

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE III.

THE SYSTEM OF INDULGENCES.

BY ALFRED H. C. MORSE, D.D., DENVER, COLORADO.

No doctrine in the Roman system is more comprehensive, more remarkable, or more vital than that of indulgences. In it center all the hierarchical tendencies. Its development is the product of centuries of sacerdotal pretensions, based upon an originally harmless solicitude for the purity of the church membership. Its abuse was the immediate occasion of the Protestant Reformation; and, without doubt, its practical operation is fraught with immeasurable evil. It has also been the butt of Protestant attack upon Rome for centuries. But neither of these facts will argue that the doctrine is destitute of reason or wholly and essentially evil. Justice demands that even Satan be heard in his own defense before he is finally judged. I shall treat in this article: (1) the rise of the practice of indulgences; (2) the statement of its doctrine; (3) its elements of truth; and (4) its abuse.

I. THE RISE OF THE PRACTICE OF INDULGENCES.

1. The rise of indulgences is traced to the *ancient penitential system* in the early church. The ancient church was distinguished for the severity of its discipline, whose object was, on the one hand, the dignity and purity of the church; on the other, the spiritual welfare of the offender. Heresy, schism, and all gross crimes incompatible with a regenerate state were classed as mortal sins. All members of the church were considered free from the penalties attaching to these

sins, through the efficacy of baptism. That is to say, by submitting to the act of baptism, they were placed in a condition of grace. But such persons often committed post-baptismal sins—sins which were considered venial, that is to say, they were sins of weakness, which, though tending to mar the effectiveness of sanctifying grace, could yet be pardoned. But, for their absolution, the offending parties were subjected to temporal punishment in this world or in purgatory. Moreover, since the church was considered to be a single and organic whole, possessing in its presiding head the power of the keys, it assumed the right to dictate all forms of ecclesiastical penalties, as atoning for the shame which post-baptismal sin brought upon the body.

Indulgence is originally the remission of these ecclesiastical pains and penalties. So jealous was the early church for the purity of its membership, that those who were openly guilty of sin and disobedience were subjected to exclusion from the privileges of worship and chiefly of the communion. If the excluded party desired readmission to the fullest fellowship, it could be only by submitting to severe and humiliating discipline. After having secured a fixed and sufficient amount of this, the penitent, upon evidence of contrition, was readmitted to the full privilege of the church. If, perchance, during the earlier stages of his probation, he gave evidence of a contrite heart, the severity of the discipline might be relaxed, or the duration of his probation abridged. This was the first step, and the harmless commencement, of the practice of indulgence.

2. A further step has been traced by Neander, and we think quite correctly, to the old Teutonic system of *composition*. Rome had passed her mantle over whole nations of barbarians, not by the individual method of evangelical

preaching, but by the wholesale method of forcible baptism. In administering the ancient rules of church penance, some regard was paid to the new relations which had sprung up by reason of this barbarian membership. "Thus to those who *personally* confessed their sins to the priest, it was granted as a favor, that they should not be subjected to any *public* church penance, but only to penitential exercises which were to be performed in private. There was a deviation from the ancient laws of the church also in this, that to those who confessed their sins and declared their readiness to engage in the penitential exercises imposed upon them, the priest might grant absolution at once, although they could not as yet be allowed to partake of the communion."¹ Moreover, there were now many regulations respecting church discipline which could not as yet be adapted to the untutored masses, neither could they be enforced, without encountering fierce opposition. This circumstance led to a modification of the penitential system — a modification which, when once begun, easily became so sweeping as to endanger the entire principle of church discipline, so essential in those rude times. The Teutons were accustomed to pecuniary fines. By the payment of specified sums, those who had committed theft or murder could purchase exemption from the punishment of those crimes; and by composition could appease those injured or the relatives of those murdered. The discipline of the church was now colored by these customs, and a composition was added to the table of ecclesiastical punishments. Now, those who could not, or chose not, to submit to certain kinds of penance were allowed to pay a proportionately estimated sum of money; and this money

¹General History of the Christian Religion and Church, vol. III. p. 186.

was applied by the church to the relief of the poor, the ransom of captives, the erection of church edifices, or to the general expense of public worship. Thus it will be seen that, in the beginning, indulgences were nothing else than substitutes for the church punishments hitherto customary, of others better suited to the exigencies of the situation.

