

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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PART 7: THE GOSPEL IS NOT FOR SALE

BEING BORN AGAIN

For many years Martin Luther had been searching for an understanding to salvation and how to apply it to his own life. He never recorded the date he was born again, but it is apparent sometime between 1513 and 1517 that Luther finally grasped that salvation only comes by grace and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

During these developmental years, Luther lectured on Psalms and the books of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. Here is how Luther stated his understanding of salvation by grace:

“The first and chief article is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Romans 3:24–25).

He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works and merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (Romans 3:23–25).

This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law, or merit. Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us ... Nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls (Mark 13:31).”

The way Roman Catholicism presented forgiveness and righteousness was at variance with the scriptures.

SALE OF INDULGENCES

Pope Leo X authorized the sale of a special indulgence in Germany in 1516. Albert of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz, oversaw the campaign in his territories, and Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar, served as one of the main indulgence preachers/sellers.

What made Tetzel’s indulgence especially controversial was the promise of full reduction of punishment. The indulgence was promoted through financial contributions, being split evenly with Pope Leo X and Albert of Brandenburg, Archbishop of Mainz. The money was earmarked for the purpose of rebuilding St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome and repaying debts connected to Albert acquiring church offices.

Tetzel was a slick salesman who traveled throughout cities and villages offering a certificate promising remission of temporal punishment after confession and



repentance. More interestingly, he also preached that people could buy an indulgence on behalf of a deceased loved one in purgatory.

“As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

Grieving families were offered a way to end a loved one’s suffering in purgatory through a financial contribution.

The whole endeavor looked corrupt and self-serving because it was literally a massive fundraising campaign. The indulgence sales were promoted in such a way that it turned forgiveness and release from purgatory into a financial transaction.

TETZEL’S SALES PITCH

Tetzel’s indulgence sales pitch violated the Bible because it made spiritual forgiveness something that could be purchased, colliding with several biblical doctrines.

Salvation is by grace, not money or works

Tetzel’s message made the grace of God transactional. The Bible says salvation is a gift of grace received by faith.

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Redemption cannot be bought with silver or gold

This is one of the strongest passages against Tetzel’s sales pitch. The sinner is not redeemed by coins in a box, but by the blood of Christ.

“Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold... But with the precious blood of Christ...” (1 Peter 1:18a-19a)

Forgiveness is through Christ’s blood

Forgiveness is grounded in Christ’s blood, not in papal certificates, human merit, relics, pilgrimages, or payments.

“In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” (Ephesians 1:7)

Repentance cannot be replaced by a payment

Luther’s first thesis attacked this problem. Christ called sinners to repentance, not to a financial transaction. Tetzel’s preaching replaced repentance with religious paperwork.

“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...” (Acts 3:19a)

God’s gift cannot be purchased

When Simon the sorcerer tried to buy spiritual power, he was rebuked sharply by Peter.

“Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.” (Acts 8:20)

This passage fits Tetzel's abuse almost directly. The things of God are not for sale.

Christ is the only mediator

Tetzel's indulgence system placed the church's treasury, papal authority, and purchased certificates between the sinner and spiritual relief. The Bible places Jesus Christ as the only mediator.

“For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

Christ's sacrifice is sufficient

If Christ's sacrifice is complete, then the sinner's hope rests in His finished work, not in additional payments to reduce punishment.

“But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.” Hebrews 10:12

Justification is by faith

Tetzel's pitch confused the issue by encouraging people to seek peace through an indulgence certificate. Scripture says peace with God is only achieved through justification by faith in Jesus Christ.

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

No man can ransom another soul

This doctrine challenges the idea that a person can purchase release for a dead loved one's soul. No one can purchase redemption for another soul.

“None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him.” (Psalm 49:7)

Tetzel's claim on purchasing forgiveness for the dead (purgatory) was also unbiblical because there is only judgment after death.

“And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” (Hebrews 9:27)

The gospel is not merchandise

Tetzel's indulgence campaign was a scheme filled with religious words to extract money from ignorant people.

“And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you...” (2 Peter 2:3a)

The promise that a coin can release a soul from purgatory provided false comfort to grieving families and shifted trust away from Christ’s finished work.

Forgiveness belongs solely to God, salvation is by grace through faith, and Christ alone is the mediator between God and man.

Tetzel’s message turned mercy into merchandise and treated the fear of judgment as a fundraising opportunity.

95 THESES

Martin Luther responded to Johann Tetzel by attacking the theology behind the indulgence campaign. Tetzel preached that people could obtain favor with God through financial contributions, including indulgences for souls in purgatory.

