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Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in the Light of Testimony Against Indulgences Before the Reformation.

Luther, thoroughly conversant with the history of the Church and the world, frequently confounding his antagonists with unexpected flashes of historical research, viewed his trials, writings, and successes in the light of past history. Let us adduce one example. In the preface to a commentary on the Apocalypse by an anonymous writer, written about seventy years before Luther's days, as he surmises, he reminds the reader that he is publishing this work so the world might learn that he is not the first to declare the papacy the realm of Antichrist, since before his days many and great men had stated the same most clearly and convincingly and in consequence of it had suffered maltreatment and persecution. (Luther's Works, St. Louis ed., XV, 178.)

Luther admits that at the time when he posted his memorable Theses against the indulgence sanctioned and ordered by a bull of Pope Leo X (XV, 232), under the date of March 31, 1515, he himself was a full-fledged and thoroughgoing papist, a better papist, in fact, than "Mainz and Heinz" (Albert of Mayence and Henry of Brunswick) ever had been or ever could be (XVII, 1361); that he was such an unreasonable papist as to be ready to kill, or to assist in putting to death, any and all who denied, even in a syllable, obedience to the Pope. (XIV, 439.) The praise of his friends and colleagues regarding his Theses did not please him;

for he says: "I did not like it, for I did not know myself what the indulgence was, and the song was going into too high a pitch for my voice." (XVII, 1360.) A most notable confession of Luther along these lines is found in the preface which he wrote to his Theses of 1538. (XIV, 450ff.) He states that his Theses publicly exhibit his disgrace, his weakness, and his ignorance. He continues: "I stood alone and had taken up the matter uncautiously; but since I could not step back, I did not only concede the Pope many and great articles, but I continued to worship him. . . . I did not know many things I know now. I was totally ignorant regarding the nature of the indulgence, just as nobody in popedom knew anything about it. . . . My arguments were not in favor of abolishing it, but since I well knew what it did not mean, I desired to know what it did mean. . . . I looked up to the Pope, the cardinals, the bishops, the theologians, the jurists, the monks, and hoped for inspiration from them. For I had so surfeited on, and drunken, their doctrine that I failed to realize whether I was asleep or awake." (In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (XIX, 5), published in 1520, he states that he was sorry for what he had written two years previous concerning indulgences. He is, no doubt, referring to his *Notations* to his Theses of May 30, 1518. (XVIII, 100ff.)) But even later, in the last days of February, 1519, in a public declaration issued upon the request of Miltitz, Luther still fails to estimate indulgences correctly. (XV, 701.) Luther's Ninety-five Theses, then, were not a formal announcement to the world: "I am right," but rather a modest question, "Am I right?" He was sure of his ground when he spoke against the abuses, which were offshoots of the indulgence peddled by Tetzl, the salesman of this dirty ware in Germany, but he was very careful not to breathe a word against the institution itself. His 71st thesis (XVIII, 78): "Let him be accursed and damned who speaks against the truth of the Pope's indulgence," should have sufficed to convince his severest antagonists that he was still a faithful son of the Pope and that he had stepped into the arena to fight for the Pope against the man who, according to his opinion, was bringing disgrace upon the Church.]

Dissatisfaction with, criticism of, and antagonism to, indulgences was nothing new in the history of the Church. Frederick Myconius is not far from the truth when he asserts that the sale of indulgences had been carried to such outrageous extremes as to cause emperors, kings, princes, and lords of the holy realm to become disgusted with this papistic arrangement. (XV, 370.)

Like-wise the refusal of the guardian of the Franciscan order in Mayence to lend his assistance in promoting the sale of indulgences in Germany, which the Dominican Tetzel then took up with all the zeal of an expert salesman, speaks volumes about the disfavor into which indulgences had come among thinking men. (XV, 333.) And the Jesuit Maimburg states numerous renowned men had written in the Latin, French, Italian, and German languages against the shameful abuses connected with this traffic and considers it hopeless to suppress this evidence. (XV, 372.) So Luther was right when he said: "Denn alle Welt klagte ueber das Ablass." (XVII, 1360.)

The cry of rage raised against indulgences proceeded from historical, monetary, and dogmatic considerations, and of the three, money seems to have cried the loudest.

