

INTRODUCTION

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther shared *Ninety-Five Theses* with the world. It was reported that he nailed the *Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, as a way to invite people to a debate.

Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* did not present the mature teaching of what later became the Lutheran Church. The *Theses* focused on one topic—the abuse of indulgences in the church of the time. Luther stated that “the whole life of believers should be a life of repentance” and “every true Christian, whether living or dead, has a share in all the benefits of Christ and of the Church, given him by God, even without letters of indulgence.”

The *Ninety-Five Theses*, however, were the spark that began the Lutheran Reformation. For that reason, Lutheran Christians celebrate October 31 as Reformation Day, and in 2017 they celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

As part of the Reformation 500 celebration, the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) prepared a new set of *Ninety-Five Theses*, put together by a committee of fifteen pastors from around the world. These *Theses* were approved at a meeting of the CELC in Grimma, Germany on June 29, 2017.

The CELC's *Ninety-Five Theses for the 21st Century*, unlike Luther's, present all the basic teachings of the Bible as confessed in the Lutheran Church. They are organized according to the outline of Luther's Catechism, which to this day is treasured as a teaching tool in the churches of the CELC.

With these new *Theses*, the members of the CELC joyfully give united expression to what they have received as heirs of the Lutheran Reformation. They are thankful to God to be part of an international church fellowship that holds to the teachings of the Bible, focusing on salvation through Jesus Christ. They are eager to share their heritage with the world.

NINETY-FIVE THESES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
For Confessional Lutherans
Arranged In The Order Of Luther's Small Catechism



FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS

#1 By God's grace, the Confessional Lutheran Church believes and teaches the biblical gospel. God saves sinners from sin, death, and the devil through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation is by God's grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, and not by human effort.

#2 By God's grace, the Confessional Lutheran Church bases all its teachings only on the Bible. As the inspired and inerrant Word of God, the Bible is the only sure source of authority for Christian doctrine. It is living and active, applicable to all people of all places of all time.



THE BIBLE

#3 Apart from the Bible, there is no source of knowledge about God's plan of salvation. The created world and the law written on the human heart give some information about God and his law. But neither presents the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Human reason and science are also unable to uncover the truth about God's salvation for sinners.

#4 God inspired the writers of the Bible so that they wrote the very words he wanted. The Bible therefore is without error in everything it presents. Jesus the Son of God himself said, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). As the infallible Word of

God, the Bible is unlike any other writing, and it is the standard by which all other religious documents are to be judged.

#5 Human intellect and human reason are helpful in understanding the Bible, but they must never be put over the Bible. Difficult passages in the Bible are to be explained in view of their context and in agreement with clearer passages. Scripture interprets Scripture.

#6 The Bible has two main messages from God—the law and the gospel. The law teaches what we should do and not do, and the law condemns us before God. The gospel teaches that God in love sent Jesus as the world’s Redeemer, and the gospel saves us before God.

#7 The main purpose of the Bible is to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ for all people. The entire Bible from beginning to end is Christ-centered, focusing on God’s plan of salvation in Christ. It is a joyful privilege to read and study the Bible, because it is like a love letter from God.



THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

#8 God the Creator has established an absolute standard of what is right and wrong. This law is in force for all people throughout human history, so it is not for each culture or each individual to decide what is right and wrong. This law is written to some extent on the hearts of all people. It is revealed clearly in the Bible.

#9 The Ten Commandments, originally given by God on tablets of stone, still provide a useful summary of the timeless law of God, as their content is repeated in the New Testament. This law can be summarized in one statement: Love God and love your neighbor.

LOVING GOD

#10 The first and greatest commandment is this: We are to fear, love, and trust in the triune God above all things.

#11 It is wrong to worship or pray to any being other than the triune God. This includes angels, Mary, Allah, ancestral spirits, and all gods and goddesses in the form of idols. It is wrong to secretly put anything in the most important spot in our lives other than the triune God. This includes money, possessions, power, occupation, entertainment, sports, family, or spouse.

#12 God's name is a special possession, and we are not to use it carelessly. God wants us to use his name to praise him, to pray to him, and to share knowledge about him with other people near and far.

