

THE ABUSE OF INDULGENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF SALVATION: A CAREFUL APPROACH TO THE THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER

By

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Abstract

Martin Luther was a prominent figure who actualised the agenda of reformation through his earnest contributions and dedication. His writings and dissertations had helped and shaped the birth of reformation and gave relief from the Roman Catholic dominance. His courageous approach to the subject of salvation in the light of indulgence had helped the Church to know the position of grace more categorically. This paper seeks to present the disposition on the concept of Indulgence in the circle of Roman Catholic, and how it has affected salvation dictum in the context of reformation and Protestant movement. **Charles R. Biggs** made it resounding as he said; ‘The practice of selling indulgences had quite a history already in the Medieval Roman Catholic Church. Indulgences were sold for

the remission of temporal punishment in purgatory, only could forgive and remit sins for eternity'. This understanding of indulgence in the context of the Papacy had generated great confusion leading to misunderstandings on the concept of salvation by grace alone. It prompts serious consideration into some theologies, which led to reformation consequently. As facts become feasible and accessible to this research, Luther's perspective and understanding of salvation as the catholic priest, with vast and consistent knowledge both in law and theology, will be considered. The Present Church could breathe comfortably as the result of great contributions of Luther, the core reformer.

Keywords: Marin Luther, Roman Catholic, Indulgence, Purgatory, Salvation

Introduction

An 'indulgence was part of the medieval Christian church, and a significant trigger to the Protestant Reformation. Basically, by purchasing an indulgence, an individual could reduce the length and severity of punishment that heaven would require as payment for their sins, as conferred on everyone. By buying an indulgence for a loved one, that person would go to heaven and not burn in hell even if he/she died a sinner. Likewise, if one bought an indulgence for self, he/she needs not to worry about that pesky affair he had been having. Martin Luther had

been at loggerhead with this practice and sees salvation far deferent from the practice of the church. To Martin Luther, salvation is by grace through Faith. And no amount of money can buy salvation or serve as atonement for sin.

Akintola (2000) says, salvation is both a concept and an experience; As a concept, it may be defined as a rescue or deliverance from pain, danger or natural disaster, or even, deliverance from the terrible results or consequences of unexplainable crisis of life. But as an experience, salvation refers to divine intervention which is believed to have been made possible by the sovereign God, the ruler of heaven and earth. Hence, to be saved can be a reference to a unique experience of being protected from dangerous events or circumstances that demand supernatural intervention. If this sounds like cash or good deeds for less pain, which is exactly what it was. To many holy people like German friar Martin Luther (1483–1546), this was against the teachings of the founder Jesus, against the idea of the church, and against the point of seeking forgiveness and redemption. (Internet, 2023) Therefore, to Martin Luther, buying of indulgence is abuse to the redemption work of Christ on Calvary which is the sole reason and mission of Messiah in the world and to the world.

So, this paper tries to study the theology and understanding of Martin Luther on the concept of salvation and to see how indulgence was or is an abuse to the salvation power and work of Christ on Calvary. In doing so, it will try to

understand indulgence in the medieval Western church, indulgence in the context of Martin Luther, salvation in the context of the theology of Martin Luther, the abuse of indulgence in the context of salvation that lead to the 95 theses and forgiveness of sin By the blood of Jesus Christ and finally the massage of the Cross for today.

Definition of Terms

Indulgence: can be defined as the remission of part or all of the temporal and especially purgatorial punishments that according to Roman Catholic is due for sins whose eternal punishment has been remitted and whose guilt has been pardoned (as through the sacrament of reconciliation).

Salvation: Internet (2023), Salvation is a vast doctrine with many different nuances and connotations. Ecclesiastically, it can be defined as the state of being reconciled, justified and redeemed by the propitiatory, substitutionary death of the son of God.

