

Indulgences

By The Bellarmine Society.

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An indulgence is NOT — as some wrongly believe — a pardon for sin; still less is it permission to commit sin. No one can gain an indulgence for unforgiven sins, for sins that are still upon his conscience; only when the moral guilt of the sin has been forgiven can he gain an indulgence. Also, no one can obtain an indulgence unless he be in a state of grace, that is, free from serious sin.

WHAT THEN IS AN INDULGENCE?

It is the remission, the cancelling, of part or all of the temporal punishment, which may remain due to sin, after the guilt of sin has been forgiven. And what is temporal punishment? As opposed to eternal punishment, it is punishment which will come to an end, either in this life or in the next.

In the Early Church, penances for sin were very heavy, but gradually the Church came to grant indulgences in regard to these severe penances; that is, for a good reason she lessened the penance that would ordinarily have had to be done, and made up what was wanting by her power over the superabundant merits of Christ and His Saints. The purpose of indulgences is to encourage and help the faithful to sanctify themselves. Thus, an indulgence is granted only for a good reason and when certain prescribed conditions have been fulfilled, all of which tend to the sanctification of the person concerned. A good reason is required; for the Church, having only the power of dispensing the merits of Christ and His Saints, cannot grant indulgences arbitrarily and at her mere whim. This reason is usually the purpose for which the indulgence is granted — the promotion of the worship of God, the fostering of works of charity, the spreading of a special devotion, and so forth. Among the conditions, the Church may prescribe Confession and Communion, together with a visit to a church and the recital of certain prayers there, or the good work prescribed may take the form of fasting, almsgiving, and so on. When the necessary conditions have been fulfilled by a person in the state of grace, the Church grants remission of part or all of the temporal punishment still due. This remission holds good before God.

But it may be asked: "When God forgives, does He not forgive wholly?" Here we must make a distinction. We must note that there is a double offence in sin: there is a personal offence against friendship with God, for the sinner withdraws from God and gives to a creature the love that is due to God alone; and there is also an offence against justice, for the sinner, by disobeying God's Law, withdraws the respect and honor that is justly due to the Divine Majesty: Now, the offence against friendship with God incurs the GUILT of sin; the withdrawal of the honor due to God merits PUNISHMENT. When the sinner repents, the guilt of the sin is wholly forgiven. But some debt of punishment remains due, and justice demands that satisfaction be made for it. We can the more easily understand that the Divine Justice should require this satisfaction, if we remember that sin is a violation of "the temple of God" (See 1 Cor. 3:17) and that it grieves the Holy Spirit of God (See Eph. 4:30).

God forgave Adam and Eve; He forgave Moses; He forgave David; but, though the eternal punishment they had deserved was cancelled, we know from Scripture that God nevertheless inflicted temporal punishment. Read the divine message delivered to David by Nathan, and you will find the distinction between GUILT and PUNISHMENT clearly brought out.

"The Lord also has taken away your sin. You shall not die.

"Nevertheless, because you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, for this thing, the child that is born to you shall surely die" (2 Kings [in the Vulgate] or 2 Samuel 12:13-54).

You may perhaps object: "Yes, God Himself can remit punishment; but has the Catholic Church the power to grant indulgences?"

The Catholic Church has this power. It was given to her by her founder, Jesus Christ. This power is a necessary part of the "Power of the Keys," given by Our Lord to Saint Peter and his successors, for the Power of the Keys extends not only to the GUILT of sin, but also to the PUNISHMENT due to forgiven sin.

This can be proved from Our Lord's words to Saint Peter:

"And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

"And whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matthew 16:19; see also 18:18).

And from His words to the Apostles, conferring on them the explicit power to forgive sins:

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John 20:23).

Christ, then, has given His Church the fullest power in the remission of sin, and of every bond that would keep a man out of heaven. But this power would not be the fullest power, unless it embraced also power over the temporal punishment due to those sins, the guilt of which has been forgiven — unless, in other words, it included the power to grant indulgences.

