



This document is an "Indulgence" which was sold by Johann Tetzel.

Tetzel, a Dominican friar, went from town to town, selling these items. To summon local people, he reportedly beat loudly on a drum. When people gathered around him, Tetzel explained why he'd come to town. He had something they needed to buy.

Money began to pour into his coffers since Tetzel was selling a product many people wanted ... at least, how he explained that product.

For people who believed that the dead go to "purgatory" - a kind of holding-place before the next stop in the afterlife - indulgences were particularly attractive.

Would paying money for an indulgence actually help a deceased relative or friend? Tetzel's reassuring answer was reportedly:

*As soon as a coin in the coffer rings
The soul from purgatory springs*

Put differently ... Tetzel was selling indulgences for the benefit of dead people.

He was also, however, selling indulgences for living people. And in that sense, he was not running afoul of Catholic Church policy. In *The History of the Popes*, beginning [at page 348](#), Ludwig Freiherr von Pastor tells us why:

Above all, a most clear distinction must be made between indulgences for the living and those for the dead.

As regards indulgences for the living, Tetzel always taught pure (Catholic) doctrine ... His teaching was, in fact, very definite, and quite in harmony with the theology of the (Catholic) Church, as it was then and as it is now, i.e., that indulgences "apply only to the temporal punishment due to sins which have been already repented of and confessed" ...

The case was very different with indulgences for the dead. As regards these there is no doubt that Tetzel did, according to what he considered his authoritative instructions, proclaim as Christian doctrine that nothing but an offering of money was required to gain the indulgence for the dead, without there being any question of contrition or confession.

He also taught, in accordance with the opinion then held, that an indulgence could be applied to any given soul with unfailing effect. Starting from this assumption, there is no doubt that his doctrine was virtually that of the well known drastic proverb.

The Papal Bull of indulgence gave no sanction whatever to this proposition. It was a vague scholastic opinion, rejected by the Sorbonne in 1482, and again in 1518, and certainly not a doctrine of the Church, which was thus improperly put forward as dogmatic truth.

That forgiveness of sins could be bought-and-sold in the local marketplace was beyond upsetting to Martin Luther. When he heard that Tetzel was coming to Wittenberg - where Luther lived and worked - he reportedly said:

I'll put a hole in his drum.

His first effort was the "95 Theses" against Tetzel's actions which Luther posted to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. It was the eve of the Church's dedication and, Luther thought, a good time to stir a debate.

Credits:

Text image of an Indulgence, sold by Johann Tetzel, online courtesy *Advent Gemeinde Dresden-West* (a German-language website).

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