

Adult Bible Study | Christ the King Lutheran Church

Historical Survey: Indulgences

- **Definition:** permission to relax or commute the satisfaction or penance of a contrite sinner
- **Development:**
 - Early Middle Ages: originally administered by the congregation. Sinner who has been excommunicated must:
 - Express sorrow for his sins
 - Confess them orally
 - Render penitential acts determined by the congregation (or receive indulgence)
 - Receive absolution and be restored to the church
 - 1000-1300 AD: Private confession became a sacrament, indulgences moved to the popes, absolution preceded satisfaction
 - First used in Crusades, to grant indulgence for their acts on behalf of the church
 - Then granted in return for money from those who did not go on the Crusades
 - 1300s-1400s:
 - Pope Boniface VIII granted “plenary indulgence”: remission of all temporal punishment after absolution to all who traveled to the Vatican for 1300 Jubilee Year. Later given to any who purchased them.
 - Scholastic Theology:
 - Penitence vs. Penance; Guilt vs. Penalty
 - Absolution preceded satisfaction, so guilt was removed from the penitent sinner, but the penance and penalty remained and must be paid, either in this life or in eternity.
 - Venial vs. Mortal Sins
 - Venial sins carried small penalties
 - Mortal sins:
 - Unabsolved: guilt and penalty in hell
 - Absolved: no guilt or eternal penalty, but great penalties, either in life or purgatory
 - Treasury of merits: Christ and some saints had done more than was required of them, leaving to the Church a treasury of their merits which the church could use to remit the earthly (and purgatory) penalties
 - Contrition vs. Attrition
 - Contrition was true Godly sorrow and not always achieved
 - Attrition was fear of earthly punishment and could be substitute
 - ➔ Result: only a scholar could sort all this out and people, fearing eternal damnation and guilt, even over absolved sins, purchased indulgences either to earn salvation or to hedge their bets, for themselves or loved ones
 - Early 1500s:
 - Pope Julius II declares Jubilee indulgence to fund basilica of St. Peter in 1510
 - Pope Leo X revives it in 1513
 - 1515 - Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz purchases a dispensation to become Archbishop of Magdeburg and Bishop of Halberstadt as well. Borrows the money from the Fugger family.
 - Pope Leo approves for Albrecht to sell indulgences with half the proceeds to go to St. Peter’s and half to repay the Fuggers. Albrecht appoints Johann Tetzel to sell them.

Luther's 95 Theses

- Published in Latin to be the basis of a public disputation
- Posted on Castle Church in Wittenberg (usual place for such a posting)
- Addressing Albrecht and Tetzel's teaching on indulgences (and sent to Albrecht)
- NOT his full treatment of the Gospel, NOT yet a rejection of purgatory, penance, or indulgences
- Posted on the day before All Saints' Day because of all the pilgrims coming to see Frederick the Wise's relics. NOT against relics, but to try to reach out to the people of Magdeburg, etc.

Redefining Repentance

(1) When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ said, "Repent", he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. (2) This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy

The Pope's Authority

(5) The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons (6) The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring and showing that it has been remitted by God; or, to be sure, by remitting guilt in cases reserved for his judgment... (20) Therefore the pope, when he uses the words "plenary remission of all penalties", does not actually mean "all penalties", but only those imposed by himself.

Tetzel's Abuses:

(27) They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.

(28) It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone.

True Absolution:

(32) Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.

(36) Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters. (37) Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.

(62) The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

The Pope's Teaching:

(50) Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.

(81) This unbridled preaching of indulgences makes it difficult even for learned men to rescue the reverence which is due the pope from slander or from the shrewd questions of the laity, (82) Such as: "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?" [and seven other questions follow in 83-89] (91) If, therefore, indulgences were preached according to the spirit and intention of the pope, all these doubts would be readily resolved. Indeed, they would not exist.

Early Lutheran Theology:

(40) A Christian who is truly contrite seeks and loves to pay penalties for his sin... (45) Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences, but God's wrath. (46) Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences.

(94) Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell; (95) And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace.