

reformation
500
1517-2017 † Faith Not Fear.

Revisiting the 95 Theses Today *Leader Guide*

October 31, 2017 marks five hundred years since Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses, a set of topics meant to spark discussion and debate. What can we still learn from these theses today? What themes would be included in a contemporary version of the 95 Theses?

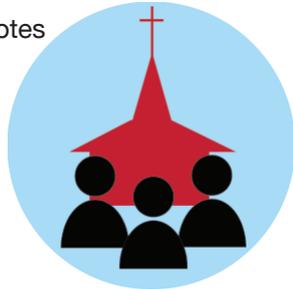
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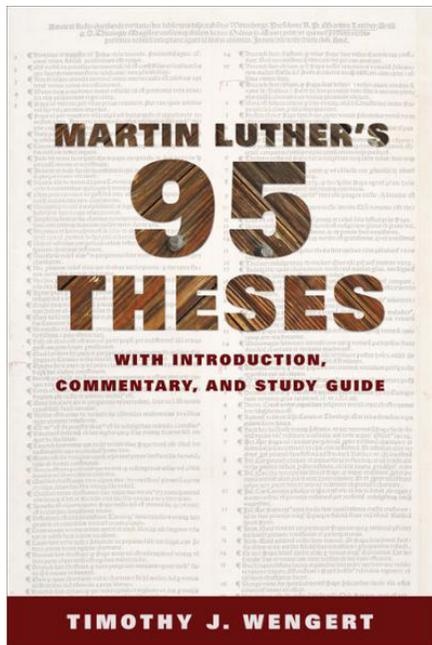


How to use this material for educational events:

What follows are presentation notes to inform and to help leaders direct and guide conversations about the 95 Theses during educational events where we claim opportunity to take a deeper look at the Theses and their relevance for our church in mission today.



Included here are notes to give historical background to the 95 Theses, as well as possible responses to discussion questions that are found in and adapted from Timothy J. Wengert's, *Martin Luther's 95 Theses with Introduction, Commentary, and Study Guide*. This material in response to the questions was generated at the 2016 Deans' Retreat in the Metropolitan New York Synod which was led by The Rev. Jonathan Linman, Ph.D. Feel free to adapt this material for your local needs and opportunities. Feel free to focus on those questions of greatest interest and relevance to your own ministry setting. Educational events are best served by participants reading and being familiar with the 95 Theses, especially as presented in Prof. Wengert's book. Accompanying this guide are two additional documents which can be given to event participants: a listing of the discussion questions, and a summary listing of particularly relevant Theses.



Martin Luther's 95 Theses with Introduction, Commentary, and Study Guide is available from augsborgfortress.org.

Notes:



Introduction to the Event and Theme

October 31, 2017 marks the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation which centers on Luther's going public with the 95 Theses. So we do well to claim this moment in history and to take a closer look at the actual theses.

Historical background concerning the 95 Theses (drawn from Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's 95 Theses with Introduction, Commentary, and Study Guide*, pages ix-xlvi):



- 2017's 500th Reformation anniversary presents an opportunity to see what 95 Theses really say, because while we're familiar with the effects of the 95, we may not really know what issues they actually address!
- The Reformation involved at least three areas of concern:
 - Academic, scholarly, theological concerns (see the 95 Theses themselves),
 - Ecclesial or churchly concerns (see the Letter to Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz)
 - And pastoral/popular concerns (see Luther's Sermon on Indulgences and Grace)
- The 95 Theses focus on the practice of selling indulgences.
- Indulgences are foreign to our piety – but are they really? (There's a lot of "tit for tat" spirituality out there which has some of the flavor of indulgences... "God, I will do this for you, if you do that for me...")
- What is an indulgence?
- The Medieval Church could be "indulgent" concerning penalties for sin, and then also purgatory, by prescribing pious acts by the faithful, including giving money to the church.
- This included purchasing "indulgences" for self and others.
- Why did Luther go public on October 31? Because of its proximity to November 1, All Saints Day: attending Mass on this feast accrued 200 days special indulgence.
- Indulgences relate to the Sacrament of Penance, with which we may be unfamiliar and which historically consists of three parts: contrition, confession, satisfaction (Luther came to struggle with this three-fold outline).
- The declaration of grace and humble acceptance were the heart of penance for Luther, not satisfaction of the punishment.
- Wengert: "When the priest declares a person forgiven, that very unconditional declaration of freedom from guilt becomes true for that person only when believing that it is 'for me.' Otherwise, if one doubts, then the very gift God in Christ wants to bestow, while valid, is finally not effective" (xlvi)
- Indulgences get in the way of this movement of faith.
- The practice of indulgences also became corrupt (for example, using indulgence income to help pay for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, for example).
- Luther also had theological and pastoral concerns, especially concerning how indulgences permitted an avoidance of judgment and law.
- As an aside: Humanism and its seeking earliest, primary texts, led Luther to scriptural study and also to the study of canon law as it all pertained to indulgences. Such study revealed that in ancient times, indulgences focused on lifting penalties for ecclesial transgression and did not focus on divine punishment for sins.
- The New Testament Greek word *metanoiēte* is not "do penance" (as suggested by then current versions of the Bible) but "repent." This reframing via word study, inspired by Humanism, helped Luther focus on the true meanings of repentance.
- Moreover, the study of early church practice, also motivated by Humanism, did not provide theological or historical support for later, Medieval indulgence practices.



