

Ninety-Five Theses on Church Control

Colleagues,

This week the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod holds its convention in St. Louis. There are a growing number of voices for reform within the LCMS, and a fair number of them are in town for the assembly. Robert Schmidt, Dean of Theological Studies (Emeritus) at the Portland, Oregon campus of the LCMS's Concordia University is one such voice for reform, though he's not a delegate at this year's gathering. He's a reformer who even uses the classic format of 95 Theses to make his case. After I'd read the theses—and that was just recently—I asked him about passing them on to you. He said OK, and then added: “As you can tell from the Theses, I too consider myself to be a part of Seminex's ‘Promising Tradition.’ But watch out. That ‘Tradition’ has in it the ferment leading to new forms of the church and ministry.” Read the theses for yourself and see what you think.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Ninety-Five Theses on Church Control

Preface

The first draft of these theses was written early in the 1970s after returning from Africa as a missionary and seminary professor. In the context of tremendous physical and spiritual needs of that desperately poor continent, the denominational

structure of the Christian church seemed out of place. Where Christians should have worked together for the good of the people, they often worked at cross-purposes and witnessed to their divisions rather than to their unity in Christ. Equally disturbing was the inappropriateness of restricting word and sacrament ministry to those who were educated in a western type seminary and would become dependent on professional salaries and subsidy.

Overwhelmed by the power of the denominational structures in the United States and their hold on the hearts and minds of their people, it seemed best to put these theses aside and work toward the empowering of laity for ministry as the best way to carry out Christ's mission. Because of the efforts of many people in the United States and the world, more lay ministry is taking place and many congregations are beginning to realize the tremendous gifts lay ministers can bring to the churches' life and work.

But such small beginnings are not nearly enough to meet three crucial challenges facing the churches. The first is how to reach a younger generation impatient with the control structures of traditional congregations and denominations. The second is how to minister to strong ethnic communities in the United States and elsewhere. The third is how to witness to Christ and his kingdom to an exploding world population that every day makes Christians a dwindling minority. To meet these challenges, Christians at the local level need their Gospel freedom to work together to carry out Christ's mission.

However, instead of giving their members the freedom to make their own decisions, church bodies like the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are insisting upon more denominational control. In so doing, they are undermining the Gospel and the freedom of its members to carry out the Church's mission. In the name of

Jesus Christ and for the sake of his kingdom it is time to discuss these Ninety-Five Theses on Church Control so that all of Christ's people realize their freedom in the Gospel and their opportunities to share his love.

Introduction

For the Church, for the world, another Reformation is needed. Then the Word of God was cited against a single authority; now it must be proclaimed against hundreds of competing authorities. Then the Church was reformed, but divided; now the Church must be transformed to become united. Then the Gospel was rediscovered in the debate over indulgences; now it must be recovered in the struggle over church control.

In her better moments the Church has taken on all institutions, including her own, and has held them up to the searching scrutiny of the Word of God. The Christian Church, harbinger of change, champion of the oppressed, proclaimer of the kingdom, is but a tired image of her former self. Rent with division, each group of Christians finds itself pandering to the comforts and prejudices of its own members. Most traditional denominations face declining memberships, aging adherents, dwindling influence, and unhappy pastors. Living in the light of fading glories, most church bodies are dull, uncreative, and boring. Their children are their worst critics.

The purpose of a Reformation in our day is to transform the present institutional pattern of the organized churches. To do so, it must replace the laws and rules which support its present structure with the Gospel of Christian freedom, leading to new, more appropriate structures. As Christians become once again confident of the liberty they have in the Gospel and use it to unite people in love, then the Church can again become a model for all institutions to work toward bringing the kingdom of God to the whole world.

Luther's Ninety-Five Theses

The Ninety-Five Theses of Martin Luther have come down to us as a mighty protest igniting the Protestant Reformation against the Medieval Church. Yet to their casual reader, they are little more than an expository thesis on the subject of penance. They do not begin with an elaborate analysis and critique of the Church or the world. Instead, there is just a simple application of the Biblical teaching on repentance. However, as soon as one compared these teachings to what the Church was actually teaching and doing, anyone could see glaring contradictions. This contrast, then, is what provoked the power and fury of what came to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

In our day, another teaching of the Scriptures needs a similar exposition. This is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. As a doctrine, justification by faith has had a hard time of it recently. Lutherans can no longer agree on it. After a tentative agreement on some aspects of justification, Lutherans and the Vatican are still in disagreement on its implications. Some claim simply that times have changed, and our age is no longer asking the question, "How can I find a good and gracious God?"