#13 Spiritual light from the triune God and spiritual darkness do not mix. Believers in the Lord should not have anything to do with witchcraft, the occult, astrology, and evil spirits.

#14 It is a great joy for believers in Christ to gather regularly for worship and to use the Word of God also in other settings. As our bodies need food to stay alive, so our faith needs the means of grace—God's Word and sacraments—to stay alive and grow.

#15 God has not commanded a specific day for worship or a specific worship order to follow. Christ and the means of grace are the focus of our worship, and our worship includes confessing our sins and hearing of God's gracious forgiveness in Christ.

LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

#16 Parents and other authority figures in church and society deserve love, respect, and obedience because God has set them over us as his representatives. In the event that they command us to do something contrary to God's Word, then we must obey God and disobey their command.

#17 Secular governments are instituted by God to maintain peace and order on earth. Therefore Christians should always respect their leaders as God's representatives and should pray for them.

Christians may serve in government and may work to improve government.

#18 Children are precious gifts from God, and it is a privilege, not a burden, to raise them. Children are not to be left on their own in regard to religious training. God wants Christian parents and Christian congregations to be zealous in teaching the Christian faith to the next generation. When God chooses not to grant children, Christian couples receive this also as God's loving will for them.

#19 Our bodies are gifts of God, and earthly life is a time of grace when we may come to faith and serve others. God wants us to take care of our bodies, and not to damage them through drunkenness, harmful drugs, or other mistreatment. Since God alone has the right to end life, it is a sin to commit suicide, to murder, or to participate in mercy killing. Since life begins at conception, abortion is also sinful.

#20 God wants us to help others with their bodily needs, as we are able. Christians should have a caring eye and a generous hand especially toward the poor, the needy, the disabled, and all who are fellow Christians. We also are to love our enemies and to pray for them.

#21 God intends that men and women find sexual fulfillment within marriage, and not in casual encounters or live-in arrangements apart from marriage. Marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman, publicly recognized. Though divorce and remarriage are permitted for innocent partners in cases of adultery or malicious desertion, divorce always involves sin on the part of at least one partner.

#22 Since God has established marriage, he has the right to tell us how it should function. He says that the relationship between husbands and wives is to be patterned after the relationship between Christ and the church, with husbands and wives having different roles. The husband is to be the loving head, and the wife the loving helper. God wants every married person to treat their spouse with respect.

#23 God's Word says that homosexuality is contrary to God's intention for males and females. People with homosexual tendencies can find forgiveness in Christ and strength to live in harmony with God's will.

#24 God does not want us to be pure only in our actions, but also in our thoughts. Lust in our minds is sinful, just as much as adultery. Hatred in our minds is sinful, just as much as murder.

#25 Everything in the universe belongs to the Lord. When the Lord entrusts money and property to us, he expects us to manage it wisely for him, using it to provide for our families, to pay our taxes, to support the church, and to help the needy. Likewise, he expects us to manage our time and abilities wisely as good stewards for him.

#26 God forbids us to take the money and property of others. It is a sin to get things for ourselves by robbery, theft, cheating, bribery, overcharging, or underpaying.

#27 God hears every word that we speak. He wants us to speak in a way that is truthful and will build others up, and not tear them down. He wants us to take the words and actions of others in the kindest possible way. He detests lying and gossiping.

#28 Since we have a generous God who promises to give us all that we need, we can be content and not envy others. To desire things that God does not want us to have is sinful and dangerous. Such desires can lead to sins of action like theft, adultery, and murder.

#29 What God commands is not a matter of performing heroic or extraordinary deeds. Rather, in our ordinary daily activities God wants us to show love to others as he has shown love to us, and to treat others as we would like them to treat us.

KEEPING THE LAW

#30 The true God is not satisfied with a good effort at keeping the law, or with a level of obedience higher than others. Since the true God is holy, he cannot tolerate any sin in his presence. To be in a

right relationship with God and to enter heaven, human beings need to obey God’s law perfectly in every thought, word, and deed.