Questions for reflection and conversation

adapted from Timothy Wengert's Study Guide



Why did Luther bother to make a protest? That is, what issues are at stake in the 95 Theses?

Why did Luther bother to make a protest?

- Very simply, see Luther's first statement in the introduction to the Theses: love and zeal for bringing the truth to light in Jesus' name prompted Luther to offer the 95 Theses.
- Luther may well have had a strong sense of right and wrong, such that his theological and spiritual values were being violated with the practice of indulgences. Such violation of values may have compelled him to speak out (remember Luther's statement at the Diet of Worms in response to the directive to recant his views: "Here I stand, I can do no other").
- In this way, Luther's personality type may have led him to protest. Not every personality type is likely to be so confrontational.
- Luther perhaps had what we might call prophetic impulses – but he was also motivated by deep pastoral concerns for God's people.
- Luther's own spirituality and faith experience also contributed to his being driven to offer the Theses. He felt claimed by God's scriptural Word and thereby led by the Holy Spirit to speak out.

The theses can be difficult to access and understand, and to translate into the categories of our experience, since they concern themselves with issues not on our theological front burners in today's church.

But it is fair to say that the 95 Theses are about more than indulgences. Indulgences may be considered a "presenting issue."

Thus it may be possible to distill more general issues or concerns from the theses. For example, the following general concerns can be identified in the 95 Theses:

- Concern for genuine spiritual life and the movements of faith are front and center:
 - (See Theses #'s: 1, 2, 3, 40, 42, 44, 94, 95)
- The integrity and truth of the gospel are at stake along with concerns about the corruption of preaching ministry:
 - (See Theses #'s: 21, 27, 28, 35, 36, 37, 54, 55, 62)
- Compromise of Christian witness to world is also a concern:
 - (See Theses #'s: 55, 90)
- Concern for poor likewise is featured in the 95:
 - (See Theses #'s: 43, 45)
- Churchly authority issues/abuses (vocational or professional boundaries) are evident:
 - (See Theses #'s: 5, 6)
- Institutional preoccupations on the part of the church and its greed can also be identified:
 - (See Theses #'s 65, 66)



- Related: Church buildings as the tail that wags the dog – the “Edifice complex” and the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica:
 - (See Thesis #: 50)
- Concern about the abuse of stewardship arguably also appear in the 95:
 - (See Thesis #: 46, 65, 66)
- Other Issues which you identify? Our Synodical Deans also listed the following:
 - The Theses convey an anti-empire sensibility, particularly when empire concerns itself with power and money.
 - The Theses expose a “preferential treatment of the rich” which is contrary to the gospel.
 - The Theses expose legal loopholes which persons of privilege can exploit.