John Wessel Gansfort (d. 1489) opposed indulgences for various reasons. Jean Charlier de Gerson (1363—1429), Doctor Christianissimus, chancellor of the University of Paris, whom Luther loved above others because he spoke of spiritual trials and offered comfort to such as experienced them, was Wessel's foremost authority, whose leadership he followed in his writings against indulgences. Wessel's argument from history or tradition may be noted here. He attributes some value to tradition, perhaps more than he should, but he contends Christian antiquity offers no traces to prove the existence of indulgences, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory being silent on the question. Nobody, from all appearances, can point to the exact time of its origin, although it received a mighty impulse and came to fuller development under Boniface VIII. Tradition, to be of any value, must show unanimity among the teachers; but no two agree upon the same principles. History, then, offers no support for the institution of indulgences; for neither can it be brought into any connection with the apostolic age, nor can any agreement regarding the value and use of indulgences be proved among the teachers. They all advance their particular personal opinions, and such confusion does not bear the stamp of catholicity. (C. Ullmann, *Reformatoren vor der Reformation*, Vol. II, p. 492.) One of John Ruchrath of Wesel's arguments is of the same nature. After stating that neither the writings of the evangelists nor those of the apostles contain one line on indulgences, he continues to say that soon after the days of the apostles "renowned teachers like Gregory the Nazianzene, Basil of Caesarea, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine have written many works, which the

Church has approved, and in those we read nothing about indulgences. But since the orders of the Dominicans and Franciscans have come into existence, many illustrious and learned men have written concerning them; but they do not agree in their opinions, they are rather opposite. And their opinions are now debated in the schools. I myself have been among the debaters and have defended the worth and divine authority of the indulgence, because as a student I too readily believed my teachers." (Ullmann, *Reformatoren*, I, 240.) Wessel's and Wesel's argument is irrefutable because all documents dated before the eleventh century purporting to be proof for the existence and use of indulgences at the respective time are manifest forgeries. Hence we look in vain for testimony against them before this time. A thing not existing cannot well be opposed.

The depleted treasuries of the lords and princes and the fact that the people were plundered and reduced to poverty by the continued excessive sale of this papal ware, brought on a protest that was loud and long and repeated time and again. Martin Mayer, chancellor to Dietrich of Erbach, Archbishop of Mayence, sensed the situation correctly. In a letter dated August 31, 1457, addressed to Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Cardinal of Siena, later Pope Pius II, he says: "To harvest more money, new bulls of indulgences are issued daily. . . . A thousand ways and means are invented by the papal court to obtain our money in some subtle and cunning manner, and we are treated like barbarians." (XV, 373. This letter is also quoted by Bruno Gebhardt on page 32f. of his book *Die Gravamina der deutschen Nation gegen den roemischen Hof*.)

The pugnacious schoolman Peter Abelard (1079—1142), if the historians report correctly, was at the head of a long line of men who opposed indulgences because of the money involved. The Popes, at first, did not use indulgences as a source of income; but it was different with bishops and priests; for Abelard complains about the priests who *pro nummorum oblatione satisfactionis adjunctae poenas condonant vel relaxant*, and he excoriates the bishops who were *ita impudenter* filled with love of money *ut, cum in dedicationibus ecclesiarum, vel in consecrationibus altarium, vel benedictionibus cimiteriorum, vel in aliquibus solemnitatibus populares habent conventus, unde copiosam oblationem exspectant, in relaxandis poenitentiis prodigi sunt, modo tertiam, modo quartam poenitentiae partem omnibus communiter indulgentes*. (Herzog, *Realenzyklopaedie*, sub "Indulgenzen.") There was, no doubt,

cause for such complaints; for at the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, Innocent III restricted the power of the bishops to the granting of forty-day indulgences, *i. e.*, remission of penances during forty days, and the granting of *indulgentia plenaria* he claimed as an exclusive power of the Popes. (Kurtz, *Kirchengeschichte*, § 107, 2.)

A vehement complaint against indulgences as a usurious transaction was heard from Germany when Nicholas V (1447—55) issued his proclamation in favor of a year of jubilee for 1450. This papal procedure is all the more significant and reprehensible since it occurred shortly after the adjournment of the Council of Basel, the last of the reform councils, which had busied themselves with the burning question of indulgences and sought to restrain the Popes from humbugging the people. (Kurtz, § 118, 1.) But Nicholas preferred to ignore the loathing and abhorrence of the Germans uttered at these councils against "the Popes who made sin a piece of merchandise and by means of indulgences sold the remission of sins for cold cash." (R. Neubauer, *Martin Luther*, 41.) The year of jubilee was a source of an enormous income for the papal treasury. But the avaricious Pope wanted more and so extended the grace of the jubilee year to 1451, and he sent Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa to Germany to offer the grace of indulgence at a reduced rate, at half price. This prompted the issuing of the following complaint: "The Pope and the Italians are not satisfied with the enormous sums obtained from the faithful, and which flowed into the papal treasury, but in addition to this he sent a cardinal to garner the remnant of our possessions. . . . This compels the faithful to doubt his sincerity, since they have been so often deceived. Thus they have been told that the funds collected would be used for the conversion of the Bohemians and for the winning of the seceded Greek Church. Neither was done. It is difficult to understand why the Germans in the year of grace should be more punished than the Italians, who are benefited by the jubilee and deposit no money in the boxes." (Gebhardt, *Gravamina*, 8f.)

