

## 94 THESES

On this the 31st day of October, 2017 – 500 years after Martin Luther posted his 95 theses in Wittenberg –, I wish to share the following theses for discussion, debate, and dialogue. Due to my profound respect and admiration for Luther's theses, and following the example of my sisters and brothers at the *Radicalizing Reformation Project*, I have chosen to write one less thesis than he did.

1. The only true God is the God who loves all people equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly. This is the God proclaimed by Jesus and the writings of the Old and New Testaments. Any who believe in a God who does not love all people equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly believe in a false God. By no means, however, are Christians the only ones who believe in the true God or in Jesus.
2. To love others unconditionally must be understood in terms of committing all that one is and has to seeking the well-being of all people equally together with one's own. Any who do not share that commitment do not truly act out of love and thus do not speak fully the truth when they say that they love God and others.
3. To change the world in the way God wants, it is necessary to do the following:
  - A) Share what you believe with others with all the passion and conviction you can muster by telling your story.
  - B) Ask others to share what they believe in the same way through their own stories and pay close attention to what they say.
  - C) Teach and empower others to do both of these things well until a snowball starts forming.
  - D) Work with others to create spaces and opportunities for this to happen.
  - E) Do what you can to keep the snowball rolling, but when you get tired, take a break and let others push for a while. This may mean getting stuck in the snowball but sooner or later God will make sure you get out.
4. When we are commanded to do something or command others, we must try to make sure that all affected understand why that commandment is given and in what way it is an expression of unconditional love.
5. The Bible is not an instruction manual on how people should live but a love letter from God to us. Although love involves respecting rules and guidelines, the last thing that true lovers need is a bunch of instructions.
6. It is good to speak of salvation as *shalom*, which in Hebrew means "wholeness." *Shalom* encompasses both body and soul, since we cannot be physically whole without being emotionally and spiritually whole; nor can we be whole as individuals without belonging to communities that are also whole.
7. In ancient Hebrew and biblical thought, "justice" means "*shalom* for all." "All" should be understood as referring to all living beings and everything in the entire created order. Christians believe that some day Christ will establish his loving lordship over all and then hand everything and everyone over to his Father so that God may be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).
8. God commands that we obey her for our own sakes.
9. In order to speak rightly of *shalom*, one must say, "I have *shalom*," and at the same time affirm, "I do *not* have *shalom*," because in this world both of these things are always true to some degree or in some sense. This observation must be generalized: Rather than saying that something is or is not true, we must ask *to what extent* or *in what sense* it is true. For example, while it is true that God is

love, that statement is false if by "God" we mean Moloch, the Canaanite god of Old Testament times who demanded that parents sacrifice their children to him.