#31 Since the true God is just, he must punish all sin. One punishment for sin is physical death. The ultimate punishment is eternal death in hell, a real place where the evil angels and all who reject God’s way of salvation will suffer never-ending torment.

#32 God’s law reveals that all people have sinned and deserve God’s judgment. No human being is good enough to earn heaven, but all are condemned. Like a mirror showing the flaws in our appearance, the law shows our sinfulness before God.

#33 In addition to our sins of thought, word, and deed, the Bible teaches that we all have a sinful nature or old Adam inherited from our parents, for which we also deserve God’s condemnation. Because of this original sin, we are inclined to evil and even our good deeds are tainted by sin.

#34 We desperately need a Savior from sin. Thanks be to God, the Bible presents the gospel! The gospel, summarized in the Apostles’ Creed, is the good news of what God has done through his Son Jesus to save mankind from sin.



THE CREED

#35 The true God is “three-in-one” or triune. He exists as three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, yet there are not three Gods, but only one God.

#36 Jesus Christ was and is God from eternity, and as God’s Son he participated in the creation of the universe. Whoever does not worship Jesus does not worship the true God. Jesus said, “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him” (John 5:23).

#37 The Holy Spirit is also worshiped as God, coequal and coeternal with the Father and the Son. He is not just a spiritual force, but a distinct person of the triune God. The church confesses in its ancient creeds that God the Father is not begotten of anyone, God the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and God the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

#38 The true God is beyond our understanding in magnificence and greatness, and he deserves our unrestrained, whole-hearted praise and worship. The Bible says that God is spirit, and that he is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, almighty, all-knowing, everywhere present, holy, just, faithful, good, loving, and forgiving.

CREATION AND PRESERVATION

#39 Everything in the universe, visible and invisible, was created out of nothing by God in six normal days by his almighty word. As we see the wonders of the universe, from galaxies to atoms and from majestic mountains to the marvels of the human body, we are led to praise the Lord who made them all.

#40 The theory of evolution, promoted as an explanation for the origin of all things, is contrary to the Bible. It presents a different worldview that cannot be harmonized with the clear teaching of the Bible that God created a mature earth with Adam and Eve as real human beings, and that everything in the beginning was “very good.”

#41 Human beings are the most important creatures in God’s world. Humans are distinctly different from animals, since they were created in the image of God, they have immortal souls, and they are accountable to God for the way they live. It is for human beings that God designed his plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.

#42 God gave the world to human beings to use and to rule in ways that would give him glory. We are free to enjoy the resources of the world as blessings given by God for our good, but we should do so in a responsible way, knowing that we are accountable to God for our stewardship.

#43 The Lord is not distant from his created world and unconcerned about it. Rather, he is actively involved in preserving and governing the universe in all matters large and small. He sets up and deposes rulers, and no sparrow falls to the ground apart from his will.

#44 The Lord has large numbers of powerful spiritual beings called angels who serve him in heaven and on earth. It is a comfort to know that these angels are sent especially to protect and help believers in Jesus, and that they are watching over us all the time.

#45 Shortly after creation, some angels rebelled against God. Their leader was Satan, who is also called the devil. These evil spirits continue to oppose God and everything that is good.

#46 When Adam and Eve were tempted by the devil and fell into sin, God's world, which was originally perfect in every way, was thoroughly corrupted. Now the world is far different from the original creation. Affected by sin, the world and everything in it is subject to decay and trouble, and all living creatures die.

#47 We should not be surprised when we see evil in the world. God has said that evil will continue until judgment day, when at last evil will be separated from good for all eternity. God is never responsible for sin and evil. He allows it, as he patiently governs the world in the interest of saving people from every generation.

#48 As we have hardships of any sort—disease, disability, war, famine, harsh weather, lack of money, or mistreatment by others because of our race or social status, we know that God promises to use all things for the good of his believers. With faith in God's promises, we can take up our crosses and continue to do good. We know that God will soon give relief to believers in the glory of heaven.

#49 Christians can expect to be persecuted for their faith, as is happening in many countries today, for example where secularism or Islam is prominent. We know that God will protect and bless believers in those circumstances, providing strength and boldness to confess his saving name.

