Apr 11th, 11:00 AM - 2:00 PM

A Comparative Analysis of Martin Luther's Works

Lauren E. Yost
Cedarville University

Josh Graham
Cedarville University, jcgraham@cedarville.edu

Peter Kennell
Cedarville University

Daniel J. Stank
Cedarville University

Joshua Kira
Cedarville University

See next page for additional authors

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Yost, Lauren E.; Graham, Josh; Kennell, Peter; Stank, Daniel J.; Kira, Joshua; and Shaver, Annis N., "A Comparative Analysis of Martin Luther's Works" (2018). The Research and Scholarship Symposium. 18.
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Lauren E. Yost, Josh Graham, Peter Kennell, Daniel J. Stank, Dr. Joshua Kira, & Dr. Annis N. Shaver

Abstract
In this study, we sought to analyze the development of themes from Martin Luther's 95 Theses (1517) to his later writings. We sought to analyze a few of his works in order to answer the following question: Of the themes of the 95 Theses, which remain unchanged, which change, and which disappear in later writings? After translating and analyzing the 95 Theses as a group, we discussed and agreed upon six themes: purgatory, the pope and the clergy, canonic law, indulgences, the gospel and salvation, and repentance. We then individually compared these themes to selected works of Luther's writings (in his hymns in general). Due to the different natures of each work, we all found different results. Ultimately, we concluded that the 95 Theses neither summarizes nor predicts Luther's theology. Luther in fact continues to develop his theology over time and tailors his content for the particular audiences for which he writes.

Methods
In order to conduct our research, we first read and translated the 95 Theses. We discussed thematic content, then collected codes or topics and agreed on six overarching themes: purgatory, the pope and the clergy, canonic law, indulgences, the gospel and salvation, and repentance. Following this, we placed the Theses and the themes on a x-y graph in order to quantify the relationship between them. Having finished analyzing and discussing the 95 Theses, we then each selected one of Luther's later works and individually examined it for the same thematic content as the Theses, seeking to answer our initial research question for our individually selected works. The works selected were An Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation (1520), Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed (1523), the Small Catechism (1529), and 35 of Luther's hymns (1524-1548).

Conclusion
As evident from our separate analyses, Luther's 95 Theses were neither a summary nor a predictor of his theology. This foundational work rather started the movement of the Reformation, which led to further development of his theology, largely in a direction away from the Catholic church and towards the sole authority of Scripture. This was evidenced by Luther's change to a negative stance on the Church in his later writings and his apparent discarding of the doctrines of indulgence and purgatory as thematic elements. Further, as Luther adapted his works to speak to different audiences than the clergy and monastics, his subject matter changed to accommodate his new audiences. Throughout all of this, salvation remained a consistent and foundational belief.

95 Theses Findings
The 95 Theses, according to the Author's analysis, contain 6 major themes:
Purgatory: Luther holds this as an undoubted fact.
The pope and clergy: Luther asserts the pope as a legitimate authority, a representative of God to the Church on earth. The pope is then essentially benevolent and a potential ally. Luther considers the clergy to be the legitimate instructor of the lay, but acknowledges the error of indulgence preachers.
Canonic law: Luther views this as a lesser authority in supplement Scripture, used when appropriate as a source of practice.
Indulgences: Luther considers these in their traditional sense a legitimate, albeit lesser, sacramental supplement to good deeds and repentance. However, he condemns as heretical the salvation-manipulating of contemporary indulgence preachers.
Salvation and the gospel: Luther holds that salvation is a gift from God, freely received rather than bought. Due to this, the gospel is the highest truth of Christianity, above all church traditions and sacraments.
Repentance: Luther sees repentance as the means of forgiveness. True repentance rejects sin, accepts and loves its punishment as the means of purification, and leads to good works. Repentance, then, changes men for the better, whereas indulgence does not.

Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation
Of the 6 main themes in the 95 Theses, only the pope and the clergy and canonical law both appear as major themes in his Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation. The pope and the clergy occurring 65 times and canonical law occurring 16 times. Salvation and the gospel appears only in three minor instances, and Purgatory, indulgences, and repentance do not appear at all. Furthermore, Luther's tone dramatically shifts when describing the two themes which do appear. In contrast to his earlier casting of the pope and the clergy as generally positive forces possessing real authority, he casts them as negative forces in the Address, characterizing the pope as the Antichrist and an ally of Satan and arguing that the clergy has no special status or authority against the secular state. In like manner, while he had previously utilized canonic law as a lesser authority alongside scripture in the Theses, he roundly condemns it as full of fabrications and error in the Address. In the few mentions of the gospel, the theme seems largely unchanged. The body of evidence is too small to draw any conclusions.
Luther's thematic shift on the two major categories he retains likely result from his split from the Roman Catholic Church, which would have relieved him of this responsibility to defend its structure and tradition.

Secular Authority: To What Extent it should be Obeyed
Of the main themes of Luther's 95 Theses only the themes of the pope and salvation appear in Secular Authority. However, they are both portrayed monotonously and cannot truly be considered themes. The theme in and writing style of Secular Authority are much different than the 95 Theses. Canonic Law, indulgences, and Purgatory were never even mentioned in the letter to the princes. Repentance was mentioned twice. Only two of the major themes from the 95 Theses appear in Secular Authority in any significant degree, but are better written as sub-narratives than themes. The pope is mentioned only 6 times in Secular Authority as compared to 34 times in the 95 Theses despite Secular Authority being more than 6 times the length of the 95 Theses. However, while the authority of the pope is spoken of directly in the Theses, Luther's letter to the nobility focuses on secular authority, and says that that the true Christian needs no secular authority. Luther argues that leaders in the church are not there for authoritarian or punishment, but as servants, to help others. Salvation appeared 8 times in the long letter and but Luther never went into any significant detail.

Luther's Hymns
When comparing the themes of the 95 Theses to those of Luther's hymns, it is important to understand the different audiences Luther was trying to reach with each work as well as the purpose of the two works. While the 95 Theses were directed at the Catholic Church as a whole and served as a critique of the way the church was run, the hymns were meant to be used by the (Protestant) Church as songs of praise to God. That being said, the themes of indulgence and the Catholic Church as a whole but disappear between the 95 Theses and the hymns and the themes of God’s grace and salvation by faith take a more predominant role. It is also worth noting that Luther seems to longer believe in purgatory at the time of the writing of his hymns. Despite this shift in focus, Luther does seem to hint at the griefs of the Catholic Church in one hymn that talks about being watchful for heresy and ungodliness, but this topic is not nearly as important in his hymns as the attributes of God and salvation.

The Small Catechism
In Luther's Small Catechism, the theme of Purgatory, the pope and clergy, canonical law, and indulgences completely disappear. Instead, Luther focuses on the authority of God and his Word. The theme of the gospel and salvation is changed in that it is further developed and expanded upon, while repentance remains unchanged in the Small Catechism. This makes sense, due to the different purposes and audiences for which he was writing. Additionally, as time passed between the two writings, Luther further established and defined his beliefs apart from the Catholic Church, but the themes of repentance and the gospel and salvation understandably remained as cores of Christian belief.