Luther saw the whole thing as spiritually destructive because it made the common people think they could deal with sin through money rather than through true repentance and faith in Christ. Anyone taken in by Tetzel’s words would walk away thinking *“I paid money, so I – or my loved one – is now spiritually safe.”*

That is why the issue was not merely fundraising. It struck at the center of the gospel and effectively erased repentance, grace, forgiveness, and faith in Christ.

Luther’s response was the Ninety-Five Theses on October 31, 1517, nailed to the thick wooden door of the All-Saints’ Church (or Castle Church as it was also known) in Wittenberg. Luther was a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. The church functioned closely with the university, so its door was used like a public bulletin board for academic debates.

The formal title of the 95 theses was *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*. The title was important because Luther was not writing Protestant theology, but calling for an academic debate over whether indulgences had been abused and whether the pope actually had authority over purgatory.

Furthermore, All Saints’ Day was a major day when people came to view Frederick the Wise’s large collection of relics. Relic veneration within Romanism was connected with indulgences. It was not a coincidence that Luther’s attack on indulgences landed right at the moment when indulgence-related devotion would have been especially visible in Wittenberg.

Luther’s first thesis set the tone:

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be repentance.”

It was a direct challenge to Tetzel’s message. Luther stated repentance was not a payment, transaction, ritual shortcut, or document from Rome. True repentance was a whole-life turning to God.

The theses were reproduced by individuals using the Gutenberg press, which spread rapidly and created a major controversy. His message reached both the academy and the common people. Ordinary townspeople, university students, professors, clergy, reformers, and curious visitors came to hear Luther preach. His preaching helped move Reformation theology out of university debate and into regular church life.

ROLE OF RELICS

In Roman Catholic medieval practice, a relic was a physical object believed to have a sacred connection to Jesus, Mary, one of the apostles, or a saint.

- ❖ Body parts of saints such as bones, hair, teeth, and skull fragments.
- ❖ Personal items of clothing, sandals, staffs, books, etc.
- ❖ Objects like pieces that claimed to be from the cross, nails, crown of thorns, and the burial cloth of Jesus.
- ❖ Objects connected to holy people or holy places such as cloths, oil, dust, spear, coffin, sponge, reed, rope, table, chains, dice, veil, crib, girdle, tunic, twig, chair, feather, wood spoon, etc.

Relics were often kept in churches and displayed for pilgrims. People came to view, touch, kiss, and/or pray near them, believing they were spiritually significant because of their connection to holy people.

The issue during Luther's time was not merely that relics existed. The deeper problem was that they became tied to veneration, pilgrimages, indulgences, and spiritual merit. Many people were led to think that honoring relics could reduce punishment for sin or bring special spiritual benefits.

An indulgence was said to reduce the temporal punishment due for sin. A pilgrim might be told that by visiting a church and viewing its relics, praying certain prayers, giving alms, and/or performing acts of devotion could allow them to receive a specified indulgence.

Frederick the Wise was Frederick III, Elector of Saxony. He ruled Saxony from 1486 to 1525 and was one of the prince-electors of the Holy Roman Empire, meaning he was one of the powerful German rulers who helped choose the emperor.

Frederick founded the University of Wittenberg in 1502, the same university where Martin Luther later became a professor of theology, and provided him with a platform for teaching, preaching, and publishing.

Frederick the Wise, Luther's prince, possessed a massive relic collection numbering in the thousands which was housed at All-Saints' Church in Wittenberg. People came to view the relics on All Saints' Day and worshipping those relics could bring indulgences. In other words, the relics were not merely historical reminders; they were tied to a system of spiritual benefits.

The problem Luther witnessed was that this system encouraged people to trust in external acts. Viewing relics, making pilgrimages, buying indulgence letters, and performing prescribed devotions carried greater weight than simply trusting in Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross.

Luther's objection was not merely that relics existed, but that the system attached spiritual benefit to man-made acts and church-controlled merits, rather than directing sinners to Christ, repentance, grace, and faith. People were misled into thinking spiritual debt could be reduced through church-managed transactions.

The Archbishop of Mainz, Albert of Brandenburg, had theologians examine the 95 Theses, and forwarded the document to Pope Leo X in Rome, propelling Luther's academic dispute into a major church controversy.

Pope Leo X did not immediately treat Martin Luther as the start of a major shift within Roman Catholicism. He viewed the dispute as an academic disturbance that could be handled through normal church channels. But once Luther's argument shifted from "indulgences are being abused" to "the pope has no authority to command doctrine against Scripture," Leo treated him as a direct threat to papal authority.