Let it be understood that church discipline is at once necessary and rational, and at the same time Scriptural. Nor can this discipline be wholesome and effective unless attended by external disabilities and penalties. Paul's advice to the Corinthian church was "not to company" with the incestuous offender — and this is excommunication. The outward disabilities of confession and penance were originally designed merely to indicate an honest contrition, and were of no value in themselves. But when the forms of penance were later changed to meet the temperament of the offender, there resulted the fatal misapprehension that moral deflections might be negotiable in terms of penance, almsgiving, fasts, or munificent contributions. The barbarian races began to feel secure in their sins. The same feeling attached itself to all forms of penance, because the distinction was not made plain between the church's tribunal and the divine tribunal, between the church's absolution and the divine forgiveness. Neither was understood the all-important place which penitence—honest, sincere contrition—holds in the entire economy of salvation. So it happened that, by a gradual and almost unconscious declination, the Scriptural matter of discipline degenerated into perfunctory absolution; repentance was entirely unmentioned; penitence was replaced by penance, which itself was quoted in terms of money value; and the untutored mind thought it possible, by this method, to purchase exemption not only from the punishment of sin, but also its forgiveness

—that is, by monetary payments to become relieved from both the temporal and eternal consequences of wrongdoing.

3. A further, and most prodigious, step was taken under the impulse to prosecute a *crusade against the hated Moslem*, then in possession of the sacred tomb. At the Council, or Synod, of Clermont in 1096 Pope Urban II. promised to all who took part in this crusade, which he proposed as a highly meritorious ecclesiastical work, *indulgentias plenarias*; and from that date, for a period of two hundred years, this grace of the church continued one of the most powerful means for renewing and enlivening these expeditions, although it was evident to the unprejudiced contemporary that the adventurers, when they crossed the Mediterranean, did not undergo a change of character with the change of climate. Then this same grace was, ere long, extended to the military expeditions set on foot against the heretics in Europe; and at last by Boniface VIII., in 1300, to the year of Roman Jubilee. From the development of the system of indulgences, it is easy to see how readily a conscientious principle may become perverted, how a truth may come to assume the features of error and heresy.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF INDULGENCE.

Man is a creature of action rather than of thought. He first acts, and then thinks. He performs, and then explains or justifies himself. So with the matter of indulgence. When the practice had become so common as to awaken some criticism, it was not wanting in strong minds to propound its rationale. For a statement of the doctrine of indulgence, we are chiefly indebted to three schoolmen—Alexander of Hales, Albert the Great, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Alex-

ander, especially, laid the foundation. St. Thomas completed the structure.

It will be necessary to keep in mind the difference between penitence and penance. (And it is not likely that these schoolmen confused them.) The former is inward and fundamental; the latter is external and simply expressive. But, as there was a general bent of the age toward the external and legal, a superior value came to be attached to the bodily expression of a spiritual experience. Penance was raised to a sacrament, in which the *essentia* became the *accidentia*. Contrition of heart and confession by mouth were subordinated, and satisfaction by works comprised the heart of the practice. We shall now notice the speculations of these three schoolmen, offered in justification of the practice of indulgence.

1. Alexander of Hales (1245) laid the foundation of the doctrine of indulgence when he advanced the theory of the *treasure of the church*. The historian Ullmann briefly summarizes this theory as follows: 'Christ, the God-man, by his meritorious suffering and death, has not only made a sufficient, but a more than sufficient, satisfaction for the sins of mankind. He has acquired a superabundance of merit. This superfluous merit of Christ is conjoined with that of the martyrs and saints, which is similar in kind, though smaller in degree, for they likewise performed more than the divine law required of them. The sum of these supererogatory merits and good works forms a vast treasure, which is disjoined from the person who won or performed them, exists objectively, and having been accumulated by the Head and members of the church, and intended by them for its use, it belongs to the church, and is necessarily placed under the administration of its representatives, especially the Pope, who

