News
Spirituality
Guest Voices

by Ray Cavanaugh

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 31, 2017
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When Martin Luther affixed his "95 Theses" to the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church 500 years ago this Oct. 31, one of the foremost items on his mind was the selling of indulgences. And no one peddled them more zealously than Johann Tetzel, a German friar whose unabashed hawking incited much of Luther's rebellious fury.

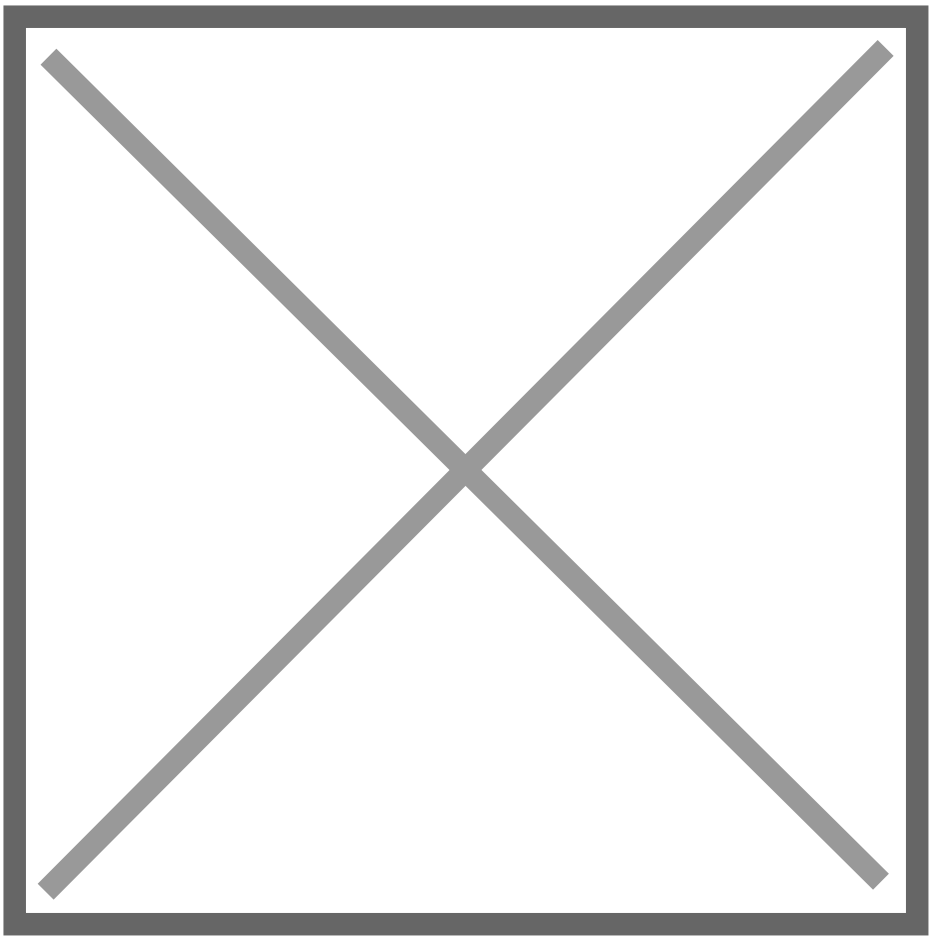


Image of Johann Tetzel is seen on a public information column posted at St. Nicholas Church in Jüterbog, Germany. (Wikimedia Commons/Assenmacher)

Born in 1465 in Pirna, Saxony (now Germany), Tetzel studied philosophy and theology at the University of Leipzig, where in 1487 he received his bachelor's degree, graduating sixth in a class of 56, according to the 1912 Catholic Encyclopedia. Soon after graduation, he entered the Dominican Order, probably at Leipzig. He then transferred to a monastery in Glogow, Poland.