10. The truth just stated can also be illustrated by translating the words of 1 John 4:18, "perfect love casts out fear," as: "perfect fear casts out love." But the word "perfect" is always relative and no expression of the truth can ever capture or convey it fully.
11. The way to share things that some people may see as threatening without agitating them is to say, not: "This is true," but rather: "I have heard it said that this is true. What do you think?" In this way we make others curious rather than judgmental and also confess that we are not the sole possessors of the truth.
12. Those who deny that human beings have evolved from other species in an evolutionary process that has spanned billions of years deny as well some of the most basic truths of the biblical story of creation. Only a God whose love knows no limits would create us in such a way so as to leave us scratching our heads and wondering, "Why on earth did God wait so long to bring us into existence? And why did he put us in the middle of such a huge playground? And where in the world is all of this going?"
13. What we call science is not really knowledge but only belief. Scientists say, "We have strong and at times overwhelming evidence that leads us to believe that certain hypotheses that we make are true, and on that basis, there are other things that we believe to be true as well. But because we cannot be absolutely sure, we have to keep on trying out more hypotheses and examining more evidence." In this way, scientists are just like Christians.
14. No person, group, or community has a God-given right to define God's will unilaterally. The only way we can seek to understand and define God's will adequately is to enter into dialogue with one another, making every effort to see things from the perspective of others. This dialogue must be as inclusive as possible and be open to both believers and non-believers. The voices of those who tend to be silenced or ignored must especially be heard. In this way, we will be brought to some degree of consensus and on that basis may define what we are to do or not to do at a given point in time. For this same reason, no person or group of people can be regarded as the final authority on what the Scriptures say.
15. As Luther and St. Paul taught, we must hate our sin just as much as God does. This means that there are basically two kinds of people: those who hate their sin and those who like it.
16. No person can bring another to believe in the God whom Jesus called "Lord." Any use of violent or non-violent means in an attempt to force others to adopt a particular belief or to prevent them from changing their beliefs is not only contrary to God's will but is also counterproductive and futile, since God alone is able to bring people to believe what they should. Our task as followers of Jesus is simply to share our convictions and testimonies and God's love with others in word and deed. What happens as we do this is up to God.
17. No person can ever truly come to love God and others unless that person has experienced unconditional love in his or her life. For this reason, as Christians we must do everything in our power to enable others to experience through us God's unconditional love.
18. In order to be faithful to Jesus and the God he proclaimed, it is necessary for us to care just as much about people of other faith groups and human communities as we care about our own. If they suffer injustices, our shout of indignation must be just as loud. The same is true with regard to people who identify themselves in ways that distinguish them from us.
19. Jesus said, "If any wish to be my followers, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." To use Luther's distinction, those words are not law but pure

gospel and grace, because to take up the cross is not to seek to suffer but to be willing to endure the suffering that love inevitably entails. Those who take up their cross to follow Jesus in this life pay a very high price. However, those who refuse to take up their cross pay an even higher price in life. Therefore, Jesus was not issuing a promise or a threat but merely stating a fact regarding life in the present world when he added, "Any who attempt to save their life will lose it, but any who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will find it."

20. When Luther translated the Bible into German, he translated *ekklesia* as *Gemeinde*, "community," rather than *Kirche*, "church," in order to stress that Jesus had intended to establish, not an institution, but a worldwide community of followers fully committed to loving God and others with their whole being. When Jesus' total dedication to that task led to the threat of a violent death, rather than backing down, fleeing, or going into hiding, he realized that if he truly desired to see such a community take the shape he envisioned and become willing like him to stop at nothing, he had no choice but to go up to Jerusalem to continue to proclaim even more openly, boldly, and aggressively there his message regarding God's reign, fully aware that this would cost him his life. Paradoxically, however, his death stamped that community forever as one to which no one can truly belong without assuming Jesus' same dedication and commitment to all that he lived and died for.
21. The New Testament teaching that Jesus "died for our sins" should not be understood in the sense that Jesus' death made it possible for God to forgive us. Nothing has ever prevented God from forgiving anyone at any time. Rather, that phrase should be interpreted to mean that Jesus gave up his life so that his efforts to save us from our sinful and destructive ways might be successful.
22. Suffering never atones for anything. To say the contrary is to crucify others. For the same reason, it is also false and extremely pernicious to maintain that in themselves Jesus' sufferings and death atone for our sins, satisfy God's justice, and deliver us from God's wrath at sin. Even though such a belief has been maintained by many Christians for centuries, true followers of Christ must now not only reject it but make that rejection firm, vociferous, and emphatic.
23. The only sense in which it can rightly be said that God sent his Son into the world to die is the sense in which we say that a country at war sends its children out to die on the battlefield. The objective is not to die but to win the war. As we see from Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, what he wanted was not to shed his blood, but to head up an army of rebels who will not rest until the rivers of living water that pour forth from their veins turn Golgotha into Eden.
24. For God to have intervened to save Jesus from being crucified by taking him up into heaven before that could happen would have been tantamount to God saying to the world, "I love you all very much and I want you to love one another, but when your activity on behalf of others leads to the threat of suffering and death at the hands of others, then stop immediately what you are doing and run as fast as you can to a safe place where you can hide out permanently so that no one can ever bother you again." From my perspective, a God who really loves us could never ever say such a thing. If God's love for us only goes so far, then how can God expect our love to go any further than his?
25. Jesus made the decision to let himself be arrested and crucified after repeatedly asking God, "What do you want me to do?" To follow Jesus is not necessarily to do precisely what he did, but to live one's life asking God the same question he did. While following him means struggling against evil and injustice with all one's might, there are times in life when the

best option is to capitulate. Ultimately, even Jesus had to give up the ghost.

