

The Catholic Church, Martin Luther, Indulgences & the Reformation

Central Historical Question:

Even if Martin Luther was unable prove indulgences did or did not “work”, should his actions be justified as those of an important reformer, or a man selfishly taking hope of salvation from those who didn’t know better?

Document 1: A Sermon made by Johann Tetzel 1515

Consider that those who apologize for and confess their sins, and make contribution will receive complete forgiveness of all their sins. Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends beseeching you and saying, "We are in horrible torture from which you can save us for a small cost." Remember that you are able to release them, *for as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.* Are you not willing, then, to pay for these indulgences, to help your soul go safe and sound into the land of Paradise?

Document #2 Martin Luther – select phrases from the 95 Theses, 1517

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.

27. It is mere human talk to preach that the soul flies out [of purgatory] immediately the money clinks in the collection-box.

28. It is certain that when the penny jingles into the money box, gain and avarice can be increased, but the result of the intercession of the church is in the power of God alone.

32. Those who believe that, through letters of pardon, they are made sure of their own salvation will be eternally damned along with their teachers.

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.

Document #3 Myconlus speaking of Martin Luther's 95 Theses 1517

Within two weeks these theses were circulating throughout all Germany, and in a month throughout Christendom, as if the angels themselves were serving as messengers to bring them to the attention of all men.

Document #4 Exsurge Domine The Bull of Pope Leo X, June 15, 1520

Against the Catholic Church lying teachers are rising. Their tongues are fire, a restless evil, full of deadly poison. As servants of God we can no longer tolerate the poisons of these liars without disgrace to the Christian religion. We wish to proceed, in the name of the Pope and Catholic Church, to cut off the advance of this plague and cancerous disease so it will not spread any further in the Lord's field as harmful thorn bushes.

Luther's 95 Theses are not Catholic and are against the true interpretation of the Scriptures. By the authority of almighty God, the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and our own authority, we condemn, and reject each of these theses or errors as heretical, scandalous, false, offensive, and against Catholic truth. We decree and declare that all the faithful must regard them as condemned and rejected. We do all of this in the virtue of holy obedience and under the penalty of an automatic major excommunication.

Document #5 Martin Luther responding to being accused of heresy

Like an insidious devil you pervert the Scriptures. You say that the Church consists virtually in the pope. What abominations will you not have to regard as the deeds of the Church? Look at the ghastly shedding of blood by Julius II. Look at the outrageous tyranny of Boniface VIII. You make the pope into an emperor.