

CHAPTER III

THE NINETY-FIVE THESES TO THE DIET AT WORMS

1. Indulgences

When Martin Luther discovered the comforting doctrine of justification by faith, he taught it to his classes at the university and he proclaimed it from the pulpit in the City Church. But this central truth of the Scriptures was destined to be made known also to the Christian world at large in the years just ahead. The incident which was responsible for this spread of the truth was Luther's public protest to John Tetzel's sale of indulgences (see Appendix F).

Indulgences in the popular sense are often defined as selling the forgiveness of sins for money. While in the eyes of many common people they were no doubt regarded just as that, nevertheless according to the official teaching of the Roman Church, they are not exactly selling forgiveness. The Roman Church distinguishes between the guilt of sin which is removed by absolution, and the temporal punishment for sin which the sinner must nevertheless pay in various kinds of penance here on earth and in a purgatory in the life hereafter. But the Roman Church teaches also that certain saints have done good works in excess of that which was required of them, and that these extra works plus the merits of Christ are stored up in a treasury in heaven of which the pope is custodian. If the pope sees fit, he may draw on this treasury of merit and apply it as penance for some poor sinner. Such a draft on this treasury is known as indulgence.

Indulgences were often granted in return for holy pilgrimages, but Pope Leo X (see Appendix F) conceived the idea of paying for St. Peter's Church in Rome (and for some of his personal expenses as well) through the sale of these indulgences for money. Tetzel (see Appendix F) was one of his agents near the territory where Luther was stationed. He called out, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs."

2. The Ninety-Five Theses

Some of Luther's parishioners at Wittenberg had purchased these indulgences, which by this time were supposed to relieve the living of further penance here on earth, and were even available to the dead in purgatory. This made Luther indignant. On the evening of All Saints' Day, October 31, 1517, Luther, it is thought, nailed a parchment to the door of the Castle Church (see Appendix E). On this parchment Luther wrote the famous Ninety-Five Theses (see Appendix B) against Indulgences, Luther's protest to Tetzel's sale. While the Ninety-Five Theses contained much that is Catholic and must not be taken as authoritative statements of what the Lutheran Church teaches today, they were nevertheless a protest which grew out of Luther's central doctrine of justification by faith. (See Appendix B.)

It was the custom in those days that when a theologian felt that he had a matter which he was willing to dispute with other theologians, he would draw up his position in the form of a number of theses, post them in a public place and challenge other theologians to debate with him. That is what Luther intended by posting these Ninety-Five Theses, but to his surprise these theses provoked an uproar in the theological world, and their appearance marked the beginning of the movement which we call the Protestant Reformation. Though originally written in Latin,

they were soon translated into German, and they became the talk of all Europe. All this communication quickly advanced because of the invention of moveable type in 1450. (See Appendix G).

3. The Debate with Dr. Eck.

In 1519 John Eck (see Appendix F), a clever theologian and defender of the Catholic tradition, engaged Luther in a theological debate in the city of Leipzig. In this debate Eck forced Luther to make several damaging admissions. Eck quoted the decrees of popes and the decisions of church councils in defense of the Catholic traditions, and Luther, who based his teaching entirely upon the Scriptures, was forced to admit that it was possible for both the pope and a church council to err. Thereupon Eck cleverly informed Luther that John Hus of Prague was burned at the stake for saying the same thing. Luther was thus branded as a heretic in the eyes of Eck and his colleagues (see Appendix E).

4. Luther Excommunicated

At first the pope did not consider Martin Luther as anything more than a fanatical little monk who would probably do no damage to the cause of the Catholic Church. However, it was not long until the pope realized that Luther's movement was gaining momentum and that if allowed to continue, it would blast at the very foundations of the papacy. An attempt was made to "buy Luther off" by offering to make him a cardinal if he would keep quiet, but when the attempt failed, the pope decided to excommunicate Martin Luther from the Roman Catholic church. This was done in the year 1520 in the famous Bull or Decree of Excommunication. By this time Luther, however, no longer feared the pope. His faith was built on a firm foundation, and not all the decrees of popes could disturb that peace of God which was his through faith in Jesus Christ. So when the bull arrived at Wittenberg, Luther was not dismayed but rather indifferent. He and the students built a bonfire, and burned the bull as an act of defiance to the pope and his whole system.