26. It is impossible to kill a true Christian because true Christians have already died with Christ. No one can take their life away because they have already given it away. Precisely for that reason, as St. Paul wrote, they have also risen with Christ and sit with him at God's side.
27. Any person who cannot grasp why St. Paul and Martin Luther were willing to die for the gospel they proclaimed will never truly comprehend it, no matter how much she or he studies their writings. Similarly, any who claim that Christians should not use the cross as a symbol of their faith because it was the instrument by which Jesus was put to death have not understood its meaning.
28. The best response I can come up with to the question of why God allows suffering is that there is no other way in which we can all learn to love together. I simply cannot see how anyone could ever learn to love without enduring some type of suffering as a result. In principle, however, I *can* see how God might some day put an end to this world to replace it with a different one in which we will finally be able to love without suffering endlessly.
29. The New Testament's claim that God physically raised Jesus from the dead puts historians in a quandary. On the one hand, they rightly recognize that such a thing seems impossible because, as far as we know, nothing like it has ever happened before or since. On the other hand, however, the evidence that the disciples of Jesus who had known him during his lifetime were absolutely convinced that he had risen not only in soul but in body as well is so strong that serious historians cannot deny that that they held resolutely to that conviction. The only people who make up lies and then dedicate the rest of their lives to perpetrating those lies are people who seek to deceive others for their own profit. But the convictions of people who are willing even to die for what they believe to be true cannot be dismissed just because what they proclaim is unheard of or runs contrary to our understanding of the laws of nature. In reality, we can say that every event in human history is unprecedented; therefore, Jesus' resurrection is by no means unique.
30. After Jesus had offered up his life to God and been raised so that he might continue to be Lord and servant of all in a new and different way, his first followers concluded, "In this man, God has not only given us new revelations, commandments, prophecies, or hopes. God has gone so far as to give us his very self!"
31. The doctrine of the Trinity should be explained thus: After Jesus' followers came to the conclusion just mentioned, they also understood why Jesus had always called God "Abba, Father" and began to address God in the same way. Likewise, when they received the Holy Spirit, they said, "This Spirit is not just something that emanates from God, but she is actually a person." Therefore, they could only shake their heads and say, "We cannot explain how the one and only God in whom we believe is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This makes absolutely no sense. It runs totally contrary to reason. But from experience, we know it to be true." Precisely because the doctrine of the Trinity is so incomprehensible and scandalous, therefore, it is true, because as the cross shows, God is himself incomprehensible and scandalous.
32. As Jesus teaches at least three times in Matthew 18, there are two different kinds of forgiveness. The first involves not seeking to harm those who have hurt us or wishing them ill. This is the sense in which we must forgive seventy times seven. The second involves allowing people guilty of wrongdoing to be left unpunished or abstaining from imposing some type of suffering on them in response to what they have done. Like the king in the parable of the unforgiving servant, at times we are to cancel debts. At other times, however, we will deem it best to see to it that a person guilty of wrongdoing be locked up or treated

like “a gentile and a tax collector.” Everyone must be their own judge as to which of these two things is better at a particular time and place and decide what serves best to promote *shalom* for all.