is supreme. It is therefore competent for the Pope, according to the measure of his insight at the time, to draw from this treasure, and bestow upon those who have no merit of their own, such supplies of it as they require.' "Indulgences and remissions," says Alexander, "are made from the supererogatory merits of Christ's members, but most of all from the superabundance of Christ's own, the two constituting the church's spiritual treasure. The administration of this treasure does not pertain to all, but to those only who occupy Christ's place, viz. the Bishops." This theory of Alexander's would not have been possible without his underlying theory of the church (which is, indeed, the orthodox Catholic theory), viz. that the church is a gigantic and organic whole, not only by spiritual sympathy and fellowship, but by reason of the external bonds afforded in the sacraments. And, inasmuch as he regarded the church as an organic whole, this transference of merit from one member to another did not occur to him as infringing upon God's penal justice. Since God only knew the offending party as a member of a body, his disabilities, occasioned by transgression, could be relieved by the superabundant health of the entire body, just as our whole circulatory system musters for the relief of some enfeebled organ of our physical bodies. It did not infringe on God's justice, he thought, since in every case he inflicts punishment and demands satisfaction, and this within the precincts of the church. For, says he, when the Pope grants plenary indulgence, he inflicts a penalty, inasmuch as he obliges the church, or one of its members, to make satisfaction. Or it may also be said, The treasure of the church, from which the indulgence is taken, is derived substantially from Christ's merit, and hence God still punishes evil, having, as God-man, suffered and satisfied for us.

Alexander of Hales maintained that the absolution granted by the church availed also before the divine tribunal, and that indulgences reached even to the relief of souls in purgatory, providing that the power of the keys belonged to the party dispensing, and faith, love, and devotion be exercised by the party receiving it.

2. Albert the Great (1280) held substantially the views of Alexander of Hales, though he modified and amplified them in some particulars. This was mainly in regard to the *efficacy* of indulgence. He held that indulgence could not be merely "a pious fraud," by which men were enticed to the performance of good works, for this would be child's play or heresy. Neither would he assert that an indulgence was arbitrary, and accomplished unconditionally all that it expressed. In order to its effectiveness, six conditions were necessary: viz. competent authority and a pious cause on the part of him who dispensed it; repentance and faith in the power of the keys on the part of the receiver; and, on the part of the church, a superabundance of merit and a proper appreciation of the deliverance for which indulgence was instituted.

3. It is to the veteran scholastic St. Thomas Aquinas (1225?-74) that we look for an exhaustive justification of the practice of indulgence. He treats the matter under three divisions — indulgence itself, the party dispensing it, and the party receiving it.

(1) *Indulgence*. Under this division he treats: (a) its authority; (b) the reason of its efficacy; (c) the extent of its efficacy.

(a) The *authority* for indulgence he finds in the very nature of Christ and his work. Christ's treatment of the adulteress shows that he is able to remit the penalty of sin

without satisfaction. So could Peter, since to him were intrusted the keys of the kingdom. So could Paul, as is seen in his treatment of the incestuous Corinthians. So, also, can the church, since its head is Peter, and its power is not inferior to that of Paul. Moreover, the church is infallible. It sanctions the practice of indulgence; ergo, indulgence must be valid. He further held that indulgence not only remitted the penalty imposed by the church, but also that it was efficacious for the penalty imposed by God in purgatory; that, by virtue of the power conferred upon Peter, the church could absolve from all temporal penalties, after contrition and confession.

(b) The efficacy of indulgence lay in the *oneness of the church*, in whose membership are many who have done superabundant works, which constitute a vast treasure of the church. Indeed, so vast is the treasure that it greatly exceeds the measure of the guilt of all living, especially when augmented by the merits of Christ. Christ died to redeem the church. The superabundant works of the saints were not performed for this or that individual who might need pardon, but for the whole church, even as Paul said, "I fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ for his body's sake, which is the church" (Col i. 24). Moreover, St. Thomas held this treasure to be under the control of, and subject to the appointment by, the head of the church, i. e. the Pope.

