

Luther's 97 Theses¹

Disputation Against Scholastic Theology

Introduction:

Luther's 97 Theses, also known as the Disputation Against Scholastic Theology; which was based upon the principles of Sola Scriptura and Sola Fide and represent a significant theological shift in September of 1517. Martin Luther critiques key elements of Medieval Scholastic Theology, advocating for a return to Augustine's teachings rather than Aristotle's. Luther's 97 Theses demonstrate his discontentment with prevailing theological norms and the need for Reform within the established Church.

- Luther's arguments sets him against the Moral Anthropology of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. Affirming Augustine's argument on Original Sin.
- Luther's theses also clarifies the history of Sin and Grace, as set against the Anthropology of the Medieval Scholastics and dismissing them as unbiblical and lacking any credence to biblical truth.
- Luther's Historical-Grammatical method (a return to the Hermeneutic of the Early Church Fathers) of interpretation is set against the elaborate Four-fold hermeneutic (Literal, Moral, Allegorical, and Analogical = The Quadriga²) of the Church leading into the 16th century; which was an exercise of intellectual asceticism.

Quadriga



¹ Edited and Outlined for Clarity and Grammar by Rev. T.R. Penry III

² The Quadriga is the name of a Roman Chariot that is pulled by four horses. Pictured - Brandenburg Gate Quadriga Statue, Berlin, Germany

Disputation Against Scholastic Theology

The Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam

- 1A. The Established Augustinian Theological Base (1-3)
 - 1. To say that Augustine exaggerates in speaking against heretics is to say that Augustine tells lies almost everywhere. This is contrary to common knowledge.
 - 2. This is the same as permitting Pelagians³ and all heretics to triumph and concede victory to them.
 - 3. It is the same as making sport of the authority of all doctors of theology.
- 2A. The Perversion of Established Theology (4-28)
 - 1B. The Will (4-15)
 - 4. It is true that man, being a bad tree, can only will and do evil (cf. Matthew 7:17-18).
 - 5. It is false to state that man's inclination can choose between two opposites. Indeed, the inclination is not free but captive. This is said in opposition to common opinion.
 - 6. It is false to state that the will can, by nature, conform to the correct precept. This is said in opposition to Scotus⁴ and Gabriel⁵.
 - 7. As a matter of fact, without the grace of God, the will produces an act that is perverse and evil.
 - 8. It does not, however, follow that the will is by nature evil, that is, essentially evil, as the Manichaeans⁶ maintain.
 - 9. It is nevertheless innately and inevitably evil and corrupt.
 - 10. One must concede that the will is not free to strive toward whatever is declared good. This is in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel.
 - 11. Nor is it able to will or not to will whatever is prescribed.
 - 12. Nor does one contradict St. Augustine when one says that nothing is so much in the power of the will as the will itself.

³ Pelagius (380?-420? AD.) - A native of Britain who denied Original Sin. He held that justifying Grace is given according to merit and regarded sinless perfection possible after Baptism. His teachings were vigorously attacked by St. Augustine (354-430 AD.) - Bishop of Hippo.

⁴ John Duns Scotus (d.1308 AD.) - The leader of the Scotist school which taught Freedom of the Will and the superiority of this Will over the intellect. He denied the real distinction between the Soul and its faculties.

⁵ Gabriel Biel (1425?-1495 AD.) - 'The Last of the Scholastics' and the first Professor of Theology in the newly founded University of Tübingen. He was the author of 'The Canon of the Mass' which Martin Luther studied diligently as a young man.

⁶ Manichaeism is a form of religious dualism consisting of Zoroastrian dualism, Babylonian folklore, and Buddhist ethics superficially combined with Christian elements. It was founded in the latter half of the third century by the Persian prophet Mani (215?-276? AD.). According to Mani, everything material and sensual is created evil and must be overcome.

