

"Was the criticism of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther against the letters of indulgence primarily based on theological or economic reasons?"

"Driven by Faith"

Cowering under the boughs of a cluster of trees, Martin Luther pleaded with St. Anne to save him. His body was trembling from the torrential winds and pounding rain of a thunderstorm and his soul was encumbered by the guilt of an unworthy sinner. As the storm clouds thundered away into the night Luther opened his eyes, overjoyed to find himself still among the living. He believed that God, in his infinite mercy, had stayed his judgmental hand. Having avoided his wrath, Luther swore to dedicate the rest of his life to the Lord. Over the next four decades Martin Luther would attempt to reconcile the ecclesiastical teachings of the church with his own individual beliefs, while attempting to convince fellow clergymen, political leaders, and laymen of the supremacy of his personal views. (Wilson 2007)

From that day forward Luther dedicated his life to God. Every life changing decision Luther would make in the years to come would be based on his desire to define and ultimately become the ideal Christian. He would actualize this desire by fortifying his mind through rigorously studying religious texts and the *Bible* and then by attempting to guide Christians throughout Europe toward their own spiritual awakening. His efforts to challenge longstanding traditions would lead to a dynamic confrontation with Christianity's largest and most powerful institution, The Roman Catholic Church.

Luther's most passionate area of contention was regarding what he believed to be the theological invalidity of the Catholic Church's leadership's sale of letters of indulgences in exchange for the complete forgiveness of sins and salvation of a person's soul. As Luther's own feelings of faith and salvation matured and he familiarized himself with biblical passages to support his stance, he became more disenfranchised with what he believed to be a deliberate misinterpretation of biblical directives and an overreaching of papal authority. Luther revealed his beliefs with candor and vigor. "Any truly

repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters, he proclaimed.” Luther refused to give credence to any doctrine which proposed that indulgences alone could save a soul. He believed that there were no biblical directives to support such a notion and felt that only through faith could a Christian be saved. (Luther, 32)

The child of working class parents in the Saxony region of Germany, Luther’s father always held the high hope that his son would become a successful lawyer. Indeed, Luther had effortlessly earned his Master’s Degree from the University of Erfurt by 1505. Still at the young age of twenty-one, he was noted by his classmates as an impressive debater and noted scholar. Between the lifelong dreams of his parents and their insistence on a quality education Luther seemed destined a career path in law. (Wilson 2007)

The divine incident of “The Storm” impacted Luther so deeply that he could no longer pursue the study and practice of law. Later that year, in the summer of 1505, he would begin his self-imposed dedication and service to God by presenting himself on the steps of Erfurt’s Observant Augustinian monastery. Over the next dozen years Luther would each day dress in rough spun robes, take part in seven to eight methodical prayer chants, desecrate his flesh, and immerse himself in a life of poverty. (Brinton, 1950)

His decision to join the conservative order was an early indication of his disinterest in material wealth. During the 16th century, as in modern times, the profession of an attorney had the potential to be quite lucrative. Certainly, Luther would have been more financially comfortable as an adult lawyer than the life he had growing up as a child of parents with a modest income. It is apparent that personal wealth and possessions were not a priority in Luther’s life. He was decidedly more focused on achieving spiritual prosperity.

For Luther the task of reaching a peaceful understanding with God was paramount. He lamented, “I am dust and ashes and full of sin” before one of his first communion distributions. For years he would

struggle with his feelings of inadequacy in the Lord's eyes. It was the journey through the process of cultivating a relationship with God which would ultimately lead to his awakening and transcendent thinking about faith, repentance, and forgiveness. Having always felt himself inadequate in the eyes of the Lord he knew that he would only be able to achieve God's mercy through constant, internal faith. (Brinton, 1950, p 32)

For Christians of the time period, finding a way to secure one's ascension into heaven was the most important aspect of their lives. Indeed, it often overwhelmed the plans for their earthly life. Many Christians would resolutely suffer and make sacrifices in hopes of realizing eternal peace in heaven. Luther was determined to discover a means by which a dedicated, observant Christian could assure that his or her destination would be in heaven. Through biblical studies he felt he had found the only true pathway to heaven - Faith in Jesus Christ.

When the arguments between Luther and one of his most learned opponents, the humanist Erasmus, are analyzed it is apparent that Luther was certain that the concept of faith, and faith alone, is what will carry one into the blessed afterlife. Luther was convinced that worldly actions had little bearing on the ultimate outcome of one's soul. "... for man is ridden by God now and then the devil now," Luther wrote to Erasmus, indicating his belief in the limited control one had over his own destiny. Earthly decisions and their outcomes were secondary to faith. (Brinton, 1950, p 150)

Another turning point in Luther's spiritual development came in 1510 on a trip to Rome. Travelling on behalf of his Augustinian order to the center of European Christendom was an important event in Luther's life. The disappointment he felt throughout the month's stay greatly affected his developing disenchantment with the Roman Catholic Church. As a young monk the idealistic ideas of the holy city were dampened by the apathetic attitudes of many of the Italian priests.