The current sentiment seems to be that justification by faith alone was great for Luther and his time, but is really not the issue today. It is quite common to hear people say, "If Luther were alive today, he would emphasize something quite different." Yet in both the writings of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, justification by faith alone was not looked upon as an emphasis for personality type (such as Luther) or for an age (The Reformation Era). It was rather seen as that which inherently was "the" message of the Scriptures. This was the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article by which the Church stood or fell. If this article was lost, then all was lost in

the Church. If it remained, others things would work out as well.

In the voluminous writings of the era, it was expressed in many ways and was used to expound nearly the entire body of Christian doctrine. Regardless of how it was expressed, justification by faith alone was “the” Christian message. It colored everything about the life of the Christian, the relationship to God, life after death and especially fellowship with other Christians in the Church.

Justification was always viewed, as in Galatians, as being intimately connected with Christian liberty. Being justified by faith alone, the Christian was free from all Church regulations and control. Encapsulated in the doctrine of justification was the explosive force of freedom against the Church as well as against other institutions and estates in the late Middle Ages. Is it possible that the major reason for a lack of emphasis on justification today is not that it is no longer relevant, but that it is far too relevant? Have denominations and parishes, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, been so busy building and surviving as institutions that they are uncomfortable with the teaching that challenges rules and regulations of every kind, even their own?

In order to demonstrate the implications of justification by faith alone on institutional churches and groups for our day, and in order to proclaim the Christian liberty of those justified, here are another “Ninety-Five Theses” for purposes of debate and discussion. However, the DEBATE AND DISCUSSION aspects of these theses need to be underlined. Theses, for Luther, meant “debatable” issues. It is in the same spirit that these Ninety-Five very “debatable” issues are offered. Since they envision a Church and a spirit almost nowhere in existence today, few are likely to agree with them in their entirety.

Nevertheless, if they provoke even a little discussion and debate, if people again question some of their assumptions about the nature of the Church, if some find a little hope in a new vision of the Christian mission, these theses will have served their purpose.

The following begin with six theses asserting the freedom of all Christians to be the church, free from the traditions, hierarchy, and denominational control that divide us from one another. The remaining theses spell out the source of this freedom and the reasons why it can be lived out and acted upon in these times.

NINETY-FIVE THESES ON CHURCH CONTROL

These Theses are being sent to theologians, church officials, interested pastors, lay ministers and assistants, and some students for reading and meditation. If you wish to discuss them further, you may do so by letter, email, or at a future conference if that can be arranged.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Christian Liberty to Be the Church

1. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians can call locally trained ministers of the word and celebrants of the sacraments who have scriptural qualifications for leadership & the willingness to do Christ's work for little or no remuneration. Acts 14:23; I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9.
2. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians at the local level can decide about doctrine. Further, they can converse with Christians of other denominations and determine for themselves, on the basis of Scripture, if there are grounds for fellowship.
3. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians can join

with their fellows of other denominations and together witness, raise social consciousness, carry out projects, and support institutions for the benefit of their common community.

4. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians at the local level can take the initiative in carrying out the great commission without waiting for denominational action or approval.
 5. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians may create new institutions at home and abroad better suited to meeting contemporary needs and may, with clear consciences, divert funds from denominational coffers to support these new institutions.
 6. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians will not sorrow overmuch concerning the problems and frustrations of denominations or groups, knowing that Christ carried out his mission quite well without them in the past, and can certainly do so again in the future.
- On Justification,
the Source of Our Liberty**
7. Justifying faith is the complete turning of a person from guilt under the law to the forgiveness and new life which comes from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
 8. Since we are justified by faith alone, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1.
 9. Justified by faith alone, a Christian has the certainty of salvation in the hope of the resurrection. Romans 8:37-39.
 10. Being justified by faith alone, we can rejoice in our sufferings and trials. Romans 5:2-5.
 11. Justified by faith alone, people of different races, classes, and sexes all are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28.
 12. Being justified by faith and not by works of the law, Christians are ready to count all of their good works as refuse because of the surpassing knowledge of Jesus as

Lord and Savior. Philippians 3:8-10.

