

Our 97

Introduction

In 1517, Martin Luther posted two sets of theses. The famous *95 Theses* focused on indulgences and was posted on All Hallows Eve. Less well-known is that Luther also posted an earlier set called the *97 Theses*, examining the theological framework of the medieval church, known as scholastic theology. Understanding this earlier set is crucial in comprehending Luther's broader critique of the medieval church and how we are called to critique our most basic assumptions today. Luther challenged the framework built on Aristotle's time, and we get to challenge the framework that was a product of Luther's.

It's intriguing to note that the concept of *theses* originates from university life and was intended to stimulate public discussion and debate on important issues. Luther's *97 Theses* challenged the fundamental assumptions of his time, and today, we can draw parallels to the need to reflect on our own basic assumptions. This is particularly relevant given that our most basic assumptions were shaped during the European Reformation 500 years ago when Christianity was closely intertwined with the law and had a strong connection to the state. For example, in Calvin's Geneva, it was mandatory to attend worship three times a week: once on Wednesday and twice on Sunday. Likewise, new pastors in Geneva had to be approved by the church and the local magistrates.

Although we no longer live in that same context, many of our thought patterns and actions are still based on these old assumptions rooted in a truly foreign context. Today, there is a need to question the assumptions framed in the context of the Reformation and adapt to our current cultural landscape while remaining faithful to the Good News we profess.

The compilation of thoughts presented below challenges many of our current assumptions and aims to initiate a much-needed conversation. While our conditions for reformation differ from those of the Middle Ages, it does not diminish the importance of our work in shaping the future for generations to come. These theses may be controversial - in fact, they have failed if they are not. Nevertheless, they are not presented for controversy's sake but strive for faithfulness in our age, just as God is faithful in all eras. We need good, faithful, and vigorous debates.

Finally, *Our 97* is an invitation to all members of Muskingum Valley Presbytery to contribute to the discourse. Join us in shaping a thoughtful dialogue as we seek to be faithful in our age.

Theses

1. Our primary proclamation is the declaration that came from the mouth of Jesus time and time again, “The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe this good news.” All other Christian theology flows from this proclamation, including the death and resurrection of Christ.
2. The Good News of Christ is most naturally heard and embraced by the oppressed, downtrodden, and abused. It is wrong to assume that church growth should follow the models of white, middle, and upper class populations in the West.
3. The Presbyterian movement should identify the most underserved populations and send spiritual and physical resources to help build up the Body of Christ there regularly, strategically, and intentionally.
4. John Calvin’s insistence that a true church was defined by proper preaching of the Word of God, and the right administration of the sacraments is a commentary on the Protestant/Catholic struggle of his day, and not a full declaration of community faithfulness. This has been the source of many sins within the church. This framework, for example, has allowed us to turn our heads to countless non-vital churches simply because they maintain weekly worship. Calvin’s assertion has also been the fountain head for the idea that worship is the most natural entry point into the Christian community.
5. Base lines beyond worship should be defined, such as having a vital group of elders who are able to lead public and “pastoral” prayers with individual and small groups, facilitating Biblical discussions, and leading the congregation in ministries of mercy, compassion, and justice.
6. Chartered congregations who are unwilling or unable to meet basic standards of ministry, beyond worship, should be assumed, dismissed, or disbanded, while being welcome into other congregations.
7. The nature of the faith community, the Body of Christ, is to be the local expression of God’s reign of faithfulness, healing, wholeness, salvation, forgiveness, redemption, and deliverance. A Christian community requires \$0 nor buildings. Instead the Christian community requires people of faith, devotion, dedication, and bravery.
8. By building a professional class of Clergy, the church has curtailed and limited Luther’s focus on the *priesthood of all believer*. In the Presbyterian tradition, research has demonstrated that such a professional cast of Christians dates as early as Calvin’s reign over Geneva. In this regard, recent generations have been no better than the Christian community in Geneva. Our language portrays our deepest assumptions on this issue. Instead of “pastoral care,” we should reference “Christian care.” Likewise, we frequently use the noun “pastor” as a verb, but we do not do the same with elder or deacon.
9. Before ordination and/or installation, elders, deacons, and pastors should be able to demonstrate basic skills and giftings, such as: leading prayer in the moment, facilitating biblical discussions, listening with compassion, speaking truth in love, and challenging systems of apathy, complacency, and injustice.
10. While Christian community differs from technical pursuits such as art and athletics, we have no training regimen for basic skills. Even worse, we do not expect people to grow in their faith. If the Christian community does focus on growth, it is primarily theological in nature, and not practice supported by theology.