This is the Catholic doctrine of indulgences. We do not deny that abuses, on the part of individuals, have existed in the past. These abuses arose mainly from the fact that almsgiving was often a condition of gaining an indulgence, and in this, there is nothing essentially wrong or simoniacal. But over-zealous and imprudent preachers of indulgences made a traffic of them and practically sold them for money. In this, they acted wrongly. But the truth and usefulness of the doctrine itself were unaffected by these abuses. The abuse of the doctrine is no argument against the doctrine itself. What good thing is there which, at some time or other, has not been abused? Popes and Councils have condemned these abuses.

The Council of Trent especially emphasized this condemnation: "Being anxious that abuses... should be amended and corrected, (the Council) ordains that all evil gains for the obtaining (of indulgences)... be wholly abolished."

To deny the truth of the doctrine because of the abuses is as unreasonable as to deny to drivers of motorcars the right to drive because of the criminal carelessness of some of their number.

CONCLUSION.

An indulgence, then, is the remission of all or part of the temporal punishment which may remain due to sins after their guilt has been forgiven.

In granting indulgences, the Catholic Church is exercising lawfully a right and a power given to her by Christ Himself.

This Apologetic leaflet was first issued by the Bellarmine Society of Oxford University. We are proud to reproduce it here in the hope that many more souls will benefit by its wisdom.

ANSWERS TO 25 QUESTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WHICH COMPLETELY REFUTE THE "BIBLE ONLY" THEORY.

The Catholic Religion Proved by the Protestant Bible.

If you read this you will see how Christ's Church existed 350 years before the New Testament was under one cover and over 1400 years before it could be printed; which completely refutes the "Bible Only" theory of today's sects. Meanwhile the Protestant Bible itself proves the marks, attributes and basic doctrines of the ancient one-faith, one-fold, one-shepherd Church of Christ - as shown herein.

QUESTION ONE.

Did Our Lord write any part of the New Testament or command His Apostles to do so?

Our Lord Himself never wrote a line, nor is there any record that He ordered his Apostles to write; He did command them to teach and to preach. Also He to Whom all power was given in Heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18) promised to give them the Holy Spirit (John 14:26) and to be with them Himself till the end of the world (Matthew 28:20).

COMMENT: If reading the Bible were a necessary means of salvation, Our Lord would have made that statement and also provided the necessary means for his followers.

QUESTION TWO.

How many of the Apostles or others actually wrote what is now in the New Testament?

A few of the Apostles wrote part of Our Lord's teachings, as they themselves expressly stated; i.e., Peter, Paul, James, John, Jude, Matthew, also Saints Mark and Luke. None of the others wrote anything, so far as is recorded.

COMMENT: If the Bible privately interpreted was to be a Divine rule of Faith, the apostles would have been derelict in their duty when instead, some of them adopted preaching only.

QUESTION THREE.

Was it a teaching or a Bible-reading Church that Christ founded?

The Protestant Bible expressly states that Christ founded a teaching Church, which existed before any of the New Testament books were written.

Romans 10:17: - So then, faith cometh by HEARING, and hearing by the word of God.

Matthew 28:19: - Go ye therefore and TEACH all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Mark 16:20: - And they went forth, and PREACHED everywhere the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

Mark 16:15: - And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world and PREACH the gospel to every creature.

COMMENT: Thus falls the entire basis of the "Bible-only" theory.

QUESTION FOUR.

Was there any drastic difference between what Our Lord commanded the Apostles to teach and what the New Testament contains?

Our Lord commanded his Apostles to teach all things whatsoever He had commanded; (Matthew 28:20); his Church must necessarily teach everything; (John 14:26); however, the Protestant Bible itself teaches that the Bible does not contain all of Our Lord's doctrines:

John 20:30: - And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, etc.

John 21:25: - And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.

COMMENT: How would it have been possible for second century Christians to practice Our Lord's religion, if private interpretation of an unavailable and only partial account of Christ's teaching were indispensable?

QUESTION FIVE.

Does the New Testament expressly refer to Christ's "unwritten word"?

