

# Martin luther and the lutheran reformation essay

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The Lutheran Reformation was a movement in the 16th century to reform the Catholic Church in Western Europe. The Reformation was started by Martin Luther with his 95 Theses on the practice of indulgences. Luther's action inadvertently precipitated a religious controversy which gave rise to the Protestant Reformation. The Lutheran Reformation not only shattered the tradition of the Catholic Church but it changed the secular aspects of society as well. The Lutheran tradition or denomination evolved out of the reformation.

The comprehensive authority of the Church was coming under scrutiny and many factors contributed to the religious turmoil. Proponents of reform fell generally into three categories. There were spiritual reformers, who deplored worldly pursuits and advocated program of piety and austerity. There were advocates of conciliar theory, who wished to see an ecumenical council reform the Church institutionally. Finally, there were humanists, who believed that knowledge of the Bible would restore the purity that had characterized the early Church. 1 The concerns for reform were further broken down as follows: the sale of indulgences—these indulgences supposedly remitted the punishment due for sins, and in exchange the penitent made a cash contribution to the church; 2 immorality of the clergy; ecclesiastical politics and unethical dealings; problems with authority in the church; leadership in Rome; deviations in Christian's teachings; questionable practices for penance; failure of conciliarism; loss of monastic discipline; declining economic conditions for the poor with no defense from the church; the fall of Constantinople; the end of ancient feudal system and the development of powerful monarchies; the rise of nationalism and humanism.

3 The humanist believed that man was essentially good, and they looked to education for his improvement. If men were educated, they believed, their standard of ethics would naturally rise—to the benefits of society and Church alike. 4 Although, as stated above there were many causes leading to the Protestant Reformation, however, this writer will attempt to present a detailed literary analysis of the related literature as it specifically addresses the sale of Indulgences, and the Reformation. Martin Luther, the Sale of Indulgences, and the Reformation The dilemma or problem began as a result of Luther's very strong and vehement objection of the Church doctrine on the sale of indulgences and the Pope's claim of having powers to remit sins. These actions caused Luther to post his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church on November 1, 1517. He protested against the doctrine of the church of what he saw as the purchase and sale of salvation.

Thus, his protest sparked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. So, what is an indulgence? An indulgence is the extra-sacramental remission of temporal punishment due, in God's justice, to sin that has been forgiven, which Remission is granted by the Church in the exercise of the power of the keys, through the application of the superabundant merits of Christ and of the saints, and for just and reasonable motive. There are two ideas involved in the idea of an indulgence: 1. Christians receive "temporal punishment" for sin, even after guilt and eternal punishment have been forgiven by God. That temporal punishment must be paid either here on earth or in a temporary, after-death holding place called purgatory. 6 2.

The Roman Catholic Church has a “treasury,” composed of the “superabundant merits of Christ and the saints,” which the Church, through the exercise of the “power of the keys,” can transfer to the benefit of those who are due temporal punishment. 7 The practice of the sale of indulgences went farther than just to those in the church. People were being told that they could buy indulgences for loved ones who had already died but their soul or spirit still remained in purgatory and that it was their rightful duty and obligation to buy indulgences for these persons to free their soul from purgatory and allow them to move on to heaven. In other words, the purchase of the indulgence would be a purchase of a pardon for sin and the purchase of salvation as well as the release of the soul from purgatory.

Moreover, for others the sale of indulgences was a byproduct of the Crusades in the 12th and 13th centuries. Because they risked dying without the benefit of a priest to perform the appropriate ceremonies, Crusaders were promised immediate salvation if they died while fighting to “liberate” the Christian holy city at Jerusalem. Again, Church leaders justified this by arguing that good works earned salvation, and making Jerusalem accessible to Christians was an example of a good work. Church leaders decided that paying money to support good work was just as good as performing good works, and it evened things up for people who were physically incapable of fighting a Crusade. . Over several centuries, the practice expanded, and Church leaders justified it by arguing that they had inherited an unlimited amount of good works from Jesus, and the credit for these good works could be sold to believers in the form of indulgences.

In other words, indulgences functioned like “confession insurance” against eternal damnation because, if you purchased an indulgence, then you wouldn’t go to hell if you died suddenly or forgot to confess something. 9 Martin Luther did not agree with this thinking at all. His position was that if the Roman Catholic Church had the power to free souls from purgatory, then it should be free. Luther had a real problem with selling forgiveness for money. The Church presented the picture of superabundant merits as to say that the Pope and the saints had earned so many merits for their good works that they did not need them all and was, thus in a position to pass them along to others.

This idea disturbed Luther greatly as he did not feel that good works were needed for salvation. What was Sought to be Gained From Indulgences In the Sacrament of Baptism not only is the guilt of sin remitted, but also all the penalties attached to sin. In the Sacrament of Penance the guilt of sin is removed, and with it the eternal punishment due to mortal sin; but there still remains the temporal punishment required by Divine justice, and this requirement must be fulfilled either in the present life or in the world to come, such as in Purgatory. An indulgence offers the penitent sinner the means of discharging this debt during his life on earth. 0 The Sacrament of the “Penance,” imposed by the confessor when he gives absolution is an integral part of the Sacrament of Penance; an indulgence is extra-sacramental; it presupposes that effects obtained by confession, contrition, and sacramental satisfaction.

It differs also from penitential works undertaken of his own accord by the repentant sinner—prayer, fasting, alms-giving—in that these are personal and get their value from the merit of him who performs them, whereas an indulgence places at the penitent's disposal the merits of Christ and of the saints, which form the "Treasury" of the Church. <sup>1</sup> An indulgence is valid both in the tribunal of the Church and in the tribunal of God. This means that it not only releases the penitent from his indebtedness to the Church or from the obligation of performing canonical penance, but also from the temporal punishment which he has incurred in the sight of God and which, without the indulgence, he would have to undergo in order to satisfy Divine justice. This, however, does not imply that the Church pretends to set aside the claim of God's justice or that she allows the sinner to repudiate his debt. <sup>12</sup> As St. Thomas says, "He who gains indulgences is not thereby released outright from what he owes as penalty, but is provided with the means of paying it." The Church therefore neither leaves the penitent helplessly in debt nor acquits him of all further accounting; she enables him to meet his obligations.

<sup>13</sup> In granting an indulgence, the grantor (pope or bishop) does not offer his personal merits in lieu of what God demands from the sinner. He acts in his official capacity as having jurisdiction in the Church, from whose spiritual treasury he draws the means wherewith payment is to be made. The Church herself is not the absolute owner, but simply the administratrix, of the superabundant merits which that treasury contains. In applying them, she keeps in view both the design of God's mercy and the demands of God's justice. She therefore determines the amount of each concession, as well as

the conditions which the penitent must fulfill if he would gain the indulgence.

14 Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers greatly objected to the Roman Catholic Church ideas of paying for the pardon of sin as well as works for the price of salvation. He had no respect for the doctrine of indulgences nor did he want people to be deceived by the Church. To Luther the primary concern was the relationship of the soul to God and the freedom the soul could enjoy by forgiveness of sin which he describes as the doctrine of justification by faith.

15 A definition of the justification by faith, as the theological principle, emphasized in Protestantism, is that salvation comes to an individual by God's grace through faith, so that to be "declared righteous," or "justified," or "saved" is on the sole basis on one's faith, in Jesus Christ apart from any works on merit (Rom. : 17; 3: 28; 5: 1). 16 The theology of Martin Luther was instrumental in influencing the Protestant Reformation.

Luther felt strongly that the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone for Christ's sake alone is the material principal upon which all other teachings rest . 17 Luther wrestled with many damaging emotions in his life mainly a feeling of unworthiness and a fear of being sinful with no bases for salvation. After studying Paul's Epistle to Romans he was able to form his theology as he state: " God accepts the sinner in pite of the sin. Acceptance is based on who one is rather than what one does. Justification is not based on human righteousness, but on God's righteousness—revealed and confirmed in Christ. We do not have to achieve salvation; rather, it is a gift to be received.

" 18 At this point in his life, the story of the Cross took on a new meaning. He knew now that when Jesus died on the Cross he justified us and imputed righteousness to us. He no longer felt unworthy; he found hope through the graciousness of God. Luther went on to say that faith is a gift from God, and brings the Holy Spirit through the merits of Christ. According to Luther the Law and the Gospel are the two ways God interact with humankind.

The Law is what brings discipline in us to obey God's commands (Psalm 119: 18). 19 The Law convicts us of our sin and drives us to the Gospel or the Good News of Jesus Christ. 20 Luther was committed and dedicated to make sure that people find this truth for themselves. As was alluded to earlier, Martin Luther, while in his early thirties began to question the practices of the Catholic Church. He composed a list of statements and questions that were known as the " 95 Theses. " In November 1517, someone printed and distributed them, causing a stir throughout the highest level of the Catholic Church. Luther was called before a Council to recant his statements and questions, but he did not. The Holy Roman Emperor found him guilty of heresy at the trial at the city of Worms.

The Pope condemned him in 1520 and he was formally excommunicated from the Catholic Church in 1521. As a great part of his reforming efforts, while he was out of the Church, Luther spent his time in hiding translating the New Testament of the Christian Bible into German. It was his greatest desire that people be able to read the Bible for themselves to know what the Lord commanded of them. He was so disturbed over the people being deceived by the Church he wanted to eradicate ignorance on the part of the



people by allowing them access to books on religious matters. The invention of the printing press came along and this helped immensely in getting reading materials out to people.

Conclusion As we have seen the doctrine of indulgences proved such a snare for the Catholic Church and such a great vehicle of deception for the people of the Church. It was considered an abuse by the Church. Luther's position was to give money to God or to the poor is a praiseworthy act, but to take money from persons under misleading pretense is corruption. He sought to correct this by placing a Bible in the hands of all people so that they could read for themselves. While it cannot be denied that these abuses were widespread, it should also be noted that, even when corruption was at its worst, these spiritual grants were being properly used by sincere Christians, who sought them in the right spirit, and by priests and preachers, who took care to insist on the need of true repentance. 21 It is therefore not difficult to understand why the Church instead of abolishing the practice of indulgences, aimed rather at strengthening it by eliminating the evil elements. 2 The Council of Trent in its decree "On Indulgences" declares: "In granting indulgences the Council desires that moderation be observed in accordance with the ancient approved custom of the Church, lest through excessive ease ecclesiastical discipline be weakened; and further, seeking to correct the abuses that have crept in...it decrees that all criminal gain therewith connected shall be entirely done away with as a source of grievous abuse among the Christian people; and as to other disorders arising from superstition, ignorance, irreverence, or any cause whatsoever—since these, on account of the widespread corruption, cannot be removed by special

prohibitions—the Council lays upon each bishop the duty of finding out such abuses as exist in his own diocese, of bringing them before the next provincial synod, and of reporting the, with the assent of the other bishops, to the Roman Pontiff, by whose authority and prudence measures will be taken for the welfare of the Church at large, so that the benefit of indulgences may be bestowed on all the faithful by means at once pious , holy, and free from corruption.

” 23 Did Martin Luther get what he wanted? Maybe, maybe not. There is one thing for certain all of the changes that were initiated relative to indulgences were as a result of Martin Luther and the Lutheran Reformation.