Wengert’s summary and conclusion:

- “Luther’s earliest concern was not that heaven and the gospel were for sale but rather than escape from judgment and the law were! His lectures from around this time make clear that Luther viewed the Christian life as always moving from God’s judgment against sin (law) to trust in Christ (gospel), that is, from the death (mortification) of the old creature to the birth of the new. Indulgences prevented that very movement by allowing people to buy their way out from under judgment. To use language from a much later era, Luther worried about a kind of ‘cheap grace’ because indulgences allowed people to rely on their own buying power to escape God’s judgment. But, since grace is neither cheap nor expensive but free, being ‘indulgent’ was really no grace at all, because such indulgence centered in a person’s own ability to buy one’s way around the law and its judgment and was based upon the prior good works of others.” (Xxix-xxx)
- In short, the treasury of the Church is not indulgences but “the gospel of the grace and glory of God” (xliv)

Here is Lutheran Theologian K Stjerna’s summary concerning the basic concerns presented in the 95 Theses (articulated at a workshop at the ELCA Grace Gathering in August of 2016):

- Poverty of the people vs. misdirected wealth of the church
- Abusive selling of indulgences vs. life of true repentance
- Authority coming from gospel, not papal office





What were Luther's main pastoral concerns in the 95 Theses? In what ways do church leaders face similar issues today?

- Responses to the prior question focused on academic/scholarly/theological and the ecclesial concerns. Here we address Luther's pastoral concerns.
- Luther had a great concern that the laity were being scandalized by the Medieval Church's practice of selling indulgences (see Thesis # 90)
- Luther takes seriously the questions of the laity (See Theses #'s 82-89)
- Luther feared that people were being deceived (See Thesis #24)
- Luther was concerned that God's people were being confused: "It is extremely difficult, even for the most learned theologians, to lift up before the people the liberality of indulgences and the truth about contrition at one and the same time" (Thesis #39)
- The abusive practice of selling indulgences interfered both with people's relationship to God (a vertical dimension) and their relationships with each other (a horizontal dimension)
- Wengert summary: "the sermon [concerning Indulgences] again reveals the heart of Luther's concern: bad preaching and theology and what it does to the faithful." Hence Luther's concern about the effects of indulgence preachers.
- In what ways do church leaders face similar issues today? Bad preaching still has its malformative effects!





What are the theses to which you are most drawn? Why?

This discussion question invites a more personal and subjective set of responses, and may well be served by breaking up into smaller groups for conversation.

Responses from conversation at our Deans' Retreat:

- Participants were drawn to those theses which point to genuine spiritual life (cf. prior listing, esp. #1)
- Participants were drawn to those theses which speak to the poor (cf. prior listing, esp. 43, 45)



What theses are hardest to understand? Why is this so?

This discussion question invites a more personal and subjective set of responses, and may well be served by breaking up into smaller groups for conversation.

Responses from conversation at our Deans' Retreat:

- Thesis #32 – eternal damnation because of indulgence teachers.
- Theses #'s 8ff. – penitential canons, purgatory, canonical penalties, all categories which are foreign to contemporary Lutherans.
- Thesis #16 – hell, purgatory and heaven in relation to despair, near despair and assurance. Here Luther could say more about the interconnections.
- Thesis #75 – violating the mother of God! A provocative statement indeed!





What are ways in today's church that people try to avoid God's judgment and therefore undermine God's gracious forgiveness?