The New Testament itself teaches that it does not contain all that Our Lord did or, consequently, all that He taught.

John 20:30: - And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, etc.

John 21:25:- And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written everyone, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written Amen.

COMMENT: Since the Bible is incomplete, it needs something else to supplement it; i.e., the spoken or historically recorded word, which we call Tradition.

QUESTION SIX.

What became of the unwritten truths which Our Lord and the Apostles taught?

The Church has carefully conserved this "word of mouth" teaching by historical records called Tradition. Even the Protestant Bible teaches that many Christian truths were to be handed down by word of mouth.

2 Thess. 2:15: - Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

2 Tim. 2:2: - And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.

COMMENT: Hence, not only Scripture but other sources of information must be consulted to get the whole of Christ's teaching. Religions founded on "the Bible only" are therefore necessarily incomplete.

QUESTION SEVEN.

Between what years were the first and last books of the New Testament written?

This first book, Saint Matthew's Gospel, was not written until about ten years after Our Lord's Ascension. Saint Paul's letters to the Galatians, about 49 A. D., and to the Thessalonians, about 50 A.D., were his first writings, and Saint James' letter is from about 50 A.D. Saint John's fourth gospel and Apocalypse or Book of Revelations were not written until about 100 A. D.

COMMENT: Imagine how the present-day privately interpreted "Bible-only" theory would have appeared at a time when the books of the New Testament were not only unavailable, but most of them had not yet been written.

QUESTION EIGHT.

When was the New Testament placed under one cover?

In 397 A. D. by the Council of Carthage, from which it follows that non-Catholics have derived their New Testament from the Catholic Church; no other source was available.

COMMENT: Up to 397 A. D., some of the Christians had access only to part of the New Testament; into this situation, how would the "Bible-only privately interpreted" theory have fitted?

QUESTION NINE.

Why so much delay in compiling the New Testament?

Prior to 397 A. D., the various books of the New Testament were not under one cover, but were in the custody of different groups or congregations. The persecutions against the Church, which had gained new intensity, prevented these New Testament books from being properly authenticated and placed under one cover. However, this important work was begun after Constantine gave peace to Christianity in 313 A.D., allowing it to be practiced in the Roman Empire.

COMMENT: This again shows how utterly impossible was the "Bible-only" theory, at least up to 400 A. D.

QUESTION TEN.

What other problem confronted those who wished to determine the contents of the New Testament?

Before the inspired books were recognized as such, many other books had been written and by many were thought to be inspired; hence, the Catholic Church made a thorough examination of the whole question; biblical scholars spent years in the Holy Land studying the original languages of New Testament writings.

COMMENT: According to the present-day "Bible-only" theory, in the above circumstances, it would also have been necessary for early Christians to read all the doubtful books and, by interior illumination, judge which were and which were not divinely inspired.

QUESTION ELEVEN.

Who finally did decide which books were inspired and therefore belonged to the New Testament?

Shortly before 400 A. D. a Council of the Catholic Church, (whose decisions were ratified by the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Saint Peter, the Pope,) using the infallible authority which Christ had given to his own divine institution, finally decided which books really belonged to the New Testament and which did not.

Either the Church at this Council was infallible, or it was not. If the Church was infallible then, why is it not infallible now? If the Church was not infallible then, in that case the New Testament is not worth the paper it is written on, because internal evidences of authenticity and inspiration are inconclusive and because the work of this Council cannot now be rechecked; this is obvious from the reply to next question.

COMMENT: In view of these historical facts, it is difficult to see how non-Catholics can deny that it was from the (Roman) Catholic Church that they received the New Testament.

QUESTION TWELVE.

Why is it impossible for modern non-Catholics to check over the work done by the Church previous to 400 A. D.?

The original writings were on frail material called papyrus, which had but temporary enduring qualities. While the books judged to be inspired by the Catholic Church were carefully copied by her monks, those rejected at that time were allowed to disintegrate, for lack of further interest in them.

COMMENT: What then is left for non-Catholics, except to trust the Catholic Church to have acted under divine inspiration; if at that time, why not now?