(c) Respecting the extent of indulgences, St. Thomas followed Alexander and Albert, and affirmed that indulgence possessed all the validity which the church declared it to have, subject, of course, to the conditions upon which indulgence is granted. It is not conditioned by the piety of the recipient, nor by the judgment of good men, but it is

measured only by the measure of its cause. But the real cause is the merit of the church, and therefore the extent of the indulgence need only correspond therewith. The merits of the church were collected for the glory of God and the good of the church in general. Hence they could be granted in return for any service in the interests of the church; such as war against heretics, building churches, etc. Thus he considered indulgence as the granting of a spiritual thing in return for a spiritual thing.

(2) As to the *party dispensing indulgences*, St. Thomas limited this privilege to the Bishop or Pope. This was because indulgence was taken, not from the merits of this or that congregation, but from the merits of the entire church, and therefore could be granted only by him who presided over all. The bishops were the deputies of the Pope, and hence they could dispense only under his direction; as could, also, the deacons and nuncios when so authorized; but the power in plenitude belongs only to the Pope. St. Thomas held that the dispensing party might even be in mortal sin, and still not nullify the indulgence, since it was not granted in his own merit, but in the merit of the treasure itself.

(3) Respecting the *party receiving indulgence*, St. Thomas maintained that repentance was, of course, an essential prerequisite; that indulgence might benefit monks; and that, by a special provision, even the dead might be benefited by it. This latter, not because the dead could furnish any spiritual work in exchange; but, since the good work is done by some one, the indulgence might read in favor of the performer and his father, for instance; the benefit accruing to the latter not by judicial acquittal, but by intercession; and this is possible upon the theory that the church militant, triumphant, and patient are one; so that

the triumphant may intercede effectively for the militant, the militant for the patient. (The patient are those in purgatory.)

III. THE ELEMENTS OF TRUTH IN THE DOCTRINE OF INDULGENCES.

1. As fundamental to indulgences, the Romanist emphasizes the distinction between the *guilt* and the *penalty* involved in all sin; nor does he claim that by indulgence he can relieve from guilt. This God alone can do, and then only through the merits of Christ. We must not only concede that there is this difference between guilt and penalty; but, also, that when God pardons guilt he does not remit temporal punishment. In confirmation of this view, see the instance of Adam. Though he may have repented, and, through the merits of the future Saviour, he may have been saved, yet "death passed upon all men," and "by the offense of one man judgment came upon all men unto condemnation." (See, also, 2 Sam. xii.) Though David repented, and the Lord had taken away his sin, that he should not die; yet "the child that was born to him should surely die." (See, also, Num. xiv., when Moses prayed: "Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of thy mercy," etc., and the Lord said, "I have pardoned according to thy word"; yet he allowed none of those who had provoked him to see the land which he swore unto their fathers.)

2. A second element of truth we notice is in the doctrine of penance, of which indulgence is the practice. According to this, *forgiveness of sin* belongs to God alone, and this only through the merits of "One Mediator, one Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ." Moreover, this forgiveness is conditioned upon contrition and confession (though the great

trouble here is, that the confession is to the priest; yet the Scripture enjoins this confession of faults "one to another" as wholesome). Even the Protestant minister is able to assure the contrite party who confesses his sins, that forgiveness is his; the great difficulty with the Catholic view being that contrition does not necessarily mean repentance. Contrition is sorrow for sin. Repentance is a sorrow for sin combined with a turning from it. Moreover, the virtue in confession does not reside in the fact that it is made, but that it is made to God.

3. The Romanist adds to the above the element of *satisfaction* as essential to make the sacrament complete. That is, by certain specified acts, or good works, the recipient proposes to repair the evil he has done. This is not with a view to the guilt or eternal punishment, but to the temporal punishment which we have seen attaches to sin, i. e. a punishment, or penalty, which must work itself out either in this world or in purgatory. The Romanist believes that by these good works he can aid his contrition and confession, and remove the penalty. Now, there is a small element of truth in this. The Protestant believes, also, that good works are necessary, not to relieve the impending penalty, but as evidence of his repentant heart; that a right heart will occasion right acts; that "faith without works is dead"; but after this the Romanist and Protestant separate.