Certainly, Luther was disillusioned by the frivolous spending habits of the Papal State. There were extravagant Renaissance projects that were underway at the time of his visit. More disconcerting,

however, was the flippant approach to the masses and sacraments of the Italian priests. Luther was mortified to hear the local priests chastise him for attempting to give lengthy masses, telling him to “Get a move on!” Even more shocking to Luther was the disrespect of the host which is thought to be the body of Christ. During one communion a priest is purported to have said, “Bread art thou and bread thou wilt remain.”

Luther’s spiritual journey, particularly his belief in the power of faith, was directly influenced by the *Bible*. He holds the "Good Book" in such high esteem in multiple capacities throughout the most pivotal moments in his life. When searching to establish his own central tenant of faith, he looked to Philippians 3:9 which begins with:

“But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ’s sake. Not only those things; I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is much more valuable. The knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere refuse, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him. I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith.”

The last line in particular is the exact way Luther felt regarding his relationship with Christ and his own hope for salvation. Throughout his life Luther models his actions after passages from the scriptures and uses them to support his arguments against the Roman Catholic Church.

As a Supreme Court Justice might look to the Constitution so did Luther look toward the *Bible*. In Luther’s opinion any writ or declaration circulated by the Church could always be overruled by the *Bible*. Using the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek translation of the New Testament, Luther used his intimate knowledge of the scriptures to support his theological debates.

Luther’s grievances with the Roman Catholic Church’s insistence on the papal authority over the souls of men and the resolutions that manifested from Rome compared to Luther’s own deference to the *Holy Bible* came to a head in 1517. On the night before All Saints' Day Luther posted a declaration on the door

of the Castle Church in Wittenberg calling for a debate regarding what he claimed to be the irreverent practice of manipulating the German people into buying indulgences.

Letters of Indulgences had been sold for centuries, so it was not necessarily the act that bothered Luther. In fact as a logical man he certainly saw the need for Rome to raise money. It was the promises being given in return for the payments by laymen that Luther had his biggest gripe. Freedom of the soul from purgatory, absolution from sins as vile as the desecration of the Blessed Mother, and salvation for the souls of one's deceased relatives were all claimed to be possible.

Archbishop Albert of Mainz had sent smooth talking Dominican Johann Tetzel to scour the country side for wealthy nobles and others to purchase letters of indulgence. The economic causes included lining Albert's coffers, funding the renovation of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and supporting Pope Leo X's lavish lifestyle. In order to garner as much funding as possible, exaggerated promises were made beyond what Luther felt the pope or the Church had to make or deliver. (Wilson 96)

Luther's fury was directed at what he felt were numerous, blatant misinterpretations of the scriptures and an overextension of papal authority. In Thesis 32 his condemnation is fierce, "Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers." In this example, it is evident that Luther's primary reason for disagreement is theological. As a man of extreme faith in God and the *Bible* the culmination of that faith is eternal salvation. Therefore, the process by which one reaches salvation is extremely important.

In the years preceding the Reformation and Luther's theological evolution indulgences in Europe were common. Taxes levied by the German princes were also a regular occurrence. Yet, Luther did not object loudly to these forced levies. One of the reasons for Luther's acceptance of these norms was that he felt the political leaders had a divine right to be obeyed. As stated in Romans, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God," and in 1 Peter the recommendation to obey authorities is clearly found in the

Scriptures. Since Luther always placed the *Bible* as the highest authority, these passages allowed him to abide by the collection of earlier taxes, coerced penance, and letters of indulgences without sacrificing his principles. It was not until the remarkable promises made by Tetzel backed by the despotic arm of papal authority that Luther felt compelled to stand against the Roman Catholic Church. For these promises of salvation and deliverance from purgatory completely contradicted his theological tenant, articulated by Paul in Ephesians , “ Salvation is by grace through faith alone, not as a result of good works, so that God alone gets the glory.”

Luther’s legacy as well as the influence he left with The Lutheran Church exemplifies the value he placed in faith as a means to salvation and his disdain towards salvation through letters of indulgences. Indulgences are not part of The Lutheran Church and baptism and holy communion are its only two sacraments. Luther’s adherence and continuous referencing of the Scriptures also indicates that his condemnation of the Roman Catholic Church during the tumultuous period of Reformation was based primarily on his theological principles rather than any economic affronts he may have perceived.

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