November 4, 2026 – GCA

Arrival and Studies at Wittenberg (1508–1512)

- **1508**: Transferred from Erfurt to the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg. He begins teaching at the newly founded University of Wittenberg (initially in moral philosophy/arts) while continuing theological studies.
- **1509**: Receives the baccalaureate in Bible (*Baccalaureus biblicus*) at Wittenberg.
- **1510–1511**: Travels to Rome on business for the Augustinian order; returns disillusioned by what he sees of the Roman clergy and practices.
- **1511**: Permanently settled at the Wittenberg monastery.
- **October 19, 1512**: Receives his Doctor of Theology degree at the University of Wittenberg and assumes the professorship in biblical studies (succeeding Johann von Staupitz). He holds this chair for the rest of his life.

Teaching, Theological Development, and the 95 Theses (1513–1517)

- **1513–1517**: Lectures on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. Through intensive study of Scripture (especially Paul), he develops his understanding of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) and the righteousness of God as a gift rather than something earned by works.
- **October 31, 1517**: Writes the *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (the **95 Theses**), criticizing the sale of indulgences (notably by Johann Tetzel). He sends them with a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and, according to tradition, posts them on the door of the Castle Church (Schlosskirche) in Wittenberg—the university's public bulletin board. This date is widely regarded as the start of the Protestant Reformation.

Conflict with Rome and the Break (1518–1521)

- **1518**: Called to Augsburg to answer charges before Cardinal Cajetan; refuses to recant. The controversy expands beyond indulgences.
- **1519**: Leipzig Debate with Johann Eck; Luther publicly questions papal supremacy and the infallibility of councils.

- **1520**: Publishes three major Reformation treatises: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On the Freedom of a Christian*. In June, the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* threatens excommunication. On December 10, Luther publicly burns the bull and other church documents in Wittenberg.
- **January 3, 1521**: Formally excommunicated by Pope Leo X (*Decet Romanum Pontificem*).
- **April 1521**: Appears at the Diet of Worms before Emperor Charles V and the imperial estates. He refuses to recant ("Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."). The Edict of Worms declares him an outlaw.
- **May 1521–March 1522**: "Kidnapped" by agents of Elector Frederick the Wise and hidden at Wartburg Castle. There he translates the New Testament into German (published September 1522).

The *97 Theses* present Luther's theology based on the precepts of scripture alone and faith alone as the means of knowing God's will while dismissing the scholastic tradition as counterproductive and even unbiblical. The scholars he cites below in his arguments – William of Ockham (l. c. 1287-1347), Duns Scotus (l. c. 1265-1308), and Gabriel Biel (l. c. 1425-1495) – were among the most highly regarded scholastic theologians of their times who had helped shape church doctrine and vision.

The works of Aristotle, which formed the basis of the Catholic Church's theological approach, were understood by the Church as essential in developing a sound, rational theology, and these were required reading for any clergy. In taking issue with the works of these men, Luther was challenging church policy, but his careful phrasing kept his critiques soundly within the confines of the very system he was arguing against.

Scholar Lyndal Roper expresses the opinion of most modern-day scholars that the *97 Theses* "are in many ways more radical and shocking than the Ninety-Five Theses" (81) in that the latter took aim at the church policy of selling indulgences and the authority of the pope while the former is an attack on the whole

theological system of the Church including the concept of free will. Roper continues:

The theses are an extraordinarily confident set of propositions, which are ordered as though they follow from one another, but their sequence is emotional as much as logical. Briskly, Luther labels one after another of his statements as "contrary to common opinion" or "in opposition to the scholastics." They capture his rejection of the whole tradition of medieval theology in all its passionate fury as he concludes: "No one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle." (81)

His rejection of Aristotelian logic is not a rejection of reason, however, nor of rational discourse. Luther had simply come to realize that one cannot rely on human reason to apprehend the divine. His revelation upon reading the line from Romans 1:17 – "the just shall live by faith" – convinced him that God provided humanity with the grace to know God's will and no system devised by humans could improve upon that.

The 97 Theses

The following comes from ***Martin Luther****'s Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, pp. 3-7.

1. To say that **Augustine** exaggerates in speaking against heretics is to say that Augustine tells lies almost everywhere. This is contrary to common knowledge.

2. This is the same as permitting Pelagians and all heretics to **triumph**, indeed, the same as conceding victory to them.