Purgatory: Charles (2000), can be defined as a place and a process of final purification, which the elects undergo after death, if necessary before entering heaven

The Medieval Western Christian Church (Roman Catholic Church) and the practice of indulgence as a partial permission of sin

The Eastern Orthodox Church followed a different path compared to the rest. In the medieval era, the concept of purgatory had been developed, and such concept grew rapidly. Rather than being damned to hell after death, a person would go to purgatory, where they would suffer whatever punishment was required to wash off the stain of their sins until they were freed. This system invited the creation of a method by which sinners could reduce their punishments, and as the idea of purgatory emerged, the pope gave bishops the power to reduce sinners' penance while they were still alive, based on the performance of good deeds of people. It proved a highly useful tool to motivate a worldview where the church, God, and sin were central of the discourse.

Moreover, the indulgence system was championed by John Titzel and formalized by Pope Urban II (1035–1099) during the deliberation of Council of Clermont in 1095. If an individual performed enough good deeds to earn a full or 'Plenary' indulgence from the Pope or lesser ranks of churchmen, all their sins (punishments) would be erased completely. Partial indulgences would cover a lesser amount, and complex systems developed in which the church claimed they could calculate to the day how much sins a person had canceled. In time, much of the church's work was done in this way: During the Crusades (instigated by Pope Urban II), many people participated on this premise, believing they could go and fight (often) abroad in return for their sins being canceled. (Encyclopedia, 2023)

Also, from the early church onward, bishops could reduce or dispense with the rigors of penances, but indulgences emerged in only the 11th and 12th centuries when the idea of purgatory took widespread hold and when the popes became the activist leaders of the reforming church. (Encyclopedia, 2023)

Furthermore, the preaching of an indulgence offered for the rebuilding of St. Peter's at the Vatican that led the Augustinian friar Martin Luther to criticise the actual preaching of indulgences and eventually to reject the underlying doctrine. He took issue with the preaching in the Ninety-Five Theses that he made public at Wittenberg in 1517. In these theses, however, Luther formulated what seem to be contradictory propositions. On the one hand he declared: "The treasury of indulgence is most acceptable, for it makes the last to be first" (thesis 64), and also: "Let him be anathema and accursed who denies the apostolic character of indulgences" (thesis 71). On the other hand he asserted: "The pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties beyond those imposed either at his own discretion or by canon law" (thesis 5), and also: "The true treasure of the Church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God" (thesis 62). The commentary that Luther sent to the archbishop of Mainz on Oct. 31, 1517 was in fact moderate. It admitted the basic principles of a temporal penalty due to sin, of purgatory, and of the treasury of the Church. It also drew attention to the greater importance of

interior conversion than of the remission of exterior penalties; and it inferred from the traditional teaching that an indulgence applied to the dead by way of petition is logically no more than a prayer.

Diversity of opinions about the theology of salvation

There are diverse theological discourses about salvation that should be carefully examined in the process of this research. Some of the theological propositions are:

- Liberation theology. Akintola (2000), this theological school emphasises about salvation is that the basic problem of human society is the oppression and exploitation of the powerless classes by the powerful. Therefore, salvation should be seen as deliverance (Liberation) from such oppressive tendencies of inhuman treatment by the fellow human.
- Secular Theology. This group asserts; salvation has to do with the fact that salvation must be seen as a celebration of humanity's emancipation from God's gracious gift.

INDULGENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF MARTIN LUTHER

In 1517, a monk named Martin Luther addressed several problems he saw within the Catholic Church circle. On Halloween night, he nailed a list of these problems to the door of the church in the town where he lived: Wittenberg,

Germany. That list contained 95 of his grievances and is known today as the 95 Theses. To him Salvation can be described as the results of final work of rescue and deliverance of human, originally began after the experience of fall in the Garden of Eden. (Gen 3). As noted by **O'Donovan** (1995) salvation means the deliverance from sin and its terrible consequences.