33. In order to understand why the Old and New Testament writings affirm that at times God makes or lets people suffer for their own good, we must remember that the authors of those writings took as a starting-point their conviction that God is pure, unconditional love and then tried to figure out why God had caused or allowed certain bad things to happen. Every person is entitled to try to make sense of her own suffering by resorting to such explanations, but it is cruel and monstrous to use those explanations to interpret the suffering of others.
34. The notion of heaven can be used both in liberating ways to give people hope and in oppressive ways to manipulate people or keep them from struggling for a better world.
35. Any who do not understand why the God of the Old Testament, Jesus, and Martin Luther at times spoke so tenderly and compassionately and at other times so harshly and aggressively have not yet understood what unconditional love is all about. The alternative to raising one’s voice louder and louder until one is heard is to become silent and abandon people, letting them go their own way. In biblical thought, God sometimes chooses the second of these two alternatives, but only temporarily. Of course, what distinguishes Luther from the God of the Old Testament and Jesus is that, because Luther was not God, he was never able to attain a love that was truly unconditional, since only God is capable of such a love.
36. According to biblical thought, a God who loves all people out of pure grace, mercy, and kindness cannot observe sinful and unjust behavior without being moved to anger. Nevertheless, it is one thing to speak of God’s wrath and another thing entirely different to affirm that God’s wrath leads God to act violently.
37. In Jesus, who continually sought out fellowship with those who had been labeled “sinners,” we discover the truth that God’s holiness does not prevent God from having communion with sin and sinful human beings. On the contrary, the belief that Jesus is the only-begotten Son of the God who is holy and in some sense is himself God demonstrates that to speak of God’s holiness is to speak of God’s love. Rather than forcing God to remain far removed from sin and sinners, therefore, God’s holiness impels God to enter into full solidarity with those whose sin God finds unbearable.
38. On the basis of this understanding of God’s holiness, those who read God’s command, “Be holy as I am holy” should interpret it to mean: “Be perfect in your solidarity with all people as I am perfect in my solidarity with all people.”
39. Everything that a person, group, or community receives from God is to be used to contribute in some way to the wholeness not only of that particular person, group, or community but the wholeness of other people as well, and when possible, to the wholeness of all, which everyone must seek alongside one another.
40. Any who say, “We alone are God’s children” murder their own flesh and blood.
41. When Bill W. and Dr. Bob S., founders of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, began to teach that alcoholism is an illness rather than a vice, they made it possible for countless people to overcome their addiction to alcohol. Likewise, when we understand and proclaim that sin is a disease that requires healing rather than a vice to be condemned and then point to Jesus as the “good physician,” we enable others to find healing in him.
42. What distinguishes those who are followers of Jesus from those who are not is not that Jesus’ followers have put away their sinful behavior or are any less sinful than other people, but

that by pure grace they have been integrated into a community within which they can come to find wholeness. Rather than condemning, shunning, or rejecting those who have not been incorporated into that community, they must reach out to them at the same time that they ask God to make it possible for them to be healed as well.