3. It is the same as making sport of the authority of all doctors of theology.

4. It is therefore true that man, being a bad tree, can only will and do evil [Cf. Matt. 7:17-18].

5. It is false to state that man's inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites. Indeed, the inclination is not free, but captive. This is said in opposition to common opinion.

6. It is false to state that the will can by nature conform to correct precept. This is said in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel.

7. As a matter of fact, without the grace of God the will produces an act that is perverse and evil.

8. It does not, however, follow that the will is by nature evil, that is, essentially evil, as the Manichaeans maintain.

9. It is nevertheless innately and inevitably evil and corrupt.

10. One must concede that the will is not free to strive toward whatever is declared good. This in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel.

11. Nor is it able to will or not to will whatever is prescribed.

12. Nor does one contradict St. Augustine when one says that nothing is so much in the power of the will as the will itself.

13. It is absurd to conclude that erring man can love the creature above all things, therefore also God. This in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel.

14. Nor is it surprising that the will can conform to erroneous and not to correct precept.

15. Indeed, it is peculiar to it that it can only conform to erroneous and not to correct precept.

16. One ought rather to conclude: since erring man is able to love the creature it is impossible for him to love God.

17. Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God.

18. To love God above all things by nature is a fictitious term, a chimera, as it were. This is contrary to common teaching.

19. Nor can we apply the reasoning of Scotus concerning the brave citizen who loves his country more than himself.

20. An act of friendship is done, not according to nature, but according to prevenient grace. This in opposition to Gabriel.

21. No act is done according to nature that is not an act of concupiscence against God.

22. Every act of concupiscence against God is evil and a fornication of the spirit.

23. Nor is it true that an act of concupiscence can be set aright by the virtue of hope. This in opposition to Gabriel.

24. For hope is not contrary to charity, which seeks and desires only that which is of God.

25. Hope does not grow out of merits, but out of suffering which destroys merits. This in opposition to the opinion of many.

26. An act of friendship is not the most perfect means for accomplishing

that which is in one. Nor is it the most perfect means for obtaining the grace of God or turning toward and approaching God.

27. But it is an act of conversion already perfected, following grace both in time and by nature.

28. If it is said of the Scripture passages, "Return to me,…and I will return to you" [Zechariah 1:3], "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" [James 4:8], "Seek and you will find" [Matthew 7:7], "You will seek me and find me" [Jeremiah 29:13], and the like, that one is by nature, the other by grace, this is no different from asserting what the Pelagians have said.

29. The best and infallible preparation for grace and the sole disposition toward grace is the eternal election and predestination of God.

30. On the part of man, however, nothing precedes grace except indisposition and even rebellion against grace.

31. It is said with the idlest demonstrations that the predestined can be damned individually but not collectively. This in opposition to the scholastics.

32. Moreover, nothing is achieved by the following saying: Predestination is necessary by virtue of the consequence of God's willing, but not of what actually followed, namely, that God had to elect a certain person.

33. And this is false, that doing all that one is able to do can remove the obstacles to grace. This in opposition to several authorities.

34. In brief, man by nature has neither correct precept nor good will.

35. It is not true that an invincible ignorance excuses one completely (all scholastics notwithstanding);

36. For ignorance of God and oneself and good work is always invincible to nature.

37. Nature, moreover, inwardly and necessarily glories and takes pride in every work which is apparently and outwardly good.

38. There is no moral virtue without either pride or sorrow, that is, without sin.

39. We are not masters of our actions, from beginning to end, but servants. This in opposition to the philosophers.

40. We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds. This in opposition to the philosophers.

41. Virtually the entire Ethics of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace. This in opposition to the scholastics.

42. It is an error to maintain that Aristotle's statement concerning happiness does not contradict Catholic doctrine. This in opposition to the doctrine on morals.

43. It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle. This in opposition to common opinion.

44. Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle.

45. To state that a theologian who is not a logician is a monstrous heretic—this is a monstrous and heretical statement. This in opposition to common opinion.

46. In vain does one fashion a logic of faith, a substitution brought about without regard for limit and measure. This in opposition to the new dialecticians.

47. No syllogistic form is valid when applied to divine terms. This in opposition to the Cardinal.

48. Nevertheless, it does not for that reason follow that the truth of the doctrine of the **Trinity** contradicts syllogistic forms. This in opposition to the same new dialecticians and to the Cardinal.

49. If a syllogistic form of reasoning holds in divine matters, then the doctrine of the Trinity is demonstrable and not the object of faith.