4. In the problem of *absolution itself*, there is a real element of truth. We cannot here explain, nor does our subject require us to furnish an exhaustive discussion of, this difficult question. Nevertheless, Jesus announced an enduring fact when he committed to the church the power of "binding and loosing." The truth is found in the fact that the church was to realize God in humanity. Its conscience

and heart upon matters of right and wrong were to represent the highest actualized among men. (It might attain to identity with God's.) And as possessors of truth, which is a two-edged sword, there is a very real sense in which the church can bind and loose. But this power is not to the church as an organization, but to the individuals in the church as possessors of truth.

5. Again, there may be, there doubtless is, a sense in which God *s pares the evil for his elect's sake*, though not, we think, with the meaning that the Catholic claims. He cites Gen. xviii. where, for the sake of his just persons, the Lord would have saved Sodom and Gomorrah; Isa. xxxvii., where, for the sake of David his servant, he actually did "protect" and "save" Jerusalem. He cites numerous other passages. This, however, we do not think was because David or Abraham, for instance, had done more "that was right" than was necessary for their own salvation, but because they were righteous men; and "the effectual fervent prayer of the righteous man availeth much."

6. There is a sense, moreover, in which the church is a *whole*; but this is not the wholeness of an organic unit, effected through the sacraments, but a spiritual unity begotten of the Holy Ghost.

IV. THE ABUSE OF THE DOCTRINE OF INDULGENCES.

In addition to the remarks which have been necessary in connection with the concessions above, the objections which may be offered to the doctrine of indulgences are "legion," and hence cannot be treated in detail. They may, however, be suggested by the following observations:—

1. The doctrine of indulgences introduces a *contradiction* into the Catholic system, inasmuch as the works of satis-

faction, which were originally an integral part of the sacrament of penitence, are now entirely disconnected from it, and viewed as a matter of ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

2. Again, it has this radical defect that moral and religious things, which can be taken only as *spiritual* magnitudes, are here treated as *material* ones, quality being treated as quantity. Indeed, in estimating the merit of Christ's work, it is found not so much in the sacrifice and love, as in the quantity of blood shed.

3. Moreover, in respect of the merits of the saints, these are found not in their moral character, but in the *volume* of good works.

4. Again, we do not think that the Scripture allusions to fasts and alms will warrant the church in enjoining them as a perpetual method of penance.

5. Further, they make the imputation of Christ's merit (and the saints') to be a purely external transference; for, although they make a penitent mind essential, yet the merit is not received in virtue of the state of mind, but in return for the good works done by one for the church; and the work itself is quite external and isolated.

6. Moreover, the transference of merit is not a moral or religious act, but purely judicial and perfunctory, so that the dispenser might himself be in mortal sin and still not invalidate the procedure, as long as he shared the judicial power of the church. The whole was thus a legal institution computed in ecclesiastical arithmetic, and in bold contrast to the spiritual nature of the kingdom.

7. This doctrine rests not only upon the theory of good works, but also that a man may do more good than is essential to his own salvation, and may thus add to a store, or treasure, of the church.

8. Again, it invades the religious domain, and attacks the very glory of God by its theory of an unerring and omniscient judicial power in the church. It makes the tribunal of the church and the tribunal of God to be identical. And the Pope is the head of the church, and hence it exalts him to the place of God, and asks the Omnipotent to share with him His glory.

9. "Granting, however, that the whole doctrine were well founded, the position assigned to the Pope would be one elevated far above the reach of fancy, and could be designated only as that of a terrestrial god. What an infinite amount of obligation would it impose upon the papacy, and with what conscientiousness, sharpened to the utmost, ought the popes, if they were bold enough to believe that such plenitude of power had actually been lodged in the hands of any child of the dust, to dispense the lofty blessings committed to their trust! How carefully ought they to have guarded them from debasement! and yet, what do we see? Abuse upon abuse, and profanation upon profanation, in ascending scale, for more than two centuries, until at last moral indignation bursts like a tempest upon their impiety."¹

10. Centuries of the practice of indulgences have sufficiently demonstrated that, guard the doctrine as carefully as it can be, with subtleties and sophistries of argument, still it inevitably leads the unlettered mind to think that one can in some way slip past the obligation to personal righteousness and evade the requirement "to cease to do evil and learn to do well." Sound Christian judgment must therefore be given against the whole system of Indulgences.

¹ Ullmann.