13. Having been justified by faith alone, we are to stand fast in our freedom from the laws of God and men and not submit again to the law of slavery. Galatians 5:11.
 14. Though justified by faith apart from the law, Christians are not to gratify the desires of the flesh, but are rather to bring forth fruits of the Spirit. Galatians 5:16-24.
 15. Since salvation is a gift of God, human pride and boasting, especially in religious activities, are finished (Ephesians 2:9) and excluded (Romans 3:27).
 16. For Paul, justification by faith alone is such an important doctrine that he condemns all those of his day and ours who add regulations to that teaching. Galatians 1:9f.
- On Church Control**
17. In nearly every denomination or Christian group, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is confused through the addition of human regulations, definitions of doctrine, and customs.
 18. Even in those churches where justification by faith alone is publicly taught, it is often obscured by a host of regulations supposedly needed to keep the church going or to provide a focus for group identity.
 19. Because of the overlay of regulations and customs in most churches, too few of the members actually realize that they cannot save themselves by their own works, but that salvation is a gift of God through Christ to be received by faith. Ephesians 2:8, 9; Romans 3:21-28.
 20. By obscuring the Gospel, people are robbed of the certainty of salvation and are filled with the straws and husks of human works instead.
 21. Even in non-denominational Christian groups, justification by faith alone is slighted and obscured by emphasizing the time and place of conversion and the willingness of the

individual to accept Christ. This emphasis makes of faith a human work and glorifies the individual rather than the Holy Spirit. I Corinthians 12:3.

22. Also perverting the Gospel are those who insist upon speaking in tongues and a “spirit-filled” life before one is fully a Christian.
23. By the imposition of church laws and regulations upon the consciences of the faithful, churches have encouraged the trivial works of keeping the organizations running rather than aiding the poor and unfortunate, the sick and imprisoned. Matthew 25:35, 36.
24. The perversion of the Gospel happens whenever people, out of pride, wish to build organizations, traditions, and institutions in which they can find human security and status.
25. Though church people do not consciously set out to pervert the Gospel, they are seduced into it through their efforts to get people to work together by means of rules and regulations.
26. When church regulations are insisted upon for full fellowship in the church of Christ, such regulations must be resisted and disobeyed as destroying the Christian freedom in the Gospel. Galatians 2:5. **Control through Seminary Education**
27. Church control exercised through obligatory seminary education of church leaders is contrary to Biblical example (Acts 14:23) and substitutes academic qualifications for those of personal morality, and aptitude in teaching and combating error (I Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:7-9).
28. Compulsory seminary certification deprives Christians in a given place of the right to select their leaders from their midst on the basis of Scriptural qualifications.
29. Professionally trained and paid leaders too often are

separate from the culture of their congregations by virtue of their professional education and training.

30. Compulsory education connected with church leadership positions has deprived many Christians in the poor nations of the world of pastoral leadership and ready access to the sacraments.
 31. The shortage of such seminary-trained leaders has been the chief constraint on the spread of the church in nations which can exclude or control such clergy, and in the poor nations of the world, where they often cannot be paid.
 32. Because of the compulsory nature of seminary attendance, battles are fought over seminary control, and church leaders use worldly sanctions rather than God's Word to enforce their doctrinal positions. Even so, seminary training has not guaranteed unity in doctrine and practice even among people who have attended the same seminary.
 33. By limiting church leaders to the professionally trained and paid, the resultant shortage of pastors and money has led churches in recent years to debate whether the church's mission is evangelism or social concern, when in reality, it is both.
 34. Theological training should be made a part of each local group of Christians and should be an on-going, continuing education.
 35. Local churches should again have various church leaders as they had in apostolic times, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers for the equipment of saints and for the work of the ministry. Ephesians 4:11.
 36. Full-time seminary training can be useful for training teachers, scholars, and traveling missionaries, as long as non-seminary trained people are also eligible for church leadership positions, as they were in the New Testament. Acts 14:23.
- Church Control through Economic Pressures**