50. Briefly, the whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light. This in opposition to the scholastics.

51. It is very doubtful whether the Latins comprehended the correct meaning of Aristotle.

52. It would have been better for the church if Porphyry with his universals had not been born for the use of theologians.

53. Even the more useful definitions of Aristotle seem to beg the question.

54. For an act to be meritorious, either the presence of grace is sufficient, or its presence means nothing. This in opposition to Gabriel.

55. The grace of God is never present in such a way that it is inactive, but it is a living, active, and operative spirit; nor can it happen that through the absolute power of God an act of friendship may be present without the presence of the grace of God. This in opposition to Gabriel.

56. It is not true that God can accept man without his justifying grace. This in opposition to Ockham.

57. It is dangerous to say that the **law** commands that an act of obeying the commandment be done in the grace of God. This in opposition to the Cardinal and Gabriel.

58. From this it would follow that "to have the grace of God" is actually a new demand going beyond the law.

59. It would also follow that fulfilling the law can take place without the grace of God.

60. Likewise it follows that the grace of God would be more hateful than the law itself.

61. It does not follow that the law should be complied with and fulfilled in the grace of God. This in opposition to Gabriel.

62. And that therefore he who is outside the grace of God sins incessantly, even when he does not kill, commit adultery, or become angry.

63. But it follows that he sins because he does not spiritually fulfill the law.

64. Spiritually that person does not kill, does not do evil, does not become enraged when he neither becomes angry nor lusts.

65. Outside the grace of God it is indeed impossible not to become angry or lust, so that not even in grace is it possible to fulfill the law perfectly.

66. It is the righteousness of the hypocrite actually and outwardly not to kill, do evil, etc.

67. It is by the grace of God that one does not lust or become enraged.

68. Therefore it is impossible to fulfill the law in any way without the grace of God.

69. As a matter of fact, it is more accurate to say that the law is destroyed by nature without the grace of God.

70. A good law will of necessity be bad for the natural will.

71. Law and will are two implacable foes without the grace of God.

72. What the law wants, the will never wants, unless it pretends to want it out of fear or love.

73. The law, as taskmaster of the will, will not be overcome except by the "child, who has been born to us" [Isaiah 9:6].

74. The law makes sin abound because it irritates and repels the will [Romans 7:13].

75. The grace of God, however, makes justice abound through **Jesus Christ** because it causes one to be pleased with the law.

76. Every deed of the law without the grace of God appears good outwardly, but inwardly it is sin. This in opposition to the scholastics.

77. The will is always averse to, and the hands inclined toward, the law of the Lord without the grace of God.

78. The will which is inclined toward the law without the grace of God is so inclined by reason of its own advantage.

79. Condemned are all those who do the works of the law.

80. Blessed are all those who do the works of the grace of God.

81. Chapter Falsas concerning penance, dist. 5, 10 confirms the fact that works outside the realm of grace are not good, if this is not understood falsely.

82. Not only are the religious ceremonials not the good law and the precepts in which one does not live (in opposition to many teachers).

83. But even the Decalogue itself and all that can be taught and prescribed inwardly and outwardly is not good law either.

84. The good law and that in which one lives is the love of God, spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

85. Anyone's will would prefer, if it were possible, that there would be no law and to be entirely free.

86. Anyone's will hates it that the law should be imposed upon it; if, however, the will desires imposition of the law it does so out of love of self.

87. Since the law is good, the will, which is hostile to it, cannot be good.

88. And from this it is clear that everyone's natural will is iniquitous and bad.

89. Grace as a mediator is necessary to reconcile the law with the will.

90. The grace of God is given for the purpose of directing the will, lest it err even in loving God. In opposition to Gabriel.

91. It is not given so that good deeds might be induced more frequently and readily, but because without it no act of love is performed. In opposition to Gabriel.

92. It cannot be denied that love is superfluous if man is by nature able to do an act of friendship. In opposition to Gabriel.

93. There is a kind of subtle evil in the argument that an act is at the same time the fruit and the use of the fruit. In opposition to Ockham, the Cardinal, Gabriel.

