

What are Indulgences?

2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation.

The exact date is 31 October because on that day in 1517 Martin Luther presented his 95 Theses. Indulgences form the focus of the 95 Theses' concerns. Luther was objecting to the abuse of the doctrine of indulgences. So what were indulgences?

Nowadays, an indulgence is having a big bowl of chocolate ice cream or a big juicy hamburger as a break from a diet or engaging in some other guilty pleasure. In Luther's day there was another, very different meaning for indulgences. By the thirteenth century, the medieval Catholic Church had developed the doctrine of purgatory. Purgatory was a place or state of being that the souls of the most of the saved occupied between death and their resurrection into heaven. As the name implies, there was purging involved. Except for the greatest saints, most of the humans who were saved were still stained by sin and needed cleansing before entering heaven. The method of cleansing was fire and it was supposed to be painful for the soul. In addition, not all saved sinners were equal in their

sinfulness. Cleansing the stains of sin could be a lengthy process that involved thousands of years for more prolific sinners.

It is important to understand that the church could forgive sins but the punishment of purgatory still remained. Needless to say, people were anxious to shorten the time that they or their loved ones would spend in purgatory. So from the third to the thirteenth century, the Catholic Church developed the doctrine of indulgences. The church could grant remission of the temporal punishment in purgatory in the form of a grant of indulgence by using the merits of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. But for this sacred transaction to work, certain conditions needed to be met. First and foremost, the penitent needed to be contrite. That meant feeling guilty, being truly sorry for the sins, and being sincerely remorseful. A contrite person would seek to avoid the same sins in the future. Next the contrite had to perform a penance which was some sort of good work like building a church or hospital or going on a crusade, or simply paying a sum of money to the seller of the indulgences. A practice developed where the living could purchase indulgences on the behalf of a deceased loved one and shorten their time in purgatory.

The problem was that the selling and buying of indulgences became commercialized. Lots of people were anxious to buy their way into heaven. They just lacked contrition but some indulgence sellers soft-pedaled that crucial detail. After the printing press was invented about 1450, handwritten indulgence certificates were replaced by printed forms in which the person's name and the details of the remission could be filled in. At various times, efforts were made to reform and to regulate how indulgences were sold and bring practices in line with proper doctrine. These efforts were not particularly successful. By the time of Luther, the level of crass commercialism attached to indulgences had started to undermine the support for indulgences among many clergy and laypersons.

One of the more crass salesmen of indulgences was Johann Tetzel. He was what we would call today a professional fundraiser. His job was to raise money to help pay for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome which was a good cause. But the indulgence campaign was also raising money to pay the large loans that Albrecht of Brandenburg owed to the Fugger Bank to pay for a dispensation to be both the archbishop of

Magdeburg and the archbishop of Mainz. That was not such a good cause.

To attract buyers, Tetzel supposedly used a nice little jingle that said,

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

Obviously Tetzel would have been quite at home as a character in *Madmen*.

Some of Luther’s parishioners returned from purchasing certificates of indulgence with tales of Tetzel’s dubious sales techniques. Luther was appalled by what they told him.

Luther was a man with a lot of anxiety of salvation and what he heard about Tetzel made him very angry. It was a false doctrine that offered a false hope, and he was not going to let it pass. He wanted a debate on the doctrine of indulgences, and his response was the posting of the 95 Theses. While he did not intend it, that act marked the beginning of the Reformation. It was a match thrown on a very dry field of grass.