- [Note: we cannot talk about “today’s church” in a way that Luther did in the 16th Century in Europe when there was one church in his reality, that is, the Roman Catholic Church. Today, we need to consider a multiplicity of churches, itself a bitter-sweet fruit of the Reformation. Some responses to this question may address the ELCA specifically. Other responses may address other Christian traditions.]
- Cheap grace (cf. Bonhoeffer’s notion): there may be a tendency today to preach a gospel that does not consider the weight and effects of sin, ways of preaching that do not address both Law and Gospel.
- Anti-nomianism: related to the above, there may be a tendency today to preach a gospel that ignores or sidesteps the claims and other uses of God’s Law.
- Acceptance by God vs. forgiveness: some may emphasize God’s acceptance of us as we are, which sidesteps or ignores ways in which God may need to forgive us.
- Little talk of sin in popular culture and in some churches: if there is no sin, then there is no need for forgiveness. In such settings, the church may be seen as “indulgent” perhaps!
- Rather than sin, some speak of needs for emotionally therapeutic healing – relevant theological concerns. But if the discourse is only about healing, then there may be a tendency to avoid God’s judgment for sin and thus undermine God’s gracious forgiveness.
- Also related, many in church and culture resist discourse about being held accountable (accountability is a form of judgment). If we cannot abide being held accountable, then there is little room for a sense of forgiveness.
- Some churches resist prophetic preaching which may get into political discourse. Such resistance may inhibit addressing social or collective sin and thus foreclose upon a sense of God forgiving whole nations and peoples.
- There is also a tendency to seek to judge others and not ourselves, likewise a dynamic that interrupts the law/gospel, judgment/forgiveness heart of the gospel.
- There is also a tendency among some to preach Law as if it is the Gospel, that our efforts at doing good, etc. will somehow on its own bring in the good news of God’s reign. This also subverts the judgment/forgiveness dynamics of Law and Gospel preaching. Pietistic movements, social gospel movements, as well as popular forms of Christianity (like the “purpose driven” and self-help movements) may fall prey to this kind of thinking where laws of to do lists try to take the place of the gospel of gracious forgiveness.
- In short: “You cannot feel the full freedom of the gospel until you feel the full weight of the law.”
- Wengert’s summary statement: “Luther was convinced that believers could not buy their way around the law and judgment of God.... Instead, only by putting to death of the old creature does the new creature of faith in God’s promises come to life.” (xlili) Indulgences sought exemption from this putting to death of the old creature.





A handful of theses emphasize God's grace and the gospel. How might the human propensity either to "earn" salvation or to buy a way around God's judgment undercut the gospel today?

- For context in response to this question, consider: "The 'truth about contrition' seeks and loves penalties [for sins]; the 'liberality of indulgences' relaxes penalties and at very least gives occasions for hating them" (Thesis #40)
- The popular appeal of so-called "prosperity gospel" approaches comes to mind as a current way of earning salvation or buying God's favor – investing in God's kingdom, sometimes with monetary donations, with the expectation of a high return on the investment in terms of salvific blessing in this life!
- Distinction between proclaimed and operational or lived theology: we may preach and teach a gospel of unearned grace, but actually live in such a way that our works unconsciously seek God's favor
- Our various to do lists come to mind as a way in which we unconsciously seek to earn God's favor and that of others by what we do. We often wonder anxiously, "Am I doing enough?" Such anxiety reveals a scarcity of faith in God's gracious, forgiving favor towards us.
- Our very activist ministries with long work hours and focus on attendance and budget numbers, while laudable, may also reveal an unconscious desire to earn forms of salvation.
- Some forms of preaching about redemptive suffering may also undercut the gospel – as if our suffering can earn God's favor, when it was Christ's suffering that made the difference once and for all.
- Tendencies to focus on scarcity that lead to a desire to hoard may also reveal a kind of theology of earned salvation – I will save myself by my accumulations.
- Various kinds of "entitlement mentalities" may also suggest earned salvation approaches – I deserve this or that because of who I am or what I have earned, not because of what God has done.





In what ways are these 500 year-old issues still relevant today?

- Responses to the preceding questions may well reveal a great deal of relevance of the concerns of the 95 Theses for today's world and mission field. Thus, you may want to examine and return to previous comments to summarize the relevance of the 95 for today.
- Also, to aid discussion of this question, it may be helpful to review the listing of issues identified in response to the first discussion question. You and your group may come up with many examples of how these issues are lively concerns today. Here again is the listing:
 - Integrity of gospel proclamation
 - Compromise of Christian witness to world
 - Concern for genuine spiritual life
 - Authority issues/abuses (boundaries)
 - Institutional preoccupations by church and its greed
 - “Edifice complex” and St. Peter’s Basilica
 - Concern for poor
 - Stewardship abuses
 - Poverty of people vs. misdirected wealth of church
 - Abusive selling of indulgences vs. life of repentance
 - Authority coming from gospel, not papal office





Given the state of the church in our 21st Century world, what new theses would you draft and post today?