94. This holds true also of the saying that the love of God may continue alongside an intense love of the creature.

95. To love God is at the same time to hate oneself and to know nothing but God.

96. We must make our will conform in every respect to the will of God (in opposition to the Cardinal).

97. So that we not only will what God wills, but also ought to will whatever God wills.

In these statements we wanted to say and believe we have said nothing that is not in agreement with the Catholic church and the teachers of the church. [year] 1517

Erasmus vs. Luther: The Fight Over Free Will

In July 1536, Erasmus is dying. At one point in the 1520s, Erasmus tried to set Luther straight leading to the famous debate between Erasmus and Luther on the subject of free will.

Luther and Erasmus argue free will, not free choice. It's strictly soteriological.

Erasmus's idea of free will is almost synonymous with how you might call the default Western person thinks about free will. So, it's attractive sounding.

Erasmus's greatest achievement is his Greek New Testament, which he published in 1516. His goal was a purified text, educated clergy, and a church that was centered on learning.

By 1521, Luther is excommunicated. He goes before the emperor, Diet of Worms, refuses to recant, is declared an outlaw. On his way home, he is seized secretly and hidden in the Wartburg Castle, but nobody knows this. The rumor spreads that Luther has been murdered. Before long, it becomes clear that Luther is alive and publishing furiously.

March 1522: Returns to Wittenberg and works to restore order amid radical reforms.

1525: Marries former nun Katharina von Bora (June 13). They have several children. He also writes against the Peasants' War.

Erasmus first wrote a dialogue, the Inquisitio de Fide. In it, he argues that Lutherans accept the Apostle's Creed and should therefore not be treated as heretics. He actually wrote that Luther is not a heretic. He should be considered orthodox. Then he writes --

***A Diatribe or Discourse on Free Will*, published in September 1524, is a relatively short, carefully argued, and deliberately irenic treatise.** It was Erasmus's first major public challenge to Martin Luther. He wrote it under pressure from Catholic authorities (including encouragement from Pope Clement VII and Henry VIII) after years of hesitation, aiming to address what he saw as one of Luther's most dangerous teachings without resorting to personal invective or extreme dogmatism.

And then, alongside that, he publishes on the same day a sermon on God's mercy.

Erasmus offers his definition of free will. And free choice, he says, is, quote, “The power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation or turn away from them.”

He says that the human will does need grace to begin moving and it needs divine assistance to keep being holy. It cannot reach salvation without God’s completing them and perfecting the work.

Erasmus’s whole point is that this keeps the commands real. Because if the will has no role to play and everything happens by necessity, then God is directly responsible, Erasmus alleges, for every sin ever committed. And Erasmus thinks that makes God a monster.

Erasmus insists grace is primary and necessary. He distinguishes kinds of grace (natural, stimulating/operative, cooperating, and completing/sanctifying). In the common three-stage scheme (beginning, progress, end):

- The first impulse (thought of the good) and the final completion are pure grace.
- In the middle stage of willing and progressing, grace and the human will cooperate, with grace as the principal cause and the will secondary.

He uses the analogy of a small child and an apple: the parent shows the apple, supports the child, and places the apple in the child’s hands; the child contributes something by taking steps, yet owes everything to the parent. “There is nothing that man cannot do with the help of the grace of God.” The contribution of free choice is “extremely small,” yet real enough to preserve responsibility and moral endeavor.

Erasmus notes that Scripture contains passages seeming both to affirm and to deny free will. The safest course is the moderate, historically supported synergism of the Church rather than novel extremes (Pelagian confidence in unaided will or Manichaean/Lutheran denial of it). Dogma is properly determined by the Church, not by individual theologians. Readers are invited to judge which view best fits the

whole of Scripture and Christian piety. He warns against the practical dangers of extreme predestinarian teaching.

Extreme views—Pelagian confidence in unaided human effort on one side, and what he took to be an Augustinian/Lutheran denial of all free choice on the other—were to be avoided. Where Scripture seems obscure on the subject, Erasmus preferred skepticism or suspension of judgment for the sake of peace. He feared that denying free will would make God the author of sin, destroy moral responsibility, and turn people into puppets.

Erasmus sought a moderate, ethically practical, and relatively irenic Christianity that preserved human dignity and moral effort within a broadly Catholic framework.

Erasmus's book on free will arrived September 1524. Luther reads it. He does not respond immediately. He's sick. He's severe kidney stones, constipation, bouts of what sound like severe depression. And Germany itself is dealing with the Peasants' Revolt. Finally, Luther sat down to write. He wrote the Bondage of the Will in 7 days and published it just a few weeks later.