He served as the inquisitor for Poland and later became the inquisitor for Saxony. His indulgence-related endeavors, for which he became so notorious, surfaced in 1503, a time when church superiors were seeking to finance the construction of the new St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Over the ensuing seven years, he was selling indulgences in no fewer than 10 German cities. By the time Tetzel appeared on Luther's disapproving radar, he was a veteran pitchman who had been appointed subcommissioner of indulgences at

Meissen, Saxony.

Tetzel certainly wasn't the first to hawk indulgences, which had existed in some form for centuries and had helped finance the crusade against the Ottoman Empire. In the final decades of the 15th century, however, a new type of indulgence surfaced — one that impacted the dead and could upgrade a soul from purgatory to heaven. Though such a concept strayed from church teaching and was denounced by multiple Catholic theologians, this new type of indulgence gained momentum, and Tetzel emphatically put it to practice.

He was effective at making potential buyers "feel guilty if they did not seize the opportunity," reminding audiences of their parents and ancestors "clamoring for help" in purgatory and needing just one financial contribution to send them into paradise, as related by Scott H. Hendrix's book *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*. Hendrix also tells how Tetzel claimed that St. Peter himself was unable to grant a grace more powerful than the indulgences for sale.

Whether or not the words originated with Tetzel (in German originally), he became known for the couplet: "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings / the soul from purgatory springs." These lines are closely related to Luther's 27th thesis: "They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory."

Some accounts relate that Tetzel once sold an indulgence to a nobleman who was seeking protection against a future sin. Subsequent to the transaction, the nobleman, with the aid of a few accomplices, set upon Tetzel and beat him. Having delivered the beating, the nobleman then informed Tetzel that the attack on him was the sin for which he had purchased the indulgence.

Tetzel was also alleged to have claimed that indulgences would work even for someone who had raped Mary, mother of God. Though he emphatically denied promoting this particular example, it had circulated enough to inspire Luther's 75th thesis: "To consider papal indulgences so great that they could absolve a man even if he had done the impossible and had violated the mother of God is madness."

Even less extreme examples of indulgences were anathema to Luther, who stressed the importance of having to undergo genuine repentance. Purchasing indulgences

showed people how to (purportedly) escape the punishments of sin but not how to avoid sinning in future. Luther felt that indulgences, particularly in their current state, had largely removed contrition from the spiritual ballgame.

Subsequent to his posting of the 95 Theses, Luther and Tetzel engaged in an ongoing public disputation. The latter tried to defend himself and the authority of the pope but ultimately returned to his Leipzig monastery "deserted by the public, broken in spirit, [and] wrecked in health," as told by the Catholic Encyclopedia. On Aug. 11, 1519, he died at age 54 — emotionally exhausted and quite the outcast.

When Tetzel was on his deathbed in Leipzig, Luther wrote to him, telling him "not to be troubled," for Tetzel did not begin the scandalous practice, or as Luther phrased it: "the child had quite a different father." The grand reformer instead placed the root of his blame on more elevated figures in the church hierarchy, including Pope Leo X.

Though Luther was trying to downplay Tetzel's personal culpability, not everyone was following this track. Soon after Tetzel's death, he became more of a scapegoat, as papal ambassador Karl von Miltitz put the whole blame for the indulgence controversy on him and also made severe, unsubstantiated allegations against his character.

Advertisement

Ultimately, Tetzel's "powers have been overrated by friend and foe alike," in the view of Ludwig von Pastor, author of *The History of the Popes*. Pastor described Tetzel as "an eloquent and popular preacher" but also "prone to exaggerations" and "wanting in modesty and simplicity." He adds that the "arrogant and pretentious" Tetzel "carried out the duties of his office in such a businesslike way that scandals could not fail to arise."

Indeed, the "scandals" would mark Tetzel profoundly enough to ensure that his name survives only in connection to a most indulgent enterprise. Wherever his soul may dwell, his legacy remains in a purgatory from which no one can purchase release.

[Ray Cavanaugh is a Massachusetts native who enjoys long walks, short novels and colorful characters. He has written for such publications as Celtic Life, History Today

and New Oxford Review.]

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 20-Nov 2, 2017** print issue.