

Footstep #11 – Coupon Clipping for Heaven! 1517

“In the letter he wrote to Albert of Mainz on October 31, 1517, Luther admitted that he could not directly accuse the preachers, since he had not heard their sermons. Among the false notions which the people derived from them, however, were the following misguided presumptions: the purchase of an indulgence letter would assure one of salvation; in the words of the famous rhyme, ‘as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs’; there was no sin so great – not even the rape of the mother of God – that it could not be forgiven through these indulgences; finally, these indulgences released one from all punishment and guilt.” (Luther and the Papacy, p. 27) Oct. 31, 1517

This is a remarkable quote that reveals the insight of the respect Luther had for the institutional church. First, indulgences were not permitted to be sold in Wittenberg where Luther lived and was a professor and priest. However, they were sold in Juterbog and Zerbst, neighboring villages. Luther was astonished that people traveled to these areas to purchase “Letters of Indulgences” (certificates) for the people they loved who had died. The Elector Frederick (noble who governed Saxony) had his own business of selling his collection of thousands of relics to believers who wanted to pay the debts of their sins as a requirement to enter heaven. However, even with a letter of indulgence, people needed to confess their sins and present their letters of indulgence to their priest in Wittenberg before they could receive Holy Communion. Of course, the priest who forgave the sins in Wittenberg is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther!

Second, this sale of indulgences by the new pope (Pope Leo X) included forgiveness for future sins by the living. Luther was upset with the rumors he heard about Johann Tetzel’s sermons regarding the motivation to purchase letters of indulgence because they were sold under false pretenses and were dangerous to the salvation of faithful Roman Catholics because they actually encouraged sinful behaviors.

Albert of Mainz was a new archbishop in central Germany and was authorized to sell indulgences on March 31, 1515. The proceeds were designated for the construction of the new Basilica of St. Peter in Rome AND to pay off the personal debts Albert incurred to the pope for his selection as the archbishop at the age of 24!. The purchase of a church office was known as simony (a reference to Simon Magus, the magician, in Acts 8) and was a corrupt practice for centuries. Luther was not aware of Albert’s debts at the time he wrote his letter on October 31.

This letter was written on the same day that Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church and it is the day before one of the holiest days in the church calendar – All Saints Day – the day that the souls of everyone deceased is remembered and prayed for!



Johann Tetzel