REDEMPTION

#50 Before the world began, God in love planned and prepared a way to redeem fallen people from sin. God's plan of salvation involved sending his Son Jesus to earth to serve as a redeemer and mediator. In the Old Testament God repeatedly promised the coming of Christ to save the world. The New Testament reports how Christ came, revealed God to all human beings of all time, and accomplished salvation.

#51 At the appointed time, Christ, the second person of the triune God, took on a human nature just like ours only without sin, when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Ever since, he has been both God and man in one person. As true man he was able to live, suffer, and die as our substitute. As true God his work has saving power for all people.

#52 To redeem all mankind from sin, death, and hell, Jesus first of all needed to keep the law of God perfectly in our place. Jesus did this, never once sinning in thought, word, or action. He possessed a perfect righteousness that is credited to our account before God. We call this Christ's active obedience.

#53 Jesus also needed to pay the penalty owed for the sins of all people of all time. Jesus did this by dying on the cross. The cross is the preeminent symbol of the Christian faith, because on the cross Jesus endured the agony of hell as our substitute. Because Jesus as the God-man took the punishment we deserved, we no longer need to be punished for our sins. We call this Christ's passive obedience.

#54 On Easter Sunday, Jesus gloriously rose from the dead with body and soul. Sunday has been the primary worship day for Christians and Easter has been the preeminent Christian festival, because the resurrection of Christ is the victorious high point in God's plan of salvation. The resurrection proves that the atoning work of Jesus was accepted by God the Father and salvation was truly accomplished.

#55 The atoning work of Christ was for all people of all time. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God justified the entire

world of sinners. God forgave the sins of all and declared all to be righteous, because Jesus made the payment for all. This truth, called universal or objective justification, gives each of us the certainty that our sins are paid for and we are indeed redeemed.

#56 The fact that Christ made the payment for the sins of the world does not mean that all people will be saved. The saving work of Christ is personally received through faith. We have personal or subjective justification as we are moved to believe in Christ. Those who do not trust in Christ, for whatever reason, forfeit Christ's redemption and remain in their sin under God's condemnation.

#57 We no longer see Jesus walking among us visibly on earth, because on the fortieth day after his resurrection he ascended into heaven. Jesus is now receiving the praise of the hosts of heaven, and the Bible says that he is sitting at the right hand of God. This means that he is ruling all things in the universe together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as he is invisibly present everywhere.

#58 When Jesus lived on earth as the God-man, he did not always make full and constant use of his divine characteristics according to his human nature. He got tired, and he needed to eat and drink, just like one of us. But now in heaven, he is not limited in the use of his full divine power and glory.

#59 The true Christian faith always has Jesus Christ at its center, because it is through the work of Christ that we are reconciled with God and will live forever with God in heaven. Like the Bible, the true Christian faith is Christ-centered.

#60 All religions do not lead to the same God since there is no way to come to the Father apart from Jesus Christ. The Christian faith is inclusive in that all people are redeemed by Christ, and everyone in every nation is invited to come and embrace him in faith. The Christian faith is exclusive in that there is no other way on earth to be saved.

SANCTIFICATION

#61 Since human beings are spiritually dead by nature, they are not able to believe in Christ by themselves. Saving faith is created, preserved, and strengthened entirely and only by the Holy Spirit.

#62 The Holy Spirit uses the gospel in the Word and sacraments to do his work. The Word and the sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper are called the means of grace because they are like pipelines through which the forgiveness of sins won by Christ comes from God to us. We do not expect the Holy Spirit to work apart from these means of grace.

#63 Our conversion and salvation are fully and completely by God's grace—God's undeserved love for sinners. We contribute nothing. This truth separates Christianity from all other religions, since all other religions depend on human works to one degree or another. It is comforting to know that our salvation does not depend on our own merits, but entirely on God and the completed work of Christ.

#64 Those who are saved have been chosen by God for salvation purely by his grace. This election to salvation in eternity reinforces that salvation is due to God's grace alone and not our own efforts. According to the Bible there is no predestination to condemnation for anyone. God wants all to be saved, so those who do not believe have only themselves to blame for their unbelief and punishment in hell.