QUESTION THIRTEEN.

Would the theory of private interpretation of the New Testament have been possible for the year 400 A. D.?

No, because, as already stated, no New Testament as such was in existence.

COMMENT: If our non-Catholic brethren today had no Bibles, how could they even imagine following the "Bible-only privately interpreted" theory; but before 400 A. D., New Testaments were altogether unavailable.

QUESTION FOURTEEN.

Would the private interpretation theory have been possible between 400 A. D. and 1440 A.D., when printing was invented?

No, the cost of individual Bibles written by hand was prohibitive; moreover, due to the scarcity of books, and other reasons, the ability to read was limited to a small minority. The Church used art, drama and other means to convey Biblical messages.

COMMENT: To have proposed the "Bible-only" theory during the above period would obviously have been impracticable and irrational.

QUESTION FIFTEEN.

Who copied and conserved the Bible during the interval between 400 A. D. and 1440 A. D.?

The Catholic monks; in many cases these spent their entire lives to give the world personally-penned copies of the Scriptures, before printing was invented.

COMMENT: In spite of this, the Catholic Church is accused of having tried to destroy the Bible; had she desired to do this, she had 1500 years within which to do so.

QUESTION SIXTEEN.

Who gave the Reformers the authority to change over from the one Faith, one Fold and one Shepherd program, to that of the "Bible-only theory"?

Saint Paul seems to answer the above when he said: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:8 - Protestant version {KJV}.)

COMMENT: If in 300 years, (from 1517 to 1817) one-third of Christianity (Protestantism) was split into at least 300 sects, how many sects would three-thirds of Christianity have produced in 1900 years? (Answer is: at least 5700. A 1953 American study soberly informed its readers that there were at least 33,800 distinct Protestant churches, sects or ecclesial communities. The same study said there was one Catholic Church which had at least 23 different rites all acknowledging the Pope as Vicar of Christ on Earth.)

QUESTION SEVENTEEN.

Since Luther, what consequences have followed from the use of the "Bible-only" theory and its personal interpretation?

Just what Saint Paul foretold when he said: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears." 2 Timothy 4:3 (Protestant edition). According to the World Almanac for 1953 there are in the United States 20 different organizations of Methodists, 22 kinds of Baptists, 10 branches of Presbyterians, 13 organizations of Mennonites, 18 of Lutherans and hundreds of other denominations.

COMMENT: The "Bible-only" theory may indeed cater to the self-exaltation of the individual, but it certainly does not conduce to the acquisition of Divine truth.

QUESTION EIGHTEEN.

In Christ's system, what important part has the Bible?

The Bible is one precious source of religious truth; other sources are historical records (better known as Sacred Tradition) and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit expressed through the Magisterium (Teaching Authority) of the Church.)

COMMENT: Elimination of any one of the three elements in the equation of Christ's true Church would be fatal to its claims to be such.

QUESTION NINETEEN.

Now that the New Testament is complete and available, what insolvable problem remains?

The impossibility of the Bible to explain itself and the consequent multiplicity of errors which individuals make by their theory of private interpretation. Hence, it is indisputable that the Bible must have an authorized interpreter.

2 Peter 1:20: - Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.

2 Peter 3:16: - As also in all his [Paul's] epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.

Acts 8:30: - And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, [Isaiah] and said, understandest thou what thou readest? 31. And he said, How can I except some men should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.

COMMENT: Only by going on the supposition that falsehood is as acceptable to God as is truth, can the "Bible-only" theory be defended.

QUESTION TWENTY.

Who is the official expounder of the Scriptures?

The Holy Spirit, acting through and within the Church which Christ founded more than nineteen centuries ago; the Bible teaches through whom in the Church come the official interpretations of; God's law and God's word.

Luke 10:16: - He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me. [Christ spoke these words to his Apostles. To them and their legitimate and continuous historical successors, this mandate applies. Thus, the true Church of Christ must be 'Apostolic', with a genuine historical link traceable through all the Christian centuries to these self-same Apostles.]