- One way of addressing this question is to consider: What if any “status confessionis” issues exist in current churches? That is to say, are there issues confronting the church in its preaching and teaching where the true integrity of the gospel is at stake, matters on which the church stands or falls?
- Another way of asking this may be: “What are today’s indulgences?” Or that is to say, how is today’s church “indulgent” and how does this affect the integrity of gospel preaching and teaching?
- For musing: what is the need for Reformation now? This is yet another way to approach the question of what theses we might generate today.
- New theses could well be drafted from discussions of the previous questions (see varied responses above)
- Another approach to considering this question is to look at the Lutheran World Federation’s foci for the 2017 500th Reformation Anniversary year themes which may be seen as theses:
 - **“Liberated by God’s Grace:** As Christians liberated by God’s grace, we are free. Free to love and serve our neighbor, free to be a responsible citizen in the world and free to be a good steward of God’s creation.
 - **Salvation – Not for Sale:** Salvation is God’s free gift— this is the central message of the doctrine of justification. It expresses a clear critique of concepts that treat salvation as a commodity on the ‘religious market.’
 - **Human beings – Not for Sale:** Every person is created in the image of God and must be fully respected in her/his dignity and integrity. Practices that create or increase poverty need to be critically addressed by churches.
 - **Creation – Not for Sale:** Nature has to be fully respected and protected as God’s good creation, entrusted to human care. It cannot be subject to exploitative human domination nor can its resources be exploited as commodities.”
- Other “theses” that emerged from conversations at our Deans’ Retreat:
 - Don’t let the tail of the institutional church wag the dog of the gospel
 - Don’t buy into corporatist, imperial ways – that is, church, do not serve corporate imperialism particularly in relation to:
 - Climate change
 - Income inequality
 - Concerning the church’s worship: don’t abandon the Mass because it is a reliable cradle to offer us the gift of the Word made flesh in preaching and the church’s sacramental life.
 - Don’t let traditionalism inhibit the communication of the great Tradition.
 - Don’t let tithes and offerings-oriented stewardship be compromised by fund-raising mentalities.
 - Human domination and exploitation of creation vs. our call to be good stewards of creation, caring for nature: we are called to uphold the latter.
 - Racial and economic justice were also raised as gospel-integrity concerns that merit theses.





If you were concerned about a particular practice or teaching of the Christian church today, how and to whom might you express that concern? By what authority would you do it?

- In Luther's time, a debate over ecclesial authority was emerging in the church – papal/curialist (the authority of the pope) vs. conciliarist, that is, the authority of councils of Bishops as a group.
- Our polity is synodal (that is, our assemblies in synod and churchwide along with our congregational meetings, have for us in the ELCA the highest legislative authority): thus, we ELCA Lutherans turn to resolutions and memorials in the context of our synod and churchwide assemblies and congregational meetings.
- The movement for addressing matters of concern can be conceived in this way: Individual/group/congregation ► Conference ► Synod ► Churchwide.
- In our interdependent ELCA ecclesiology, authority is shared (though not equally) in the varied expressions of the church.
- Again we need to ask in addressing this question, what church are we talking about? How do we address churches not of our own fold and polity?
- Ecumenical dialogues are a current means through which churches address each other.
- Full communion agreements also contain proscribed avenues through which to address each other (cf. mutual admonitions in, for example, Formula of Agreement between the ELCA and the Reformed churches. You may wish to research this further via the ELCA Website pages on ecumenism.





The posting or publishing of a set of theses or a sermon is not commonly the way to spur public dialog today. How are important matters of public concern and debate aired?

- Facebook has become a central venue for sharing news and views.
- Twitter is also frequently employed to directly appeal to popular attention.
- The various Occupy movements and other mass people's movements occurring in the USA and throughout the world also come to mind as means through which to air matters of public concern.
- Other social media likewise play a role in increasing ways, alongside traditional news media in print, on TV and online.



What might it mean that Luther was the first living bestselling author in the world?

- There is significant importance of a popular appeal in helping to get the message out to the widest public.
- That is to say, Luther's popular appeal as an author helped drive the Reformation forward.
- Another set of questions: How best do we faithfully claim the zeitgeist, that is, the spirit of our times? And how do we re-direct it so that we serve and proclaim the gospel and do not merely cater to the whims of popular culture? When we preach and teach popular whim, we risk compromising the integrity of the gospel.
- In what ways was Luther catering to popular energies? Princes in Germany during Luther's time had increasing interest in independence from the Holy Roman Empire. In Luther and his concerns, the princes found a useful ally in their efforts at greater secular authority.
- In response to this question, you may address the problem of cults of celebrity personalities today, especially when so much of what grabs our attention and imagination is mediated by corporate media and may thus express their views and not that of the gospel.