13. It is absurd to conclude that erring man can love the creature above all things and, therefore, also God. This is in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel.
14. Nor is it surprising that the will can conform to erroneous and not to correct precepts.
15. Indeed, it is peculiar to it that it can only conform to erroneous and not to correct precepts.
- 2B. The Will Misdirected (16-28)
 - 1C. Of Love and the Will (16-22)
 16. One ought rather to conclude that since erring man can love the creature, it is impossible for him to love God.
 17. Man is, by nature, unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he wants to be God and does not want God to be God.
 18. To love God above all things by nature is a fictitious term, a chimera, as it were. This is contrary to common teaching.
 19. We cannot apply Scotus' reasoning concerning the brave citizen who loves his country more than himself.
 20. An act of friendship is done not according to nature but according to prevenient grace. This is in opposition to Gabriel.
 21. No act is done according to nature that is not an act of concupiscence against God.
 22. Every act of concupiscence against God is evil and a fornication of the spirit.
 - 2C. Of Hope and the Will (23-28)
 23. Nor is it true that an act of concupiscence can be set aright by the virtue of hope. This is in opposition to Gabriel.
 24. For hope is not contrary to charity, which seeks and desires only that which is of God.
 25. Hope does not grow out of merits but out of suffering, which destroys merits. This is in opposition to the opinion of many.
 26. An act of friendship is not the most perfect means for accomplishing that which is in one.⁷ Nor is it the most ideal means for obtaining the grace of God or turning toward and approaching God.
 27. But it is an act of conversion already perfected, following grace both in time and by nature.
 28. If it is said of the Scripture passages, "Return to me,...and I will return to you" (Zechariah 1:3.), "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8, "Seek and you will find" [(Matthew 7:7), "You will seek me and find me" (Jeremiah 29:13), and the like, that one is by nature, the other by grace; this is no different from asserting what the Pelagians have said.

⁷ "To do what is in one" is a scholastic phrase which implies that a Christian can do meritorious works agreeable to God.

- 3A. The Theology of Eternal Election and Predestination of God (29-40)
29. God's eternal election and predestination are The best and infallible preparation for grace and the sole disposition toward grace.
30. However, on man's part, nothing precedes grace except indisposition and rebellion against grace.
31. It is said with the idlest demonstrations that the predestined can be damned individually but not collectively. This is in opposition to the scholastics.
32. Moreover, nothing is achieved by the following saying: Predestination is necessary by virtue of the consequence of God's will but not of what followed, namely, that God had to elect a particular person.
33. It is false that doing all that one can do can remove the obstacles to grace in opposition to several authorities.
34. In brief, a man, by nature, has neither correct precept nor goodwill.
35. It is not true that an invincible ignorance excuses one completely (all scholastics notwithstanding);
36. For ignorance of God and oneself and good work is always invincible to nature.
37. Nature, moreover, inwardly and necessarily glories and takes pride in every work which is apparently and outwardly good.
38. There is no moral virtue without either pride or sorrow, that is, without sin.
39. We are not masters of our actions but servants from beginning to end. This is in opposition to the philosophers.
40. We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds; having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds. This is in opposition to the philosophers.
- 4A. The Foundations of Sound Theology (41-53) Removing Aristotle
41. Virtually, the entire Ethics of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace. This is in opposition to the scholastics.
42. It is an error to maintain that Aristotle's statement concerning happiness does not contradict Catholic doctrine. This is in opposition to the doctrine of morals.
43. It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle. This is in opposition to common opinion.
44. Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle.
45. To state that a theologian who is not a logician is a monstrous heretic is a grotesque and heretical statement. This is in opposition to common opinion.
46. In vain does one fashion a logic of faith, a substitution brought about without regard for limit and measure. This is in opposition to the new dialecticians.
47. No syllogistic form is valid when applied to divine terms. This is in opposition to the Cardinal.⁸
48. Nevertheless, it does not follow that the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity contradicts syllogistic forms. This is in opposition to the same new dialecticians and to the Cardinal.

⁸ Luther refers to the Cardinal of Cambrai, Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420). A French theologian, a commentator on 'The Sentences of Peter Lombard' and guiding spirit of the Conciliar Movement which led to the calling of the Council of Constance (1414-1418 AD.)

49. If a syllogistic form of reasoning holds in divine matters, then the doctrine of the Trinity is demonstrable and not the object of faith.
50. Briefly, the whole of Aristotle⁹ is to theology as darkness is to light. This is in opposition to the scholastics.
51. It is very doubtful whether the Latins comprehended the correct meaning of Aristotle.
52. It would have been better for the church if Porphyry¹⁰, with his universals, had not been born for the use of theologians.
53. Even the more useful definitions of Aristotle seem to beg the question.
- 5A. The Theology of Law and Grace Grace and Law. (54-97)
54. For an act to be meritorious, either the presence of grace is sufficient, or its presence means nothing. This is in opposition to Gabriel.
55. The grace of God is never present in such a way that it is inactive, but it is a living, active, and operative spirit; nor can it happen that through the absolute power of God, an act of friendship may be present without the presence of the grace of God. This is in opposition to Gabriel.
56. It is not true that God can accept man without his justifying grace. This is in opposition to Ockham.¹¹
57. It is dangerous to say that the law commands that an act of obeying the commandment be done in the grace of God. This is in opposition to the Cardinal and Gabriel.
58. From this, "to have the grace of God" is a new demand that goes beyond the law.
59. It would also follow that fulfilling the law can occur without God's grace.
60. Likewise, it follows that the grace of God would be more hateful than the law itself.
61. It does not follow that the law should be complied with and fulfilled in the grace of God. This is in opposition to Gabriel.
62. And that therefore he who is outside the grace of God sins incessantly, even when he does not kill, commit adultery, or become angry.
63. But it follows that he sins because he does not spiritually fulfill the law.
64. Spiritually, that person does not kill, does not do evil, and does not become enraged when he neither becomes angry nor lusts.
65. Outside the grace of God, it is indeed impossible not to become angry or lustful, so not even in grace is it possible to fulfill the law perfectly.

