

Doctrine of Indulgences

Historical Controversy

1. In the year 1517, Pope Leo X authorized the sale of Indulgences, and had worked out an arrangement with Prince Albert of Germany, for rights to the proceeds in select provinces in Germany.
2. Placed in charge of selling Indulgences for Rome was Johann Tetzel (b. 1465 – August 11, 1519) who was gifted in marketing skills.
3. Tetzel would go into a village with great pomp and ceremony. A procession would go into town with a cross bearing the sign of the pope.
4. A papal bull was carried on a velvet cushion embroidered in gold.
5. Once the people were gathered, Tetzel would make emotional appeals to the people to hear the cries of their loved ones in purgatory pleading for release.
6. Release from purgatory could be enhanced by the purchasing of an Indulgence.

“Whenever a coin in the coffer rings,
a soul from purgatory springs.”

7. Officially, Tetzel was barred from appealing to the people from Wittenburg in Saxony, but individuals found a way to get to Tetzel and purchase Indulgences.
8. When Luther discovered what was going on, he was furious. This led to his writing of his 95 Theses, a document which he nailed, about noon, to the church door in Wittenburg on October 31, 1517. He was accompanied by his friend Mecklenburg.
9. Luther wanted the scholars of the church to come and debate the selling of Indulgences.
10. Within two weeks, his document, written in Latin, anonymously printed in German, was being circulated throughout Germany.
11. Initially, the academicians did not respond to the document.
12. Karl Barth said that Luther was like a blind man who climbed the tower steps and lost his footing. Grabbing for anything his hand could find, which was a rope, the blind man rang the tower bell. Luther had, in his innocence, rung the tower bell of Rome, for the 95 Theses tested the power and authority of the pope.
13. At this time, Luther still had a high view of the church, and of the papacy. What he was concerned about was the abuse of spiritual power at every level.

14. Luther was distressed over the abuse he witnessed in the church, especially since his visit to Rome in 1510. Now, there was the selling of forgiveness of sins. It was all too much for his sensitive soul.
15. Realizing he had stirred up deep passions with his 95 Theses, Luther, in much calmer language, wrote a dissertation on each of the theses, and sent a copy to Prince Albert.
16. At the same time, Tetzel sent his arguments to Prince Albert of Saxony, and made many complaints against the interference of Luther in the selling of papal Indulgences, and the collection of the proceeds.
17. Prince Albert sent Luther's explanation on to Rome.
18. To complicate the theological dispute, there was a religious competition between the Dominican order, and the Augustinian Order. Tetzel was a Dominican monk, while Luther was an Augustinian monk.
19. When Pope Leo X received all the documents, his initial reaction was, "This is nothing more than the work of a drunken German monk. He will get over it in the morning."
20. However, neither Luther, nor the 95 Theses, was going to be dismissed so easily.
21. As more people were caught up in the controversy, in 1518, Tetzel wrote his own theses in response to Luther. His document was sent to Wittenburg, which the students of Luther immediately burned.
22. While the controversy raged, some demanded that Luther be sent to Rome to go on trial for heresy. The pope was sympathetic to the proposal. Frederick the Wise protected Luther.
23. Luther did want a forum for debate on the matter. That desire would be satisfied in his summons to the Diet of Worms in 1521.
24. One of the ironies of the 95 Theses is that there is almost nothing in the 95 Theses about the doctrine of justification, which Luther would use later to create the firestorm of the Reformation.
25. The basic emphasis of the 95 Theses is the selling of Indulgence and the Treasury of Merits on which Indulgences are theologically based.
26. Luther was offended that Tetzel was presenting the Indulgence in such a way that true confession and repentance was a mockery, or even unnecessary.
27. Contrition for sin was being placed replaced with attrition for sin. In other words, sorrow for sin was being replaced by a good work.

28. Attrition is motivated out of a fear of punishment. Contrition is a genuine sorrow for doing wrong. Grace was being cheapened.
29. Between 1517 and 1521 there were three significant meetings that involved Luther.
30. In April, 1518, in Heidelberg, German, Luther engaged in a dispute with the Dominicans over the philosophy of the Middle Ages that focused on the difference between Nominalism and Realism.
31. The purpose of the debate was to set forth the Augustinian's position.
32. In the course of the debate Luther made a distinction between a theology of the cross, and a theology of glory.
33. Luther thought the church had got caught up with the glory of their own exaltation, and needed to remember the theology of the cross.
34. The church gloried in the gifts it was bestowing on the people. No, said Luther, the true gift of the church is to give people the theology of the cross.
35. Only when people understand the cross, can there be any hope of understanding what Christianity is all about. Said Luther, "The cross alone is our theology."
36. At Heidelberg, Luther was brilliant, witty, and conciliatory. Even the Dominican monk, Martin Bucer (November 11, 1491 – February 28, 1551), was charmed by Luther.
37. Later, having joined Luther and the Reformation, Bucer would have tremendous influence over a young priest named John Calvin (July 10, 1509 – May 27, 1564).
38. Following the meeting at Heidelberg, in May, 1518, Tetzl received his doctorate degree. He did not realize that, within a year, he would be disgraced, and he would die.
39. Luther continued to hear from the authorities in Rome. He responded by asking for a public debate.
40. Two disputes were scheduled to take place. The first was to be in Augsburg, Germany. The second was to be held in Leipzig.
41. In the first meeting, Luther met Cardinal Thomas Cajetan (Feb 20, 1469 – August 9, 1534), the leading Catholic theologian at the time.
42. In the second meeting, Luther was pitted against the leading theologian of Germany, Johann Eck (Nov 13, 1486 – Feb 13, 1543).
43. These debates brought Luther ever closer to the Diet of Worms in 1521.