37. Building congregations about a full-time clergyman has of necessity promoted large congregations to pay them and has also made necessary a large expensive building to house such a number for worship.
38. Since congregations and missions are built around the full-time paid professional, and since the poor cannot afford such, the poor, by and large, do not have the Gospel preached to them as much as do the rich.
39. Because of the imagined necessity of having a full-time professional and a church building needed to house large numbers of people, the church has been closely tied to the moneyed classes and has lost credibility among the very poor.
40. Because of the economic pressures of paying for personnel and buildings, Christians in different denominations, and within the same denomination, compete for members to the sorrow of Christ and the destruction of Christian unity.
41. Also because of these pressures, churches must resort to fund raising efforts which are often manipulative, legalistic, and go against the clear teachings of our Lord not to let one hand know what the other one gives. Matthew 6:3.
42. Because of the imagined necessity of buildings and professional clergy, churches are not able to contribute as much proportionately for the poor as were the New Testament churches. I Corinthians 16:1f.
43. Where the ministry of Paul was filled with great joy because it operated with church leaders selected on the spot, the ministry of many contemporary pastors and missionaries is depressing and burdensome because of the need to keep the organizations running with limited resources.
44. The ecumenical movement has failed to bring unity to Christians on the local level largely because of the

economic bases of professional clergy, congregations and denominations.

45. By insisting upon the paid professional, we impose intolerable financial burdens on the churches of the third world. By subsidizing their education and support, we make them open to the charge that they are captive to the churches of the West.
46. The economic basis of the Church, together with the desire to control the organization of the church, has led to the introduction of seamy politics into the house of God, with Christians vying for positions of high remuneration, status, and power. All this is contrary to our Lord's teaching that the greatest among us is a child or a slave. Matthew 18:4; Matthew 20:26. **Control through Church Administration**
47. Church control through paying people for full-time service or withholding funds for their support stifles the prophetic voice that condemns the sins of the rich.
48. Church control over pastors has largely silenced their public criticism of the denominational system of which they are a part.
49. The dependence of the clergy upon their salaries has tended to make them servants of their members' comforts.
50. The financial vulnerability of most clergy has led them to become cautious in condemning the real sins and prejudices of their members.
51. Control over pastors and missionaries has diverted their energies from creative approaches in pastoral care and mission in order to fulfill the institutional expectations of their paymasters.
52. Denominational mission boards are not necessary to carry out mission work at home and in foreign fields, as can be seen from faith missionaries who receive support from individuals and congregations.

53. By using stipendiary missionaries administered by boards, we have, in effect, discouraged the natural mission work of traveling Christian lay people, who in New Testament times were able to begin self-sustaining congregations.
 54. Denominational mission boards have often taken away from single congregations and small groups the thrill and excitement of doing their own mission work.
 55. Clergy and missionaries can accept their salaries as gifts freely offered, but ought neither to expect them nor be governed by them.
 56. The sooner clergy can find other work to fall back upon, if need be, the happier their ministry will be.
- Church Control through Confessional and Constitutional Standards**
57. Denominations are unable to exercise control over doctrine despite confessional, constitutional, and/or hierarchical provisions. Instead, we find the greatest disputes over doctrine and practice precisely in those denominations that seek to enforce such provisions.
 58. Even though confessional and constitutional commitments do not guarantee pure doctrine or even unity within a denomination, it is certain that they effectively split Christians, who may share a common faith but belong to different denominations.
 59. In a rapidly changing world of diverse cultures, where concepts and words have different meanings and problems differ, every few years confessional and constitutional commitments are out of date.
 60. Control through enforcement of confessional and constitutional commitments too often precludes honest & effective dialogue between Christians of different denominations at a local level.
 61. Denominational control over fellowship with other Christians clearly omits Christ's own criteria of judging prophets by their lives (Matthew 7:16-20), and neither a

church convention nor a faraway bishop can decide that for us.