⁹ The logical and metaphysical writings of Aristotle were well known in the Middle Ages and were incorporated in Scholasticism. His scientific writings became known to Europeans in the late Middle Ages and caused much concern because they contained statements contrary to Christian doctrine. It is to these writings that Luther refers in his phrase "the whole of Aristotle."

¹⁰ Porphyry (233-303 AD.) - A Neoplatonic follower of Plotinus and a bitter opponent of Christianity.

¹¹ William of Ockham (1280-1349 AD.) - A Franciscan school man, a nominalist who stated that reason could not be applied to Theology. He published commentaries on Aristotle and Porphyry.

66. It is the righteousness of the hypocrite actually and outwardly not to kill, do evil, etc.
67. It is by the grace of God that one does not lust or become enraged.
68. Therefore, it is impossible to fulfill the law in any way without the grace of God.
69. As a matter of fact, it is more accurate to say that the law is destroyed by nature without the grace of God.
70. A good law will, of necessity, be bad for the natural will.
71. Law and will are two implacable foes without the grace of God.
72. What the law wants, the will never wants unless it pretends to like it out of fear or love.
73. As taskmaster of the will, the law will not be overcome except by the “child, who has been born to us” (Isaiah 9:6).
74. The law makes sin abound because it irritates and repels the will (Romans 7:13).
75. The grace of God, however, makes justice abound through Jesus Christ because it causes one to be pleased with the law.
76. Every deed of the law without the grace of God appears good outwardly, but inwardly, it is a sin. This is in opposition to the scholastics.
77. The will is always averse to, and the hands inclined toward, the law of the Lord without the grace of God.
78. The will inclined toward the law without the grace of God is so inclined because of its advantage.
79. Condemned are all those who do the works of the law.
80. Blessed are all those who do the works of the grace of God.
81. Chapter Falsas concerning penance, dist. 5,¹² confirms that works outside the realm of grace are unsuitable if this is not understood falsely.
82. Not only are the religious ceremonials not the good law and the precepts in which one does not live (in opposition to many teachers);
83. But even the Decalogue and all that can be taught and prescribed inwardly and outwardly is not good law either.
84. The good law and that in which one lives is the love of God, spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.
85. Anyone’s will would prefer, if possible, that there would be no law and be entirely free.
86. Anyone’s will hates that the law should be imposed upon it; if the will desires imposition of the law, it does so out of love of self.
87. Since the law is good, the will, which is hostile to it, cannot be good.
88. From this, it is clear that everyone’s natural will is iniquitous and evil.
89. Grace as a mediator is necessary to reconcile the law with the will.
90. God’s grace is given to direct the will, lest it err even in loving God in opposition to Gabriel.

¹² *Decretum Magistri Gratiani, Decreta Secunda Pars*, causa XXXIII, ques. III, dist. V, cap 6. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Aemilius Friedberg (Graz, 1955), I, col. 1241. Cf. Migne 187, 1636.

91. It is not given so that good deeds might be induced more frequently and readily, but because without it, no act of love is performed in opposition to Gabriel.

92. It cannot be denied that love is superfluous if man can naturally do an act of friendship in opposition to Gabriel.

93. There is a kind of subtle evil in the argument that an act is, at the same time, the fruit and the use of the fruit. In opposition to Ockham, the Cardinal, Gabriel.

94. This also holds the saying that the love of God may continue alongside an intense love of the creature.

95. To love God is, at the same time, to hate oneself and to know nothing but God.

96. We must make our will conform in every respect to the will of God (in opposition to the Cardinal);

97. So that we not only will what God wills but also ought to will whatever God wills.

In these statements, we wanted to say and believe we have said nothing that does not agree with the Catholic Church and its teachers.¹³ September 1517



“Translating the Bible in the Year 1532,” an engraving by J.C. Buttre after a painting by P.A. Labouchere, shows part of Luther’s Old Testament translation team. From left to right: Philip Melancthon, Martin Luther, Johann Bugenhagen, and Casper Creziger.

¹³ I (T.R. Penry III) find this statement curious because Luther’s 97 Theses = Disputation Against Scholastic Theology, based upon the principles of Sola Scriptura and Sola Fide, strikes at the heart of Medieval Scholastic Theology within the established Catholic Church.