To Luther, it means being rescued from sin in the past, present and the future. Therefore, it cannot be bought or sold. Neither amount nor priest can forgive sin except Christ and the atoning work He has accomplished on the cross. "The pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties beyond those imposed either at his own discretion or by canon law" (thesis 5), and also: "The true treasure of the Church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God" (thesis 62). The commentary that Luther sent to the archbishop of Mainz on Oct. 31, 1517 was in fact moderate. It admitted the basic principles of a temporal penalty due to sin, of purgatory, and of the treasury of the Church. It also drew attention to the greater importance of interior conversion than of the remission of exterior penalties. (Internet, 2023)

Salvation in the context of the theology of Martin Luther

The official Catholic position has long been that the church is the only channel for dispensing God's grace, and this grace is transmitted through the

sacrament of the church. Those outside the officials or organized church cannot receive grace. (Internet, 2023)

Peterson (2006), as a priest and professor, Luther apposed the sale of indulgence as it contradicted the message of salvation by Grace. Luther railed against the entire corruption in the Church and he pressed for a new understanding of papal and scriptural authority and superiority. He was attacked and persecuted but went on to lead a religious revolution that radically changed the western world.

From the early church onward, bishops could reduce or dispense with the rigors of penances, but indulgences emerged in only the 11th and 12th centuries when the idea of purgatory took widespread hold, and the popes became the activist leaders of the reforming church.

Karl (1942) like Martin Luther said; Humanity consists of two parts: a passive capacity for grace, and the action part that resists God and His ordinances. Hence, humans are quite unable to satisfy both aspects of their nature by their own accomplishment; they require the grace of God, which is understood divine life imparted to Humanity by God.

Luther wrote down his own ideas about faith. These included that salvation came only from believing in God, and that the Bible was the sole place to get information about one's faith. Perhaps most radically, Luther believed that all

Christians were equal before God and therefore there was no need to have a Pope at all!.

Palmer (2014) in a book titled, the theology of the New Testament said, Jesus came to take away our sins and to defeat evil. This happened on the cross. It is the sacrifice on the Cross that gives life. It provides liberation from sin and evil. According to Palmer we received eternal life and forgiveness of sin through Faith in Christ.

Dag (2017) also said, without the shedding of blood there's no forgiveness. And Jesus has shed His blood for the remission of sin and has been a substitute for all sinners. He has paid all that takes to receive forgiveness. The Theology of Martin Luther in the context of salvation is based on the Epistle of Paul to Ephesians 2:8 that said salvation is by grace through Faith, not by work. Martin Luther was influenced and was moved to study the scripture to understand the concept of salvation in its context through the practices of the Western Christian Church (Roman Catholic Church) of selling indulgence to remit sin which is at odd to the teaching of the scripture. He established his Theology of salvation on this "salvation is by grace through Faith, not of work". Nothing a man can do to earn himself salvation. Therefore, because Jesus Christ has paid the price for the forgiveness of sin, man needs not to pay any amount for his sins to be atoned for. Man receives forgiveness and salvation by grace through Faith. John 1:16-17 says

"And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (NKJV). Therefore, salvation and forgiveness of sin is received by grace through Faith in Christ Jesus. For in Him (Christ) we have all received grace to be saved.

Application to the present Church

Research has shown how indulgence was perverted in the history of church, especial on the concept of salvation in the circle of Roman Catholic. The following lessons can be drawn from the research, thus include;

- The research has helped the Church to know the position of scholars on the need of Grace more than work. Various ideas from different authors serve as an opener to desist from any Heresy that may consume the Church.
- It is very clear that people were not properly informed on the subject of Indulgence as it was kept secret for sometimes before it was exposed by Martin Luther, and as such Church is informed on this basic truth that led to the salvation by grace.
- Salvation in Christ Jesus is free and not attach to any monetary transaction, and as such Church is misinformed before the reformation, but the

reformation catalyst had helped the Church to discover great things in regard to salvation without restriction.

Conclusion

On the cross Jesus dealt with the law and bore the wrath of sin on His flesh. God for us, but he also dealt with Satan and his all-consuming grip on souls (at Calvary the terrible battle of history took place). In this battle our souls were at stake as the satanic powers bombarded Jesus. In the darkness of midday and in the body and nature of man, Jesus battled for our eternal souls. The battle started in Bethlehem when Satan moved his puppet, King Herod, to try to kill the baby Jesus. It continued for the next thirty three years as the temptation in the wilderness shows us, but it reached its climax at Calvary. **Peter** (2007) so because Jesus has paid the price once and for all, we received Salvation and forgiveness of sin. By the blood of the Lamb (His grace) and not by the works of the law.

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