62. Costs incurred in propagandizing councils and conventions are clearly wasted funds much better given to provide opportunities for the poor.
63. Control through the political interpretation of confessional and constitutional commitments robs the church of the sweetness of the Gospel and replaces it with bitter battles over human definitions.
64. Control through confessional and constitutional commitments clearly takes doctrinal decisions away from the common people and places them into councils and conventions where politics are supposed to answer questions that only the Holy Spirit can resolve. John 14:26.
65. Confessional statements and church decisions can and should be honored as witnesses to the faith of the dead and the living. Such confessions, however, become evil when they are appealed to as law and used for church control.
66. New confessional and creedal statements should be continually drawn up by Christians crossing denominational lines as joint testimonies to their common understanding of God's Word. **Control through Church Regulations**
67. Through church regulations, denominations are more often characterized by their prohibitions than by the Gospel they attempt to communicate.
68. By working through church regulations, churches have invariably by-passed the Biblical way of dealing with sin and error as is specified in Matthew 18:15-21 and Corinthians 5:1-13.
69. Through rule-making and policy-setting procedures, church denominations have taken away opportunities for decisions, study, and growth by local lay Christians.

70. Since common lay Christians' beliefs are so often formed through regulations, such Christians are often apathetic about Bible study and theology.
71. Congregations may have customs and traditions, but they should be agreed upon by all who are expected to observe them.
72. Such customs and traditions must neither be insisted upon nor used to divide Christians whom Christ has reconciled with his blood. Ephesians 2:14.
73. Church control through regulations concerning non-essentials has contributed greatly to the non-relevance of the church in minority areas in the United States and in non-Western countries.
74. Regulations concerning the ministry, liturgies, customs, hymns, and traditions are often only Western cultural transplants, which grow poorly among people of another culture.
75. When the regulatory control of a church body disappears, then only will those within and without be able to appreciate both the beauties and faults of that tradition.
76. Real church unity can come about as congregations and denominations die to their own pride and institutional regulations and let the Spirit lead them into a wider fellowship. **Church Control through Educational Materials**
77. Church control is also exercised through the production and censorship of educational materials with resulting conflicts over the doctrinal content of such materials.
78. Christian education, to be most effective, should happen in the context of the family where lessons learned by the mind can be reinforced by the goodly actions of Christian parents.
79. By replacing parents as the chief source of Christian education, the church, in effect, discourages Christian education in the home and communication between parents

and their children on subjects of ultimate meaning and morality.

80. By replacing parents as the chief source of Christian education, large sums are spent on educational plants and buses, rather than providing opportunities for those in need.
81. By promoting specialized education suited to nearly every possible age or sex group, churches divide families for education and fellowship rather than uniting them.
82. Where there is widespread literacy, the Bible and a simple catechism should again serve as the chief media of religious education for the whole family, with parents themselves chiefly responsible for their interpretation and application.
83. Sunday schools, parochial schools, confirmation and instruction classes may be beneficial to children without Christian parents, or as auxiliary agencies to parental instruction, but should be neither the pattern for Christian education nor the vehicle for church control.
84. Denominational educational, evangelism, and stewardship programs are seldom used, are unnecessary, and at times are harmful when they burden the church with busy work.
85. Increasingly, congregations pay good money for materials that have worked well in other congregations despite denominational differences, thus making most denominational materials superfluous.
86. Denominational charitable and educational institutions might be better handled by inter-denominational groups of Christians in the surrounding area. This would provide a greater base of support, and also make available these institutions to people whose denomination is not strong enough in the area to sponsor their own institutions. **Church Control through Social Pronouncements**
87. Church control over the spiritual lives of people is also

- sought through church pronouncements on social issues.
88. History demonstrates that little if any effect has ever come from a council or convention resolution without the prior intense commitment of a large majority of people.
 89. Christian commitment to social issues is most likely to come about when Christians see an intolerable tension between the teachings of Christ and the life of the unfortunate about them.
 90. This commitment can be acted upon by prophetic individuals, who, at great risk to themselves, call society to repentance, and, in the name of God, demand a change in values and behavior.
 91. This commitment can also be realized when Christians in responsible positions make God-pleasing decisions.
 92. The Church is also influential when Christians in a given locale advocate and build institutions for charity, education, and health.
 93. Christians are also influential in creating and sustaining organizations and movements for raising political consciousness.
 94. Through teaching Christian morals and values to citizens, churches indirectly support good government and withhold support from bad government.
 95. None of the above actions by Christians in the political or social realm requires the existence of denominations, let alone denominational control.

Festival of the Reformation

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