#65 When people come to faith in Christ, they have a new self that hates sin and is eager to live a holy life filled with good works. This new life of sanctification flows from a heart that knows it has been justified by grace and desires to thank God.

#66 With godly living, Christians can give a powerful witness to others and attract them to the one and only true God. We as Christians can view our circumstances in life as a calling or vocation from God, in which God wants us to serve others in love.

#67 Believers never reach perfection in this life because they continue to have a sinful nature. Still, God wants them to grow in

sanctified living, abounding in good works. Through the power of his Word, God breaks the control of sin in our lives. As believers we struggle every day with our sinful nature, but we find forgiveness and help in Christ as we repent of our sin.

#68 For believers, the law of God revealed in the Bible serves as a guide for sanctified living. Since our consciences can become dull, especially in an immoral society, we need the law of God to instruct us in how to please God.

#69 In matters neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God, there is Christian freedom. We are to exercise this freedom, however, always with a concern for others, so that we do nothing to lead anyone into sin.

#70 The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to believers to equip them for service to others. In the early church, the Holy Spirit also gave special charismatic gifts such as miracles and speaking in tongues, which were associated with the apostles. There is no evidence in Scripture that we should expect the continuation of these charismatic gifts today.

#71 It is possible to fall from faith in Christ. Daily repentance and a return to the grace and power of our baptism is necessary as long as we live. The first of Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* says: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." As we use the means of grace, we trust God's promise that he will preserve us in the one true faith.

THE CHURCH

#72 All believers in Jesus throughout the world are part of the holy Christian church—the true spiritual family of God who will inherit heaven. But only God knows for sure who the members of this church are, since faith cannot be seen. Wherever the means of grace are used, we expect this church to be present, since the Holy Spirit uses the gospel in the means of grace to create faith.

#73 God wants all believers to be part of a Christian congregation—a "visible" church, where the faith of believers is

built up through God's Word and sacraments. The Christian faith ordinarily is not meant to be practiced by individuals in isolation. It is to be practiced together with other believers in Christ.

#74 God wants believers to belong to a visible church that holds to all the teachings of God's Word. When there is full agreement in biblical doctrine, God's Word instructs us to practice church fellowship with joint worship, joint prayer, and joint church work. It is a violation of God's Word to practice church fellowship with those who persist in false teaching.

#75 The work of the church is to preach the gospel for the salvation of souls that are perishing. It is not the work of the church to fix all of the world's social problems. The church cannot guarantee results in its work, since the success of gospel preaching is always in the hands of God. The church simply strives to share the gospel as widely and fully as possible.

#76 On the heart of believers is a burning desire to spread the good news of salvation in Jesus to people of all nations, languages, and races. It is thrilling to see how God has allowed the gospel to spread around the world. It is a privilege to participate in worldwide mission work through our prayers, personal service, and financial support.

THE LAST THINGS

#77 When human beings die, their souls leave their bodies and do not remain in this world. The souls of believers go immediately to be with the Lord in heaven. The souls of unbelievers go immediately to be with the devil and the evil angels in hell. There is nothing in the Bible about soul sleep, reincarnation, or purgatory.

#78 At the end of time, Jesus will return in power and glory on judgment day. He will bring the world to an end, and he will judge all people, living and dead. On the basis of the Bible, we do not expect a thousand year, earthly reign of Christ or a special rapture of believers prior to judgment day.

#79 On the Last Day, there will be a resurrection of all the dead, and the souls of all who have died will be reunited with their bodies. The bodies of believers will be glorified like the body of Christ, able to live with God forever in the new heaven and new earth. Unbelievers after judgment day will suffer torment in hell with both body and soul forever.

#80 The promise of eternal life gives a splendid, solid hope to believers in Jesus. We have something marvelous to look forward to! The Bible promises that life in the kingdom of glory will be free from all pain, trouble, and sin. There will be glory and indescribable joy in the presence of the Lord for all eternity.

