgences? If it is the salvation of souls and not money that the Pope is after, why does he suspend old letters of pardon and put new ones on sale? Such searching arguments as these,

Luther justly says, cannot be met by a display of force: they must be answered.

Then he brings the whole document to a close with some fervent words renouncing a gospel of ease, crying Peace, peace! such as the indulgences offer: and proclaiming the strenuous gospel of the cross: "Christians should be exhorted to strive to follow their Head, Christ, through pains and deaths and hells, and thus to trust to enter heaven rather through many tribulations than through the security of peace."

It belongs to the general structure of the document,—advancing as it does from the principles which underlie the indulgence traffic, through the dangers which accompany it, to its actual abuses—that its tone should grow sharper and its attack more direct with its progress. Luther's argumentative purpose and his rhetorical instinct have no doubt cooperated to produce this result. It suited the end he had in view to present the indulgences as a species under a broader genus. But also it pleased his rhetorical sense so to manage his material as to have it grow in force and directness of assertion steadily to the end, and to close in what deserves the name of a fervent peroration. The calm, detached propositions of the first section pass in the second into a series of rhetorical repetitions, and these give way as the third section is approached to stinging antitheses. Nevertheless the real weight of the document lies in its first section, and it is by virtue of the propositions laid down there that it is worthy of its place as the first great Reformation act, and the day of its posting is justly looked upon as the birthday of the Reformation.

The posting of these Theses does not mark the acquisition by Luther of his evangelical convictions. These had long been his—how long we hardly know but must content ourselves with saying, with Walther Köhler, that they were apparently acquired somewhere between 1509 and 1515. Neither does their posting mark the beginning of the evangelical proclamation. From at least 1515 Luther had been

diligently propagating his evangelicalism in pulpit and chair, and had already fairly converted his immediate community to it. He could already boast of the victory of "our theology" in the university, and the town was in his hands. What is marked by the posting of these Theses is the issuing of the Reformation out of the narrow confines of the university circles of Wittenberg and its start on its career as a world-movement. Their posting gave wings to the Reformation. And it gave it wings primarily by rallying to its aid the smouldering sense of outrage which had long been gathering against a gross ecclesiastical abuse. This would not have carried it far, however, had not the document in which it was thus sent abroad had in it the potency of the new life.

"What is epoch-making in the theses," writes E. Bratke, "is that they are the first public proclamation in which Luther in full consciousness made the truth of justifying faith as the sole principle of the communication of salvation, the theme of a theological controversy, and thus laid before the church a problem for further research, which afterwards became the motive and principle of a new development of the Christian Church, yes, of civilization in general." What Bratke is trying to say here is true; and, being true, is vastly important. But he does not say it well. Luther had often before proclaimed the principle of justifying faith in full enthusiasm, to as wide a public as his voice could reach. It happens that neither faith nor justification is once mentioned in the Theses. It is the Lectures on Romans of 1515-1516 that the epoch-making exposition of justification by faith was made, not in the Theses. Nevertheless, it is true that the Theses are the express outcome of Luther's new "life principle", and have as their fundamental purpose to set it in opposition to "human ecclesiasticism and sacerdotalism". And it is true that the idea of justification by faith underlies them throughout and only does not come to explicit expression in them because the occasion does not call for that: Luther cannot expound them (as in the *Resolu-*

tions) without dwelling largely on it. The matter would be better expressed, however, by saying that Luther here sets the evangelical principle flatly in opposition to the sacerdotal. What he here attacks is just the sacerdotal principle in one of its most portentous embodiments—the teaching that men are to look to the Church as the institute of salvation for all their souls' welfare, and to derive from the Church all their confidence in life and in death. What he sets over against this sacerdotalism is the evangelical principle that man is dependent for his salvation on God and on God alone—on God directly, apart from all human intermediation—and is to look to God for and to derive from God immediately all that makes for his soul's welfare. In these Theses Luther brought out of the academic circle in which he had hitherto moved, and cast into the arena of the wide world's conflicts, under circumstances which attracted and held the attention of men, his newly found evangelical principle, thrown out into sharp contrast with the established sacerdotalism. It is this that made the posting of these Theses the first act of the Reformation, and has rightly made October Thirty-first the birthday of the Reformation.

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