5. The Necessary Ban of the Empire

The Roman Church always claimed that it put no one to death, and that its hands were never stained with blood. If the Church declared a man guilty of death because of heresy, that man was turned over to the secular authorities, and they were expected to put him to death—if they failed to do so, the Church might declare them to be heretics also. The official executing was done, however, by the secular government and not by the Church. Luther had been excommunicated by the Church, but it was up to the secular government to follow up that act of the Church.

Saxony as well as the other German states belonged to what was known as The Holy Roman Empire, ruled over by an emperor who was elected by three archbishops and four secular princes, of which the Duke of Saxony (see Appendix F) was one. In the year 1519 Charles (see Appendix F) was elected emperor under the title of Charles V. He was the grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, and he inherited from his Spanish grandparents all of Spain, territory in Italy and newly discovered territory in America. Charles was also the grandson of

Maximilian of Austria and his wife Mary of Burgundy, and from these grandparents he inherited Austria and its possessions, and the Netherlands which at that time included Belgium and Holland. In addition to all this, he was elected emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Quite a kingdom for a young man of nineteen.

6. The Diet at Worms

It was before this emperor that Martin Luther was to be tried. A diet or assembly of the dignitaries of the empire was to be held at the city of Worms in 1521. Luther was summoned to appear before this diet. Charles V insured Luther safe conduct to and from Worms, but Luther's friends advised him not to go. They reminded him of John Hus of Bohemia who was guaranteed safe conduct to and from the Council of Constance in 1415, but was nevertheless burned at the stake by order of the council. Luther replied that "Christ lives, and I will enter Worms in spite of the gates of hell." He said he was determined to go "Though there be as many devils there as tiles on the roof" (see Appendix E).

7. Luther's Testimony

On the seventeenth of April, 1521, Luther first appeared before the diet and was asked to recant everything he had written. This time he gave no direct answer. He asked for more time to consider his reply and was given until the next day. The night of April 17 was spent in prayer; it has often been called "Luther's Gethsemane." The next day he faced the diet again and was asked again whether he was willing to recant. He replied that some things which he had written even his enemies approved of, and these he could not recant. He stated that the abuses in the church of which he had written were so definitely proved that he could not recant his mention of them. He admitted that certain writings against individuals may perhaps have become a little more vehement than was necessary and he was willing to retract these overstatements, but that so far as his doctrines were concerned, he could not and would not recant. "Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scripture or other obvious reasons, I believe neither the pope nor the councils, since it is obvious that they often have erred and contradicted themselves. I stand convicted by my writings, and my conscience is bound in God's Word . . . Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me, Amen."

8. Significance of the Diet

We know that Luther was condemned to death as a heretic at Worms in 1521, but we know also that he died a natural death in 1546. We will deal with his rescue in the next lesson. The important fact to remember is that where Luther stood at the Diet at Worms, the Church which bears his name still stands today. For the true Lutheran all doctrines and morals stand or fall on the Word of God; there is no other authority. "Scripture alone" has been the watchword of the Lutheran Church.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What were indulgences according to the Roman Church? Is this still a teaching of the Roman Church today?
2. What was Luther's real purpose in posting the Ninety-Five Theses?
3. Do these Ninety-Five Theses represent Lutheran doctrine? Explain.
4. What line of argument did Eck use to prove Luther a heretic?
5. What was the relationship of the Roman Church to the practice of putting heretics to death?
6. Why did Luther have to face the Diet at Worms after he had been excommunicated?
7. We usually assert that the three principles of the Reformation are "sola gratia" or "grace alone," "sola Christus" or "Christ alone" and "sola scriptura" or "Scripture alone." How have these principles been developed in our study so far?

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

Read *Luther, Biography of a Reformer*, Chapter 3, "The Sound of a Hammer," pp. 41-58; Chapter 4, "The Echo of the Hammer Blows," pp. 59-74.

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