

## **Tetzel Sells Indulgences**

*Both Popes Julius II and Leo X needed money to rebuild the great Church of St. Peter in Rome, and they both raised it by selling “Indulgences,” which were tickets of “pardon” issued by the Pope to forgive sins committed by ordinary Christians and so to get them out of Purgatory and Hell. John Tetzel, a Dominican monk, was especially zealous in hawking these Indulgences. A contemporary account, from a mining village called St. Annaberg, illustrates Tetzel’s methods:*

It is incredible what the ignorant and impudent friar gave out. He said that if a Christian had committed incest, he had only to drop a coin into the Pope’s Indulgence box, and the Pope had power in heaven and on earth to forgive the sin; and if he forgave it, God must do so too.

Item, if they contributed readily, and bought grace and indulgence, all the hills of St. Annaberg would become pure solid silver.

Item, as soon as the coin tinkled in the box, the soul for whom the money was paid would go straight to heaven.

The Indulgence was so highly prized that, when Tetzel entered a city, the Papal Bull was borne on a satin or gold-embroidered cushion, and all the priests and monks, the Town Council, the schoolmaster and his scholars, men, women, maidens, and children, all went out to meet him with banners and tapers, with songs and processions. All the bells were rung, and all the organs struck up. He was conducted into the church, and a red cross was erected in the middle of the building, and the Pope’s banner displayed. In fact, God himself could not have been welcomed and entertained with greater honour.

## **Selections from Luther’s 95 Theses**

*Martin Luther was not just a very devout and learned Catholic priest. He was also angry about the practices of his Church, and he was especially angry about the selling of Indulgences. So much so that in 1517 he nailed to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral his 95 Theses (or points to argue in a debate) attacking the selling of Indulgences. Without intending to, he began the Protestant Revolution and took the first steps towards founding his own Church. What follows is a selection:*

In the desire and with the purpose of elucidating the truth, a disputation will be held on the underwritten propositions at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, monk of the order of St. Augustine, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer in the same at that place. He therefore asks those who cannot be present and discuss the subject with us orally to do so by letter in their absence. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in saying “Repent” [*poenitentiam agite*], etc., intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence [*poenitentia*].

2. This word cannot be understood as sacramental penance, that is, the confession and satisfaction which are performed under the ministry of priests.

3. It does not, on the other hand, refer solely to inward penitence; nay, such inward penitence is naught, unless it outwardly produces various mortifications of the flesh.

4. The penalty [for sin] must thus continue as long as the hatred of self—that is, true inward penitence; namely, till our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

5. The pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties except those which he has imposed by his own authority, or by that of the canons.

6. The pope has no power to remit any guilt, except by declaring and warranting it to have been remitted by God; or at most by remitting cases reserved for himself; in which cases, if his power were despised, guilt would certainly remain.

7. Certainly God remits no man’s guilt without at the same time subjecting him, humbled in all things, to the authority of his representative, the priest.

20. Therefore the pope, when he speaks of the plenary remission of all penalties, does not mean really of all, but only of those imposed by himself.

21. Thus those preachers of indulgences are in error who say that by the indulgences of the pope a man is freed and saved from all punishment.

23. If any entire remission of all penalties can be granted to any one, it is certain that it is granted to none but the most perfect, — that is, to very few.

27. They preach man [rather than God] who say that the soul flies out of purgatory as soon as the money rattles in the chest.

28. It is certain that, when the money rattles in the chest, avarice and gain may be increased, but the effect of the intercession of the Church depends on the will of God alone.

39. It is a very difficult thing, even for the most learned theologians, to exalt at the same time, in the eyes of the people, the ample effect of pardons and the necessity of true contrition.

40. True contrition seeks and loves punishment, while the amplex of pardons relaxes it and causes men to hate it, or at least gives occasion for them to do so.

43. Christians should be taught that he who gives to a poor man, or lends to a needy man, does better than if he bought pardons.

44. Because by works of charity, charity increases and the man becomes better, while by means of pardons he does not become better, but only freer from punishment.

50. Christians should be taught that, if the pope were acquainted with the exactions of the preachers of pardons, he would prefer that the basilica of St. Peter should be burnt to ashes rather than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.

51. Christians should be taught that as it would be the duty, so it would be the wish of the pope even to sell, if necessary, the basilica of St. Peter, as well as to give of his own money to very many of those from whom the preachers of pardons extract money.

56. The treasures of the Church, whence the pope grants indulgences, are neither sufficiently discussed nor understood among the people of Christ.

57. It is clear that they are at least not temporal treasures, for these are not so readily lavished, but

only accumulated, by many of the preachers.

62. The true treasure of the Church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

63. This treasure, however, is naturally most hateful, because it makes the first to be last;

64. While the treasure of indulgences is naturally most acceptable, because it makes the last to be first.

81. This license in the preaching of pardons makes it no easy thing, even for learned men, to protect the reverence due to the pope against the calumnies, or, at all events, the keen questionings of the laity.

82. As, for instance : Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of his most holy charity and of the supreme necessity of souls, — this being the most just of all reasons, — if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of that most fatal thing, money, to be spent on building a basilica, — this being a very slight reason ?

86. Again: Why does not the pope, whose riches are at this day more ample than those of Croesus, build the basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with that of poor believers ?

88. Again: What greater good could the Church receive than if the pope were to bestow these remissions and participations a hundred times a day, instead of once, as he does now, on any one of the faithful ?

90. To repress these scruples and arguments of the laity by force alone, and not to solve them by giving reasons, is to expose the Church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies, and to make Christian men unhappy.

91. If then pardons were preached according to the spirit and wish of the pope, all these questions would be solved with ease; nay, would not exist.

### **Selection from Luther's "Against the Murdering and Robbing Bands of the Peasants"**

*Luther, and the church he founded, were politically very conservative. When German peasants revolted in 1524 against the harsh conditions under which their German princes forced them to live, Luther made it perfectly clear what he felt about social revolution:*

With threefold horrible sins against God and men have these peasants loaded themselves, for which they have deserved a manifold death of body and soul.

First, they have sworn to their true and gracious rulers to be submissive and obedient, in accord with God's command (Matt. xxii. 21), "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's," and (Rom. xiii. 1), "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers." But since they have deliberately and sacrilegiously abandoned their obedience, and in addition have dared to oppose their lords, they have thereby forfeited body and soul, as perfidious, perjured, lying, disobedient wretches and scoundrels are wont to do. Wherefore St. Paul judges them, saying (Rom. xiii. 2), "And they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." The peasants will incur this sentence, sooner or later; for God wills that fidelity and allegiance shall be sacredly kept.

Second, they cause uproar and sacrilegiously rob and pillage monasteries and castles that do not belong to them, for which, like public highwaymen and murderers, they deserve the twofold death of body and soul. It is right and lawful to slay at the first opportunity a rebellious person, who is known as such, for he is already under God's and the emperor's ban. Every man is at once

judge and executioner of a public rebel; just as, when a fire starts, he who can extinguish it first is the best fellow. Rebellion is not simply vile murder, but is like a great fire that kindles and devastates a country; it fills the land with murder and bloodshed, makes widows and orphans, and destroys everything, like the greatest calamity. Therefore, whosoever can, should smite, strangle, and stab, secretly or publicly, and should remember that there is nothing more poisonous, pernicious, and devilish than a rebellious man. Just as one must slay a mad dog, so, if you do not fight the rebels, they will fight you, and the whole country with you.