Again, in 1456, representatives of five electors, of the bishops of Salzburg and Bremen, and of the cathedral chapters of Mayence, Trent, Cologne, and Bremen convened at Frankfort to discuss the issue of a new indulgence by Calixtus III (1455—1458), whose one passion was hatred of the Turk, and who professed to need the money for a warfare against the Turk. These representatives gave vent to their sour disdain by heaping invectives upon the

Pope, who "was unmercifully shearing the German lambs." They resolved that all moneys raised by indulgences must remain in Germany. (Gebhardt, *ibid.*, 19. 26.) Similar protests were frequently repeated by German prelates. Thus Diether of Isenburg, Archbishop of Mayence, successor to Dietrich of Erbach since 1459, appears as a leader of German ecclesiastical princes in an appeal to the Pope in which they express their hatred of tithes raised by the Church. They say that "by repeated indulgences, ordered under numerous subterfuges, the Church has been surrendered to the usurers and her existence undermined, . . . and the nation has been drained to exhaustion and must fail in its efforts to bear all these burdens." (Gebhardt, *ibid.*, 47.) At the Congress of Mantua called by Pius II (1458—64) for June 1, 1459, but because of lack of interest opened September 2 of the same year, the crusade against the Turk was the main topic, and that, of course, meant the raising of moneys by taxes, including indulgences. Gregory of Heimburg, the former friend of Pius II, with whom he had fought shoulder to shoulder for reforms at the Council of Basel, was very prominent in the affairs of his days, and he opposed the Pope's efforts to the bitter end. He declared that his whole heresy consisted in asserting that the Pope in his proposed crusade against the Turk wanted nothing but money. A year later Pius put Heimburg under the bann. (Gebhardt, *ibid.*, 36. Kurtz, § 120, 5.)

The chronicles of German cities are replete with complaints similar to one of 1465, which says that it is a rare surprise to find currency in Germany; but, in fact, it ought not surprise anybody if he notices a dearth of gold and silver since it is carried in bags to Italy. Germany had been bearing such burdensome taxes for the last two hundred years. (Gebhardt, *ibid.*, 59.)

The Diets of Nuernberg in 1466 and of Augsburg in 1500 also busied themselves with this vexing financial problem. At the former it was resolved to suspend all indulgences in favor of one, the indulgence for the warfare against the Turk, and in the Recess it was expressly stated: "*Und solich Gelt soll nit dem Papst, noch Keyser, noch Niemand anders von ihren wegen, sondern allein den Kurfuersten, Fuersten, Prelaten, Graven, Herren, Fryen und Richstaetten werden und gefallen.*" The Diet of Augsburg convened in a year of jubilee, and Alexander VI (1492 to 1503), that profligate and murderer, had availed himself of the golden opportunity to reap a harvest of clinking money by issuing an indulgence. But the princes were not minded to have

their subjects exploited, and the unholy business did not promise much success to Cardinal Raimund, who acted as the Pope's representative. The princes yielded sullenly, but declared: "All moneys must stay in Germany." So the diet, busied with an extraordinary number of political problems, still found time to discuss the ever-recurring question concerning indulgences and even remonstrated to the Pope. Ways and means were also considered how he might be made "ductile and pliant to right reason" if he resisted. (Gebhardt, *ibid.*, 72 ff.)

According to the annals available to the writer the last efforts before the Reformation to stem the flow of money to Italy were made by Maximilian I (1493—1519), aided by Wimpheling. (Gebhardt, *ibid.*, 78 ff.) The emperor sent his secretary, Jakob Spiegel, to Wimpheling in Heidelberg, in 1510, with the information that his imperial highness was determined to free Germany from the Curia and to hinder the dragging of money to Rome, which the Popes used to the harm of the emperor. In his answer to the emperor, Wimpheling almost exclusively stresses the financial features connected with the dirty business of indulgences. He says, *e. g.*, that the avarice of the Popes and cardinals prompts many laymen to refuse to make bequests to the Church, because they are not inclined to turn their possessions over to such conscienceless squanderers. He enumerates ten *gravamina* of the German nation which are identical with those itemized by Martin Mayer in his letter to Aeneas Sylvius (mentioned above) a little over fifty years before. He presages a persecution of all clericals or a general defection of believers like that of the Bohemians, if the papal court should fail to learn to be more moderate in its demands.

Thousands, then, objected to indulgences because, to their minds, they amounted to heavy and therefore unjust taxation. They yielded again and again although they continued grumbling and protesting against the nefarious scheme. But let us bear in mind that it was the serious drain on their pocketbooks that concerned them most, and it was not because the institution stood and was fostered in flagrant violation of God's Word. But there were some who opposed it for dogmatic reasons. B.

(To be concluded.)