43. Just as those who have been empowered to break their dependency on alcohol with the help of *Alcoholics Anonymous* learn to say, "I am still an alcoholic and will remain an alcoholic for the rest of my life," so also must the followers of Jesus say, "Even though Jesus has begun to heal me, I remain a broken sinner and will never overcome that brokenness fully in the present life." As Luther taught, by God's grace we are all 100% saints, but we all remain 100% sinners our entire life.
44. Just as those who walk into a meeting of *Alcoholics Anonymous* can anticipate that they will not be censured or reproached for their alcoholism even when they have relapsed, so also those who walk into any public gathering of Jesus' followers with a sincere heart should be able to be confident that they will be received gladly and warmly just as they are, no matter what they look like or what terrible things they have done. They should be able to say, "The only thing that everyone here wants is to help and support me."
45. According to *Alcoholics Anonymous* and Martin Luther, when God brings you to touch bottom, God has done you a favor. This means that at times the greatest favor we can do for others is to allow them to touch bottom, though at the same time we must keep an eye on them to prevent them from hurting themselves and always be ready to help them get back up again.
46. As Luther noted, even the best things we do are tainted with sin. Everything good that we do, then, is in some way bad as well.
47. Faith saves, not because God has arbitrarily established the acceptance of certain doctrines as the condition for saving people, but because it involves entrusting one's life entirely to God and looking to God above all else for the help one needs. Nothing makes us whole but faith, which involves constantly fixing our gaze on God rather than on ourselves. God therefore commands us to believe in him for our own good. For the same reason, as Luther was forced to explain time and again, true faith cannot exist without a transformed life. One cannot cling to Christ without being dragged along wherever he decides to go.
48. No matter how dark or light your skin is, you are a racist. But that's OK — so is everyone else, because the sinful systems in which we live make racists of us all. The only racist that cannot be helped by others is one who refuses to recognize his racism. Thus, rather than accusing each other of being racists, we must all ask one another kindly to help us see and overcome our racism.
49. To turn the other cheek is not to let someone keep abusing us. Rather, it is to say to them, "You can hit me all you want, but you will never make me your slave. Hitting me will accomplish nothing. So stop hurting me, and stop hurting yourself. Instead, let's live together in harmony and love."
50. The biblical saying, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" does not mean: "When someone hurts you, you should hurt them back." Instead, it means, "whoever has the God-given responsibility of administering justice should dictate sentences that are neither too harsh nor too lenient." Jesus also teaches us that retributive justice must always exist for the sake of distributive justice.
51. Because the God of whom the Old and New Testaments speak is fully committed to *shalom* for all, any interpretation of the Bible that is not intended to contribute to that end involves proclaiming an idol of our own making who is distinct from the God of Scripture. Of course, our good intentions do not necessarily make our interpretations good.

52. Because each of us is God's good creation, every person can do and say unique and wonderful things that no one else can. Therefore, we all need the help even of those who lie paralyzed and must listen even to those who are physically unable to speak. Similarly, we all have much to learn from persons whom many have mistakenly called "mentally retarded." In some ways, they are actually more advanced than the rest of us.
53. Every good sermon can be reduced to the words, "Yes, you can. Just believe."
54. The opposite of power is impotence. Both can be good or bad. As Luther taught, our impotence is a gracious blessing when it compels us to reach out to Jesus and cry out, "Lord, help, because I am drowning!"
55. We must all think, "With or without me, the world will go on fine and my loved ones are safe. They are in God's hands. All I can do is to keep putting them there."
56. If you live your life constantly looking over your shoulder because you are afraid, eventually you will get lost or trip and fall. In addition, those who would seek to take you captive have already accomplished their objective. What made it possible for Peter and Paul to announce to the world a message that burst open hearts cringing in fear was that they were not afraid of serving jail time.
57. I have been to a place where children sniff paint thinner in order to quell their hunger pains. By the time they turn thirteen, they have irreversible brain damage, but then they start having babies that someone else must raise. Many who live in such places think that the best or only way to survive is to sell drugs. Others are forced to join a gang and get a special tattoo so that they can always be hunted down. They then end up doing unspeakable, horrific things and become completely numb to any kind of pain, whether it be that of others or their own. Those who end up in prison even feel fortunate because they get a little food and have a place to sleep.
- We are all responsible for this because we do nothing but condemn people as evil, blame them alone for their behavior, and then look the other way. This makes us all Satans.
58. To slam the door in the face of people fleeing from situations such as those just described who seek our help is to say to Joseph and the Virgin Mary, "Go sleep in the cow dung. There is no room for you and you don't belong here. This place is ours alone."
59. Instead of embellishing the temple at Jerusalem to consolidate his power, King Herod should have built some good schools and clinics and helped create jobs in places like Bethlehem and Nazareth.
60. Through the Holy Spirit, every follower of Jesus receives from God a vocation in life, which may or may not be to serve in a leadership role within the community of believers in Christ. The activity of those who serve God outside of the church is just as important for the advancement of the gospel as that of those who do so as its official representatives. Each believer's vocation is to some extent distinct and unique. This makes it possible for each believer to touch the lives of other people in ways and places in which other believers cannot. God turns every believer into a means of grace for others.
61. People do not exist for the church. Rather, the church exists for people.
62. Because God created sex and God is good, we must not condemn it when two mature, single adults decide to establish a healthy sexual relationship that is characterized by mutual love, full and unpressured consent, and a commitment to be faithful to one another, even when these two persons are of the same gender. On the contrary, we should be elated and rejoice with God when s/he provides a person with such a partner. If they can be married publicly, we should encourage them to consider doing so for their own sake, since to make a life-long commitment to one's partner enables both to dig together a well that

keeps getting deeper and deeper. In that way, they can constantly satisfy their thirst with water that is always fresh.