Matt. 16:18: - And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Mal. 2:7: - For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.

COMMENT: Formerly at least, it was commonly held that when individuals read their Bibles carefully and prayerfully, the Holy Spirit would guide each individual to a knowledge of the truth. This is much more than the Catholic Church claims for even the Pope himself. Only after extended consultation and study, with much fervent prayer, does he rarely and solemnly make such a decision.

QUESTION TWENTY-ONE.

What are the effects of the Catholic use of the Bible?

Regardless of what persons may think about the Catholic Church, they must admit that her system gets results in the way of unity of rule and unity of faith; otherwise stated, one Faith, one Fold and one Shepherd.

COMMENT: If many millions of non-Catholics in all nations, by reading their Bible carefully and prayerfully, had exactly the same faith, reached the same conclusions, then this theory might deserve the serious consideration of intelligent, well-disposed persons-but not otherwise.

QUESTION TWENTY-TWO.

Why are there so many non-Catholic Churches?

Because there is so much different interpretation of the Bible; there is so much different interpretation of the Bible because there is so much wrong interpretation; there is so much wrong interpretation because the system of interpreting is radically wrong. You cannot have one Fold and one Shepherd, one Faith and one Baptism, by allowing every man and every woman to distort and pervert the Scriptures to suit his or her own pet theories.

COMMENT: To say that Bible reading is an intensely Christian practice, is to enunciate a beautiful truth; to say that Bible reading is the sole source of religious faith, is to make a sadly erroneous statement.

QUESTION TWENTY-THREE.

Without Divine aid, could the Catholic Church have maintained her one Faith, one Fold, and one Shepherd?

Not any more than the non-Catholic sects have done; they are a proof of what happens when, without Divine aid, groups strive to do the humanly impossible.

COMMENT: Catholics love, venerate, and use the Bible; but they also know that the Bible alone is not Christ's system but only a precious book, a means, an aid by which the Church carries on her mission to "preach the Gospel to every living creature" and to keep on preaching it "to the end of time."

QUESTION TWENTY-FOUR.

Were there any printed Bibles before Luther?

When printing was invented about 1440, one of the first, if not the earliest printed book, was an edition of the Catholic Bible printed by John Gutenberg. It is reliably maintained that 626 editions of the Catholic Bible, or portions thereof, had come from the press through the agency of the Church, in countries where her influence prevailed, before Luther's German version appeared in 1534. Of these, many were in various European languages. Hence, Luther's "discovery" of the supposedly unknown Bible at Erfurt in 1503 is one of those strange, wild calumnies with which anti-Catholic literature abounds.

COMMENT: Today parts of the Bible are read in the vernacular from every Catholic altar every Sunday. [Even more daily vernacular Bible reading is heard from Catholic altars in these days of the twenty-first century.] The Church grants a spiritual premium or indulgence to those who read the Bible; every Catholic family has, or is supposed to have, a Bible in the home. Millions of Catholic Bibles are sold annually.

QUESTION TWENTY-FIVE.

During the Middle Ages, did the Catholic Church manifest hostility to the Bible as her adversaries claim?

Under stress of special circumstances, various regulations were made by the Church to protect the people from being spiritually poisoned by the corrupted and distorted translations of the Bible; hence opposition to the Waldensians, Albigensians, Wycliffe and Tyndale. [Sadly, the situation of English-speaking Catholics was most distressing. The two last-named, Wycliffe and Tyndale filled their English translations of the Bible with calamitous footnotes, which, had they been accepted, would have mislead the newly literate Middle Classes into grossly distorted views of gospel truth. It

was against these nastily footnoted Bible translations that English Catholic Bishops took such a strong objection. Neglectfully, they failed to provide authentic translations in the English vernacular to take the place of these heretical deceptions. In this, they did NOT follow the example of their continental Catholic colleagues.]

COMMENT: Individual churchmen may at times have gone too far in their zeal, not to belittle the Bible, but to protect it. There is no human agency in which authority is always exercised blamelessly.
