

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

JOHANN TETZEL

Born: 1465 | Saxony, Germany

Died: Aug. 11, 1519 | Leipzig, Germany



REFORMATION
2017 It's *Still* All About
Jesus

LutheranReformation.org

A Dominican monk hired by church authorities to sell indulgences in Germany

“AS SOON AS THE COIN IN THE COFFER RINGS, THE SOUL FROM PURGATORY SPRINGS!” So went the sales pitch of the Dominican monk Johann Tetzel, who hawked forgiveness of sins like a carnival barker. Tetzel was born in 1465 in Saxony, Germany, and joined the order of Dominican monks in 1489. His specialty was selling indulgences, and by the spring of 1517, he was selling indulgences authorized by the pope in the territories of Albrecht, archbishop of Mainz, just over the border from Wittenberg. He claimed that the papal cross, under which these indulgences were sold, held as much power as the cross of Christ.

Why was Tetzel selling papal indulgences in Albrecht's lands? Some years earlier, when Albrecht was already the archbishop of Magdeburg, he also wanted to become the archbishop of Mainz. Appointments like these came at a cost, and Pope Leo X was in dire need of money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The two churchmen struck a deal: Tetzel would go into Albrecht's territories and raise funds through the sale of indulgences. Half of the money would go toward the building of St. Peter's and the other half would pay off Albrecht's loan, secured to buy the new archbishopric.

An indulgence was a cancellation, imparted by the Roman Catholic Church, of all or part of the punishment for sin suffered here or in purgatory. Indulgences had originated as an inducement for men to fight for the Church as Crusaders. Soon a lucrative business of selling indulgences arose to fund construction of churches and other pious purposes. They also funded not-so-pious purposes, like the buying of church offices. Concordia Historical Institute has a papal indulgence issued in 1482. This indulgence states that the bearer has paid the indulgence price and is entitled to full remission of sins upon confession. The priest is instructed to say, “I absolve you from each and every transgression, wickedness and sin, however great and serious they are.”

When Martin Luther's parishioners asked him about indulgences, he was concerned that there would no longer be any true repentance. He was afraid people would reason that if pardon from all sin could be purchased, there was no need for further concern about their souls. Luther knew he must protect his flock from this dangerous practice.

Luther thought that church officials would certainly do something about this after he alerted them. Imagine his surprise when the pope didn't correct but defended such abuses! Furthermore, it was Pope Leo's extravagant lifestyle that exacerbated his financial situation and prompted Tetzel's activities.

Tetzel may have been Luther's first target, but it soon became clear that Tetzel was just a greasy cog in a large, corrupt machine.