63. Jesus never prohibited what we today call "divorce." What he said was that one should not "dismiss" or "send away" one's spouse, since in God's good plan, "the two have become one flesh." Jesus' idea was that it is not good for a spouse to cut off what has become his/her own flesh without first making every effort to get that flesh healed.
64. Of the many joys in life, none can ever compare with that of having children. Even though sometimes they will give you a tour of hell, at others they will open your eyes to things in paradise that human words can never express. However, I am not sure whose pain is greater: parents who have lost a child or those who were never able to meet the child they conceived in their mind.
65. While we all share a common human nature, to call something "unnatural" is to overlook the fact it is we who define nature rather than nature which defines us. We must also remember that God has made us in such a way that what is natural for one person is not natural for another.
66. To say that a wife should submit to her husband because he is male or that women should submit to men because of their gender is inhumane, sadistic, and contrary to Scripture.
67. Whenever anyone thanks us, we should feel somewhat uncomfortable and respond, at least in our own minds, "Why do you thank me? I am only being the person God created me to be. I can't help it. So thank God instead." Nevertheless, we should express verbally and in other ways our gratitude towards others as often as possible and continually give others the gift, honor, and pleasure of saying "Thank you" to us.
68. As Martin Luther repeatedly emphasized, while it is necessary to adopt and enforce laws and regulations in order to restrain evil in our world, no law or commandment can in itself ever change human hearts. This is the task of the gospel. Therefore, while we may participate in the promulgation and enforcement of just laws in our world out of love for God and others, from a Christian perspective, the proclamation of the gospel in word and action is the only way to change the evil in this world into good.
69. The theology of the cross, which Martin Luther took from the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians, teaches us that many of the things that we regard as ugly or repulsive are beautiful from God's perspective. And with God's help, whatever is not truly beautiful can become so.
70. No matter how much or how little we have studied and learned, we are all experts at some things but idiots at others. Thus we constantly need to ask our fellow experts and our fellow idiots to lend us a hand.
71. As Luther repeatedly stressed on the basis of the story of Balak and Balaam in Numbers 22, if God can speak through an ass, God can speak through any of us.
72. When Lutherans baptize a baby, it is as if they called the church gardener to say, "We have a new sprout that needs transplanting." The gardener takes the sprout out of its little pot, plants it in a space next to all the other flowers where it can get plenty of sunshine (but not too much), and pours some water on it. This allows it to grow strong roots and flourish. Then the gardener does what she can to make sure that there are plenty of honeybees, butterflies, and hummingbirds around so that they can pollinate the flower along with those around it. As a result, the garden becomes even larger. It should be noted in passing that the gardener is also an expert in transplanting larger plants. She just has to use a little more water.
73. In churches that are truly Lutheran, all those who are present when the Lord's Supper is offered are told, "If you are hungry, come get

some food. You do not need to show an ID card. The meal's not much but you'll be surprised how satisfying it is. If you already feel full and don't want to dine with us, come anyway. As you start eating, all of a sudden your stomach will start growling and you will say, 'I guess I was hungry after all.'"

