

HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION

1518

Translated by Harold J. Grimm

INTRODUCTION

The disputation to which Luther had invited participants by posting his *Ninety-five Theses* never materialized. Instead, a storm of protest arose and Luther was assailed as a heretic. Leo X, hoping to silence Luther through regular channels, asked Gabriel della Volta, or Venetus, general of the Augustinian Eremites, to do this. Volta in turn transmitted the request to Johann von Staupitz, vicar of the German congregation of the order.

The general chapter of the Augustinians of Germany met as a rule triennially on Jubilate Sunday, that is, the third Sunday after Easter. In 1518 it convened at Heidelberg, April 25. Luther obediently left Wittenberg April 11, against the advice of most of his friends. Provided with letters of introduction by Frederick the Wise, he set out on foot with his fellow Augustinian, Leonhard Beier. At Würzburg the two joined the Erfurt group with whom they rode to Heidelberg, arriving there three or four days before the opening of the meeting.

Staupitz apparently made known Volta's wishes, but there is no record of any official action having been taken by the chapter. We know, however, that Luther agreed to complete and publish his *Resolutions, or Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, and send it to the pope with a letter of apology. More important for the course of the Reformation, however, was the fact that Staupitz asked Luther and Beier to participate in a disputation at the Augustinian monastery on April 26 to acquaint the brothers with the new evangelical theology. To avoid arousing animosity against Luther, Staupitz asked him not to debate controversial subjects but to prepare theses concerning sin, free will, and grace—topics which had been debated in the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*. Although the older theologians were not convinced by Luther, most of the younger men, including Martin Bucer, Johann Brenz, and Theobald Billikan, who later spread the Reformation in Strassburg, Württemberg, and Nördlingen, respectively, were highly receptive and immediately wrote enthusiastic accounts concerning him to their friends. Bucer was particularly impressed by Luther's reliance upon the Bible, his familiarity with the church fathers, his courtesy in answering questions, his willingness to listen to others, and his courage in expressing his views.

Luther prepared the twenty-eight theological and twelve philosophical theses for the *Heidelberg Disputation* before the debate, as was customary. He also drew up short proofs for the theological theses and a special explanation of the sixth thesis. Leonhard Beier debated the theses with Luther presiding.

The following English translation is made from the Latin in *WA* 1, 353–374. There are German translations in *St. L.* 18, 36–71, and *MA*³ 1, 125–138. For accounts in English of the Augustinian chapter meeting, see E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, pp. 326–330, and H. Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, pp. 206–210.

HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION

Brother Martin Luther, Master of Sacred Theology, will preside, and Brother Leonhard Beier, Master of Arts and Philosophy, will defend the following theses before the Augustinians of this renowned city of Heidelberg in the customary place. In the month of May, 1518.

THEOLOGICAL THESES

Distrusting completely our own wisdom, according to that counsel of the Holy Spirit, “Do not rely on your own insight” [Prov. 3:5], we humbly present to the judgment of all those who wish to be here these theological paradoxes, so that it may become clear whether they have been deduced well or poorly from St. Paul, the especially chosen vessel and instrument of Christ, and also from St. Augustine, his most trustworthy interpreter.

1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.
2. Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end.
3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.
4. Although the works of God always seem unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.
5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good), as though they were crimes.
6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless.
7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.
8. By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.
9. To say that works without Christ are dead, but not mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God.
10. Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin.
11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.
12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.
13. Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.
14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.
15. Nor could free will endure in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.

16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.

17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.

18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20].

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.

23. The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ [Rom. 4:15].

24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.

25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.

26. The law says, "do this," and it is never done. Grace says, "believe in this," and everything is already done.

27. Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work and our work an accomplished work, and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.

28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

PHILOSOPHICAL THESES

29. He who wishes to philosophize by using Aristotle without danger to his soul must first become thoroughly foolish in Christ.

30. Just as a person does not use the evil of passion well unless he is a married man, so no person philosophizes well unless he is a fool, that is, a Christian.

31. It was easy for Aristotle to believe that the world was eternal since he believed that the human soul was mortal.

32. After the proposition that there are as many material forms as there are created things had been accepted, it was necessary to accept that they all are material.

33. Nothing in the world becomes something of necessity; nevertheless, that which comes forth from matter, again by necessity, comes into being according to nature.

34. If Aristotle would have recognized the absolute power of God, he would accordingly have maintained that it was impossible for matter to exist of itself alone.

35. According to Aristotle, nothing is infinite with respect to action, yet with respect to power and matter, as many things as have been created are infinite.

36. Aristotle wrongly finds fault with and derides the ideas of Plato, which actually are better than his own.

37. The mathematical order of material things is ingeniously maintained by Pythagoras, but more ingenious is the interaction of ideas maintained by Plato.

38. The disputation of Aristotle lashes out at Parmenides' idea of oneness (if a Christian will pardon this) in a battle of air.

39. If Anaxagoras posited infinity as to form, as it seems he did, he was the best of the philosophers, even if Aristotle was unwilling to acknowledge this.

40. To Aristotle, privation, matter, form, movable, immovable, impulse, power, etc. seem to be the same.¹

¹ Luther, M. (1999). [*Luther's works, vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*](#) (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.; Vol. 31, pp. 35–42). Fortress Press.