

BIOGRAPHY OF JOHANN TETZEL



Johann Tetzel was born in the Holy Roman Empire in 1465. He joined the Dominican order and became a friar. In 1502, Cardinal Giovanni di Lorenzo (later Pope Leo X) commissioned Tetzel to preach about indulgences, which he did for the remainder of his life. In 1509, he was made an inquisitor to Poland (remember the Inquisition was to try and punish heretics to the Catholic Church). After this Pope Leo made him in charge of collecting all indulgences throughout Germany.

Tetzel claimed to be collecting indulgences for the ongoing restoration of Saint Peter's basilica. Scandal erupted when it came to light that Tetzel was selling forgiveness for sins that had not been committed yet. Tetzel over exaggerated the Catholic Church's position on indulgences, suggesting that not only could one pay the Church to erase their dead relative's sins (releasing them to heaven), but one could also pay to remove their own future sins. This was not Church teaching, but more Tetzel's own belief system.

Martin Luther took issue with Tetzel's selling of indulgences and wrote his 95 Theses in response in part to Tetzel's actions. This led to the Reformation.

A popular quote on Tetzel during this time (even Luther mentioned it in his 95 Theses) was:

"As soon as a coin in the coffer rings / the soul from purgatory springs"

Tetzel received his doctorate in theology after defending his selling of indulgences to Martin Luther. He came under more criticism and was accused of fraud and embezzlement. These claims were later discredited. But the damage had been done and Tetzel was shunned by the public. Tetzel withdrew from public life to a monastery where he fell ill and died in 1519. Luther wrote to Tetzel on his deathbed to comfort Tetzel, telling him not to worry about starting the religious turmoil of the Reformation. According to Luther, the Catholic Church already had problems long before Tetzel began selling indulgences.