74. In the Lutheran tradition, those who come to share the Eucharistic bread and cup are told, "Do you see that guy at the head of the table? He's picking up the tab. But keep your eye on him as you eat and drink and you'll be amazed. All of a sudden he disappears from sight. Then everyone runs outside and begins to see him showing up everywhere they look."
75. The reason that Lutherans do not pray to the saints is that we believe in a God who loves us so much that she wants us to approach her directly through Jesus.
76. The reason that Lutherans do not pray for the souls of the deceased is that this would give the impression that they have not yet been fully embraced by God to cuddle up in her bosom for eternity.
77. When those who opposed Luther started calling those who agreed with Luther's understanding of the gospel "Lutherans" in order to provoke and ridicule them, at first they rejected that label. Luther himself wrote, "How should I, a poor stinking bag of maggots, come to have the children of Christ called by my wretched name?" After a while, however, those who identified with Luther's thought stopped fighting the label and said, "Precisely because we are all a bunch of poor, stinking bags of maggots just like Luther, let's stop protesting when people call us Lutherans. In fact, let's even use that wretched name ourselves with joy as if it were a title of honor."
78. Contrary to what many thought, when at the Diet of Worms he was ordered, "Recant!," Luther knew it was in his best interests to stand firm. Had he given in, for the rest of his life, his conscience might have made it impossible for him to live with himself. However, as Jesus taught Peter, even if you tell others that you don't know who he is after they have inquired several times, Jesus will always give you another chance. So when you betray Jesus, don't go out and hang yourself like Judas did. Just shout out to everyone what Luther would eventually have exclaimed had he faltered at the moment of truth: "I recant my recantation!" Honestly, that is just as well, because in that way others who have denied and betrayed Jesus will realize that they too can always shout out for the world to hear their own recantation of their recantation. By the way, this is what Luther had in mind when he said, "Sin boldly."
79. To say that believers of all different faiths worship the same God may be true in some sense, yet at the same time it is an insult to them and to the God or Gods in whom they believe. We seek to prevent our different beliefs about God from fostering violence, not by declaring all Gods the same, but by talking calmly and caringly with one another about the God or Gods in whom we believe. Believers of different faiths or worldviews, therefore, are not merely to "tolerate" one another but must also manifest their love for one another in concrete ways.
80. There are so many wonderful and incomparable things in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism that are lacking in Christianity. Likewise, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses possess many treasures that Lutherans can only envy.
81. One does not need to be a Lutheran to be a Lutheran. In fact, there are many non-Lutherans who are more Lutheran than many Lutherans, just as there are Lutherans who are more un-Lutheran than many non-Lutherans. Of course, what really matters is being Christian, yet once again, there are many Christians who are un-Christian and even non-Christians, just as many non-Christians are more Christian than many Christians.

82. One of the saddest things in the world is that when people hear words such as “Christian,” “pastor,” “Bible,” “church,” and above all “Jesus” and the name of “God,” they think of something violent and oppressive rather than liberating and transforming. Instead of ceasing to use those words, however, those of us who follow Jesus must first let others get to know us and then explain what they mean.
83. All true Christians are agnostics because following Jesus is not about knowing but trusting. Furthermore, when people called the first Christians atheists, they were not incorrect, since true Christians reject the same oppressive Gods that their brother and sister atheists do.
84. Throughout the history of the church, people who have questioned oppressive notions of God and have proposed that God be understood differently have commonly been branded “heretics.” The task of a Lutheran Seminary is to prepare heretics who believe so strongly in the gospel and the God of incorrigible love they proclaim that they would rather be burned at the stake than renounce their faith.
85. When Jesus and John the Baptist cried out, “Repent, for the reign of God is at hand!,” what they were saying can be paraphrased thus: “God is coming soon to clean up the mess we have made, so go jump in the shower, let the Holy Spirit give you a good scrubbing, and put on the new clothes he gives you.” The problem is that God really hates having to clean up. That’s why he keeps waiting to see if we will do it ourselves. Unfortunately, there’s no other way for the party that God has planned to get going. But what God *really really really* wants is for everyone to be there and for no one to miss out.
86. To do mission work is to go out to learn things and then go back home and tell everyone what you learned. But be warned: when you go out to do mission, you may catch a deadly virus and then set loose an epidemic upon your return.
87. It is not bad or sinful to doubt God, question God, or get angry at God. On the contrary, God *wants* us do these things when we feel moved to do so. In reality, God is overjoyed when someone yells at him, “I don’t believe in you!” He responds: “I am so glad that we’re finally having this conversation! Let’s go get a cup of coffee and keep chatting.”
88. It is also right and proper to demand from God an explanation as to why God has allowed something bad to happen, as Jesus did on the cross when he exclaimed, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!” As Jesus found out, it may take a while, but eventually God will answer your question.
89. The story of Thomas and the risen Jesus teaches us that when someone tells us, “I have seen a miracle!,” we must not say, “That’s impossible!” Instead, we should say, “I may have my doubts, but if I want to know for sure, I can only do what Thomas did: keep hanging around the people who say they saw the same miracle and see whether or not Jesus shows up.”
90. It is right and proper to affirm that all followers of Jesus should submit to him or to God as their Lord. It is not, however, faithful to Jesus or the New Testament writings to equate someone with God so as to affirm that to submit to that person or group is the same as submitting to God or Jesus. Such an affirmation is blasphemous because it involves placing a human being or a group of human beings in a position that belongs to God alone. At the root of all oppression in both Christianity and other faiths is the claim that only one particular person or group represents God and speaks fully for him.
91. To submit to God’s will and conform oneself to that will can be understood in both an active and a passive sense. In an active sense, it involves striving to live and behave in the way God desires. In a passive sense, it involves accepting whatever comes from God’s hand and simply commending to God oneself, one’s future, one’s projects, and other people. What