#81 No one knows the day or hour of Christ's second coming. He has promised to return when people do not expect him, like a thief in the night. But since the biblical signs of the end have been adequately fulfilled—signs like war, famines, earthquakes, persecution of Christians, and the preaching of the gospel to all nations, we understand that Jesus could come at any time.

#82 The imminent return of Christ gives urgency to our life of faith and our sharing of the gospel with others. God has promised many things, but he has not promised that there will be a tomorrow.



THE LORD'S PRAYER

#83 Prayer is a wonderful privilege of believers in Jesus, who have direct access to God through the forgiveness of sins. God invites believers to pray to him continually and in every place. He promises to hear and answer their prayers in keeping with his will, which is always for their good, even when they as sinful human beings may not see the overall benefit at the time.

#84 It is proper to give thanks to God and to pray for the needs of ourselves and other living people. Especially it is good to pray for

spiritual blessings. According to the Bible, our prayers should not be addressed to angels, saints, dead people, the sun, the moon, stars, mountains, trees, or idols, but only to the triune God. Prayer is not a means of grace, but it is a response that arises from a heart of faith.



BAPTISM

#85 Baptism is a sacrament instituted by Christ in which water is used together with the word of God. According to the promise of God, Baptism conveys the forgiveness of sins, has faith-working power, and incorporates people into the church. It is a means of grace—an instrument through which God the Holy Spirit distributes his grace in Christ to sinners.

#86 It is proper to baptize infants, because they are included in Christ’s command to baptize “all nations.” Infants need the forgiveness of sins just like adults, since they are born with original sin. The Bible indicates that even tiny infants can have faith.

#87 Baptism is a treasure for believers. As we daily remember our baptism which connects us to Jesus Christ, we are assured that God loves us and forgives us. We are empowered to turn away from sin and live in a way that pleases God.



THE KEYS AND CONFESSION

#88 All Christians have the “keys of the kingdom of heaven.” They can open heaven for repentant people by telling them that their sins are forgiven. They can close heaven to the impenitent as long as they do not repent by telling them that they are not forgiven.

#89 Though all Christians have the keys, God has also established the public ministry of the church. He wants leaders who are specially called by a group of believers to administer the means of grace on their behalf, serving as Christ's representatives. Only men are to serve as pastors, in keeping with the headship principle revealed in God's Word since creation.

#90 It is important to confess our sins to God. We may do so in our private prayers, with others in public worship, or alone before our pastor or some other Christian. When repentant Christians confess their sins, a Christian pastor or layperson should speak an absolution, announcing the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ and by Christ's authority.



THE LORD'S SUPPER

#91 The Lord's Supper is a sacrament instituted by Christ in which he gives his true body and blood under bread and wine. According to the Bible, the bread and wine do not just represent the body and blood of Christ, and they are not changed into the body and blood. Rather, the body and blood of Christ are miraculously present in, with, and under the bread and wine, and are received by all communicants.

#92 The Lord's Supper, also called the Sacrament of the Altar and Holy Communion, is a means of grace. It conveys the forgiveness of sins in Christ to all who believe through the power of God's Word. The forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper is the same as that received through Baptism, absolution, and the Word. But it is received in a very personal way as we eat the body and drink the blood of Christ.

#93 Confessional Lutherans share the Lord's Supper only with those who are properly instructed and repentant, since we do not want anyone to come upon God's judgment by receiving communion in an unworthy manner. We also share the Lord's Supper only with those who are united in the same faith. To

receive Christ's body and blood together with others is a deep expression of Christian fellowship.

#94 The Lord's Supper is a treasure for believers. Under normal circumstances it is a regular part of life for communicant members of the church. As we commune often, we are personally reassured that Jesus died for our sins, we are strengthened to live a godly life, and we are built up in our fellowship with other believers.



THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

#95 Confessional Lutherans adhere to the Lutheran Confessions of 1580 not “insofar as” but “because” these Confessions are a correct presentation of the pure doctrine of the Bible. Lutherans especially treasure the Small Catechism of Martin Luther as a useful tool for teaching the Christian faith.