On New Year's Eve, he writes to a friend, "I am sending you my rebuttal to Erasmus, which I completed as best I could in a shorter time and in a hurry." Ironically, that book would go down as one of Luther's most legendary contributions to theology. The bondage of the will becomes one of the most important theological works in the 16th century.

Luther himself will say later it is the only book of his, besides the catechism, that deserves to survive. It's brutal. He opens with a mock bow to Erasmus's genius and then just trash his book.

Erasmus's work, Luther says, is like dung being carried by gold and silver vessels. Beautiful elegance, trash content. But, he also thanks Erasmus. He says, "You alone have attacked the real thing, the essential issue." Because the question of free will is not a side issue. It is, Luther said, "the hinge on which all things turn."

Erasmus had said, “If man cannot obey, then being chained like that in bondage is mockery.” Luther’s answer here, the title of the book, is that Erasmus has it backwards. The command is not given so that you can obey it, Luther says. The command is given so that you can discover that you cannot obey it.

Luther says that the command is given as a mirror. It shows you who you are. Paul says this explicitly in Romans 3:20. Man is bound. He cannot free himself. The command to perform and be holy is not cruelty. It is the first step towards rescue. Because only when the man realizes that he cannot run, will he cry out for someone to break the chains. The command drives him to despair of his own inability.

Luther is this simply responding to Erasmus’s idea of the chains and bondage by saying, ‘The chains and bondage are the point. You’re enslaved to your sin. And the command is there to show you that all of your good works doesn’t remove the chains. It’s not progressing you towards salvation.’”

The will, Luther says, acts by necessity. It follows its own nature. A corrupt will necessarily wills corrupt things. A redeemed will necessarily wills good things. The will cannot do otherwise than its nature dictates.

Luther is very clear on this. A wolf does not choose to be a wolf, but it hunts willingly. This distinction matters because Erasmus keeps framing the debate as though Luther is saying humans are puppets, mindless objects. Luther says, “You’re not a puppet. You are a willing, freely choosing agent.” The problem is that what you will, what you choose, always, invariably, apart from grace, is yourself, your own glory, your own comfort, your own kingdom. You want and will these things freely, gladly, and eagerly.

Luther’s key arguments include:

- **Total inability after the Fall.** Original sin does not merely weaken the will; it binds it so that the unregenerate person is a slave to sin and cannot turn to God or produce any truly spiritual good. The will is like a beast of burden: “If Satan rides, it goes where Satan wills. If God rides, it goes where God wills. In either case there is no ‘free choice.’”

- **God's sovereign monergism.** Salvation is entirely God's work—from the first stirring of faith to its completion. God foreknows, purposes, and accomplishes all things according to his immutable will. Divine foreknowledge does not merely observe; it is tied to his causative will.
- Apparent difficulties arise from human blindness, not from Scripture's darkness.
- **The purpose of the Law.** Commands and exhortations do not prove ability; they reveal inability and drive the sinner to Christ.
- **No merit or cooperation in justification.** Any residual power attributed to free will in spiritual matters is really an attempt to ascribe divinity to the creature and empty the cross of its necessity.
- **Predestination and the "hidden God."** Luther does not shrink from the implications: God's will is the ultimate cause of all things, including the hardening of some. This is difficult for natural reason, but it must be accepted because Scripture teaches it. The "revealed" God (in Christ and the Gospel) is the object of faith; the hidden will of God is not to be pried into.

He insists that the debate is not academic: the glory of God and the certainty of the Gospel stand or fall with it.

Luther insisted that any residual free will in matters of salvation undermines *sola gratia*, the seriousness of sin, and the freeness of the Gospel.

Erasmus answered with two volumes of *Hyperaspistes* (meaning "one who holds a shield over another," "protector," or "defender") (1526–27). Luther did not reply further.

Final Years (1522–1546)

- **1529**: Publishes the Large and Small Catechisms. Attends the Marburg Colloquy with Ulrich Zwingli (no agreement on the Lord's Supper).
- **1530**: The Augsburg Confession is presented by Philipp Melanchthon at the Diet of Augsburg (Luther cannot attend because of the imperial ban).
- **1534**: Completes and publishes the full German Bible.

- **1530s–1540s**: Continues teaching, preaching, and writing extensively in Wittenberg. Health declines; produces later works including controversial writings (e.g., *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1543).
- **February 18, 1546**: Dies in Eisleben (his birthplace) at age 62 while mediating a local dispute. His body is returned to Wittenberg and buried beneath the pulpit of the Castle Church.