impels the followers of Jesus to do these things is their conviction that the God whom they have come to know loves them unconditionally, in spite of any hardships they endure that might seem to indicate the contrary.

92. The reason why we cannot merit God's grace, favor, and love is that these things are already ours in abundance. How can we merit or earn something that we have already been given freely? If God already loves us infinitely by pure grace just as we are, how can our behavior bring her to love us more? The only thing that our behavior can merit is a particular form that God's love for us will take. God responds to our behavior by using many different means to attempt to mold us into the persons she wants us to be for our own good and that of others.
93. To affirm that celebrating the "Festival of the Reformation" would be like celebrating a divorce is to fail to understand what Luther did. Luther never left the church, which he always loved. When he was excommunicated by the pope, he exclaimed, "Just as they have excommunicated me for the sacrilege of heresy, so I excommunicate them in the name of the sacred truth of God! Christ will judge which of these two excommunications is valid!" What Lutherans celebrate, therefore, is not the division of the church (because the true church can never be divided), but the fact that Luther refused to be intimidated and thus made it possible for the gospel to be heard all around the world once more.
94. All of the ideas I have shared here have been repeated many times by others long before me. All that I have done is to dress them up in some fancy clothes that will cause people to stare for a few moments before deciding whether or not to shop for the same brand or even design their own label. If that makes you chuckle, stop it. None of these things are laughing matters. One way or another, I just want to make you cry with me so that you will ask God for a handkerchief and start wiping

away the tears. Then we can all dance to the music that God has been dying to play for us on his fiddle.

In conclusion to these theses, I would stress three points. First, I must insist once more that I do not wish anyone simply to give assent to them. In fact, each one of these theses affirms things that even I would question. Therefore, as I indicated in the prologue, I must persist in reiterating that what I am inviting readers to do is simply to discuss, debate, critique, and reflect on their content. What the readers do after that is up to them and to God.

Second, to those who reject as false any of the ideas expressed in these theses, I reply: You may very well be right. But you can't show anyone that you are right if you merely condemn, censure, and repress ideas that you regard as untrue. To do that only demonstrates impotence, ignorance, and incompetence. So don't mute, but refute, by engaging rather than incinerating.

And third, if these theses make anyone angry, I say to them: You have misinterpreted my words. There is nothing in them designed to harm you or anyone else or to affect negatively your interests or those of others. On the contrary, if all I want is for you to be made whole together with me, and I like you cannot be made whole without trying to make you and everyone else whole, then why should you be upset? Because God loves me and God loves you, I love you too. So let's hold hands and continue together our journey to the promised land.

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