What difference does it make to you that scholars debate whether the 95 Theses were posted or printed?

- The manner of posting the Theses may be of little real concern, when the main point is going public with debate. How best to go public is at stake, not the manner of posting...
- But the image of Luther nailing the theses is visually powerful and a huge part of the popular lore concerning Luther (trying doing a “Google Image” search of the 95 Theses to see the number of images depicting Luther nailing the Theses to the door!)
- For additional discussion, you may ask “What is the proper role of myth making as it pertains to our heroes in the faith?”
- There may have been no actual debate, but clearly plenty occurred as a result of Luther going public with the Theses!
- Luther’s sending of the 95 to Archbishop Albrecht reveals great respect for authority of the bishop. It was Albrecht’s response in raising the question of heresy on the part of Luther that began to generate the storm that got the Reformation going.



Questions for reflection and conversation

adapted from Timothy Wengert's

Martin Luther's 95 Theses with Introduction, Commentary, and Study Guide

Revisiting the
95 Theses Today



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Some Key Theses toward Understanding Main Issues in the 95

Revisiting the 95 Theses Today



Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying, “Do penance,” wanted the entire life of the faithful to be one of penitence. (1)

This phrase cannot be understood as referring to sacramental Penance, this is, confession and satisfaction as administered by the clergy. (2)

Yet it does not mean solely inner penitence – indeed such inner penitence is nothing unless it outwardly produces various mortifications of the flesh. (3)

The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own discretion or that of the canons. (5)

The pope cannot remit any guilt except by declaring and confirming its remission by God or, of course, by remitting guilt in legal cases reserved to himself. (6)

And so, those indulgence preachers err who say that through the pope’s indulgences a person is released and saved from every penalty. (21)

Because of this, most people are inevitably deceived by means of this indiscriminate and high-sounding promise of release from penalty. (24)

They “preach human opinions” who say that, as soon as a coin thrown into the money chest clinks, a soul flies out of purgatory. (27)

It is certain that when a coin clinks in the money chest, profits and avarice may well be increased, but the intercession of the church rests on God’s choice alone. (28)

Those who teach that contrition is not necessary on the part of those who would rescue souls from purgatory or who would buy confessional privileges do not preach Christian views. (35)

Any truly remorseful Christian has a right to full remission of guilt and penalty, even without indulgence letters. (36)

Any true Christian, living or dead, possesses a God-given share in all the benefits of Christ and the church, even without indulgence letters. (37)

The “truth about contrition” seeks and loves penalties for sins; the “liberality of indulgences” relaxes penalties and at very least gives occasion for hating them. (40)

Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend the acquiring of indulgences to be compared in any way with works of mercy. (42)

Christians are to be taught that the one who gives to a poor person or lends to the needy does a better deed than if a person acquires indulgences. (43)

Because love grows through works of love and a person is made better; but through indulgences one is not made better but only freer from penalty of sin. (44)

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

Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must set aside enough for their household and by no means squander it on indulgences. (46)

Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the demands made by the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the Basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than that it be constructed using the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep. (50)



An injustice is done to the Word of God when, in the very same sermon, equal or more time is spent on indulgences than on the Word. (54)

It is necessarily the pope's intent that if indulgences, which are a completely insignificant thing, are celebrated with one bell, one procession, and one ceremony, then the gospel, which is the greatest thing of all, should be preached with a hundred bells, a hundred processions, and a hundred ceremonies. (55)

The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God. (62)

Therefore, the treasures of the gospel are nets with which they formerly fished for men of wealth. (65)

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

To suppress these very pointed arguments of the laity by force alone and not to resolve them by providing reasons is to expose the church and the pope to ridicule by their enemies and to make Christians miserable. (90)

And thus, away with all those prophets who say to Christ's people, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace! (92)

May it go well for all of those prophets who say to Christ's people, "Cross, cross," and there is no cross! (93)

Christians must be encouraged diligently to follow Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell, (94)

And in this way they may be confident of "entering heaven through many tribulations" rather than through the false security of peace. (95)



Notes:



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God's work. Our hands.



*Marked with the cross of Christ forever,
we are claimed, gathered, and sent
for the sake of the world.*