11. It is unbiblical, and by-and-large unhealthy, to send solo pastors into ministry. Jesus sent disciples in pairs. This practice even applied as Jesus sent two disciples to gathering a donkey. The demands of ministry cannot be met by one pastor, and solo pastorates at “best” build personal kingdoms and theifdoms. The Body of Christ only has one head, and that is Christ.
12. Pastors (and their churches) who feel demoralized and burnt-out would benefit from pastoral partnerships and partnerships among congregations.
13. Siloed pastors is closely related to siloed churches. Collectively we are the Body of Christ. Our buildings, resources, and pastors do not belong to us. For everything on earth belongs to the Lord. Thus we are called to partner with others beyond our immediate benefit. This not only means that churches share financial resources, but they share spiritual, ministry, and teaching resources. Unfortunately, our polity and practice emphasizes the individuality of congregations, not partnerships (G-1.101-2).
14. In Calvin’s Geneva, at any given time, there were four professors of the Geneva Academy, 8 to 10 ministers in the city’s three churches, and 10 to 11 pastors in the neighboring countryside. They served their region together. These groups represented a range of theological education and instruction. The modern church, in each region would benefit from following and embracing more and less strenuous forms of theological education among the team of pastors who serve the region together. In our case, we need local theological professors to be added to our numbers while maintaining language and communication that is accessible to all people in the region.
15. Direct pay for pastoral ministry is rooted in the idols of power and control, and often hinders ministry in the local and regional community of faith.
16. In addition to theological training, and practice skills, candidates for ministry should thoroughly investigate their ministry passions and gifts, and serve in their top capacities among a cohort of regional pastors. Such categories for ministry should included organizational leadership, equipping, and community ministry.
17. The Christian community is not a collection of perfect people. The Body of Christ, instead, has from the very beginning been a band of misfits and outcasts who seek to be holy.
18. History is riddled with oppressive religious communities who have abused the image of God in people through tactics of fear, mistreatment, and even death. Even the early days of the church in Geneva committed fratricide in the name of religion. While we are called to righteousness, faithfulness, and justice, we are also encouraged to live lives of mercy, gentleness, and self-control.
19. Righteousness, faithfulness, and justice are linguistically tied together in both the ancient Hebrew and Greek scriptures. It is to our detriment that theological, philosophical, and political wings of the church have divided and twisted them to their own ends. Because these words are intimately tied together, we can not separate them, and thus many of our differences should be muted before the Word of God. This does not mean that we have healthy points to make, rather that we should all let the scriptures define us together.
20. Christian ethics are best taught through tools such as parable and proverb, not fear, which leads to isolation, lack of safe space, internal turmoil, and sin.
21. The Christian faith, at times, has been a selfish pursuit which focused on our personal benefits and salvation. The ministry of Jesus calls us to more. As Jesus healed, nurtured, restored, and forgave others, our faith should focus on the benefit of others, and not ourselves.

22. The teachings of Jesus are best lived out within covenant community of faith of reciprocity. We forgive all. We pray for enemies. But there is no holiness in allowing others, or ourselves, to be abused time and time again. Turning the other cheek is a bold proclamation to a sibling stating, “Do you really want to backhand me after you slapped me?” The action of turning the other cheek is a means to call a sibling to stop.
23. There is a strong distinction between that which is necessary for a Christian community to spiritually thrive and that which is a comfort and/or nicety. One matrix for the health of a Christian community is how much its people focus on the spiritual necessities.
24. While the Book of Order presents beautiful theology, it is still too long, and yet lacks helpful specificity. For example, in our opening section, F-1.01, there is no direct definition of the “Mission of God.” While retaining mystery and nuance, the basic theology in the Book of Order should be written in language that all people can easily understand. Our theological language is a burden to the Mission of God.
25. The word “church” is a post-biblical term and is filled with connotations that are not helpful to the mission of God in the world. Such connotations include “building” and “judgmental.” The word “church” should be worked out of our formal and informal language.
26. As followers of Jesus, or disciples, discipline should not primarily be limited to pastors, nor should it be limited to egregious cases. This can be done without being oppressive.
27. Not every person in a congregation is called to serve as an elder. It is not a matter of taking turns.
28. Intellect is important, but it is not the primary skill of pastors.
29. Locally, regionally, and at large, decisions should not be limited to majority rule (F-3.0205). At times consensus is advisable, healthy, and helpful.
30. Funding should not be limited to donations and investments. Other religious communities have developed healthy and holy ties to business, such as the Amish community. Not all business is oppressive. By embracing business development, we can help fund ministry and train leaders.
31. The unintentional and logical conclusions of the European Reformation of 500 years ago are individualism, secularism, and atheism. We must find healthy ways to address these issues.
32. While there is an umbrella of orthodox and while not all theology fits within this umbrella, to closely defining and using terms such as “true” christian, or “true” church are not helpful to the mission of God in the world.
33. While Calvin’s Geneva was a theocracy where individuals were required to attend worship 3 times a week, and participate in the Lord’s Supper, theocracies by their nature and human nature are tyrannical. Such civic religion also logically leads to Christian Nationalism and is used as justification for all sorts of evil.
34. With the advent of Luther’s expositional style sermon, pastors have often become the center of worship, driven by cult personalities. The purpose of worship is to worship God, and while instruction can and should take place in worship special care should be given to leading worship in such a way that focuses the attention and devotion of the people to God and not to the realm of ideas.
35. Christian worship lifts one’s spirit, but the purpose of worship is to glorify God, not simply to encourage the people.

36. As we no longer live in a theocracy, it is important to deal with the ecclesiastical benefits of theocracy that we do not want to give up and which actually hinder God's mission in the modern world. For example, the Good News calls us to go to people who are "not in Church on Sunday," instead of expecting them to show up.

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