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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 23

INDULGENCES TODAY

A period of penal suffering in 'purgatory' is, according to official Roman Catholic teaching, what the great majority of Christians are to expect when they die. They may have repented of their sins and put their faith in Jesus Christ for forgiveness, but they still have to pay this 'temporal penalty'. Then, when they have paid it off, they will be transferred to heaven. In the meantime they can be helped and their penalty lessened by indulgences or pardons granted by the church on earth and applied to the dead in prayer. In the sixteenth century the Church sold these indulgences or pardons for money, but today they are earned by the merit of good works. The one who earns them can either apply them to himself, when dead, or to others who are dead already.

The sale of indulgences for money in the sixteenth century caused the theory of indulgences to be scrutinised, and was the particular abuse which occasioned Luther's famous protest in his 95 Theses, the commencement of the Reformation. Where was the biblical basis for all this, the Reformers asked? And could it be reconciled with the biblical doctrine of justification by faith? In Article 22 of our own 39 Articles, we read:

'The Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons... is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.'

It is widely supposed that the practice of granting these pardons or indulgences has since died away, and when the new ARCIC commission issued its statement 'Salvation and the Church' in 1987 it made no direct reference to them. The nearest it came was in paragraphs 23 and 24, where it restated the Roman doctrine of merit in a much more biblical manner.

It was therefore a surprise to people to be reminded by Margot Lawrence in the Church Times that the Daily Telegraph had only the previous year reported a press conference given by Monsignor Luigi de Magistris at Rome on the occasion of the publication of the 3rd edition of the Vatican's latest decree on indulgences. He had attracted the interest of the press by his extraordinary warning that, though you can gain an indulgence by listening to the papal blessing on radio or television, you have to listen to it live, and cannot gain a second indulgence by listening to a recording!

Some correspondence in the Church Times followed, in which the Anglican co-chairman of ARCIC described indulgences as a 'minor' matter, and a Roman Catholic member of ARCIC defended the theory of indulgences, though without much success. The most telling letter, however, came from Bishop Timothy Dudley Smith, in which he drew attention to the actual content of the recent Vatican document on the subject, and very properly called for ARCIC to give attention to the matter, when revising its statement 'Salvation and the Church'. His letter is here reprinted by permission, followed by extracts from the Vatican document, translated out of the Latin.

The Editor,

The Church Times

9-3-87

SIR, - Successive ARCIC Reports have sought to demonstrate considerable doctrinal convergence between our churches - a convergence greater than the formularies or practices of either, taken as a whole, can justify.

It is understandable, therefore, that the Anglican co-Chairman of ARCIC II should want to dismiss the question of indulgences as 'minor'; and assert them to be 'largely abandoned' by the Roman Catholic Church (Letters, 6 March 1987) .

This is quite unconvincing (to use no stronger word) in the light of the recent publication by the Vatican of the third edition of their Enchiridion Indulgentiarum ('A Treasury of Indulgences') - a book of 124 pages which has seen three editions since it was published in 1968, this present updated edition appearing as recently as May 1986. It was this book which led to the Daily Telegraph headline mentioned by your original correspondent Margot Lawrence. That article quoted a Vatican spokesman, Cardinal Luigi Dadaglio, as saying (the direct opposite of what Bishop Santer suggests) that 'there is a growing interest in the Roman Catholic Church on the matter of indulgences.'

Enchiridion Indulgentiarum must surely, in one edition or another, be among the documents necessarily considered by ARCIC II in their discussion of Salvation and the Church. I note three things about it:

- i. It is not an unofficial manual of popular devotion, but an authoritative publication of the Vatican.
- ii. It is no mere restatement of medieval tradition. It refers, for example, to receiving 'with pious devotion' a Papal or episcopal blessing by means of radio or television as linked with 'a plenary indulgence'.
- iii. The conception of salvation and forgiveness conveyed by these pages is alien both to the faith of the Scriptures and to the teaching of the Church of England. There can surely be no informed and balanced exposition of a Roman Catholic understanding of sin and salvation which does not take account, for example, of indulgences for the dead (p. 21), indulgences for the worship of the Sacrament (p. 46), indulgences for the use of objects of piety - partial if the object has been blessed by a priest or deacon, plenary if a bishop or the Pope (p. 61). In all, some seventy specific acts are quoted as linked with partial or plenary indulgences.

The General Synod was invited recently to declare earlier ARCIC documents as 'consonant in substance' with the faith of the Church of England. It cannot in fact be difficult to demonstrate consonance or convergence if evidence to the contrary is to be disregarded.

Yours etc.

Timothy Thetford

THE TREASURY OF INDULGENCES

(3rd updated edition of the 1968 Roman decree, issued May 1986, and published in Latin by the Vatican Press)

The Doctrine of Indulgences (pp. 86-89)

As we are taught by divine revelation, the consequences of our sins are punishments inflicted by the divine sanctity and justice, which are either suffered in this world, by the sorrows, miseries and calamities of this life, and especially by death, or else are suffered in the world to come, by fire and torments or by punishments that cleanse... But the doctrine of purgatory clearly shows that the suffering of punishments and the purifying of the remains of sins can remain, and in fact often do remain, after the guilt of the sins has already been forgiven; for in purgatory the souls of the dead, who have died in the love of God, truly repenting, but before they have made amends, by appropriate fruits of repentance, for their sins of commission and omission, are purified after death by purgatorial punishments.

The Rules about Indulgences (pp. 21-25)

1. An indulgence is the remission in God's sight of the temporal punishment for sins, the guilt of which has been done away, which one of the Christian faithful, rightly disposed and on fixed and definite conditions, obtains by the help of the Church, who, as the minister of redemption, authoritatively dispenses and applies the treasury of the merits of Christ and the Saints.
2. An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it releases partly or wholly from the temporal penalty due for sin.
3. No-one who acquires indulgences can apply them to others still alive.
4. Indulgences, whether partial or plenary, can always be applied to the dead by means of prayer.
21. A plenary indulgence can only be acquired once a day. At the point of death, however, one of the Christian faithful can obtain a plenary indulgence, even if he has already acquired a plenary indulgence the same day. But a partial indulgence can be acquired many times a day, subject to express regulations to the contrary.

The Indulgences actually Granted (pp. 31-75)

Partial or plenary indulgences are attached to three general acts and seventy specific acts of a pious or devotional kind. Specimens are:

3. Worship of the Most Holy Sacrament.

A partial indulgence is granted to one of the Christian faithful who visits the Most Holy Sacrament to worship it; but if he does this for at least half an hour the indulgence is plenary.

12. The Papal Blessing.

One of the Christian faithful who receives with pious devotion the blessing bestowed either by the Pope upon the City and the World, or by a bishop upon the faithful committed to his care, even if only by the help of radio or television, is granted a plenary indulgence.

20. Christian Doctrine.

One of the Christian faithful who takes pains to teach or learn Christian doctrine is granted a partial indulgence.

31. Mary, Mother of Grace.

Mary, Mother of grace, Mother of pity, do thou protect me from the enemy, and receive me in the hour of death. Partial indulgence. (Other prayers to the Blessed Virgin, nos. 9,32,48,51,52,57)

35. The Use of Objects of Piety.

One of the Christian faithful who uses with a pious mind an object of piety (crucifix or cross, crown, scapular, medal), which has been duly blessed by a priest or deacon, obtains a partial indulgence. If however, the object of piety has been blessed by the Pope or some bishop, he can even obtain a plenary indulgence...

41 . Participation in Holy Preaching.

A partial indulgence is granted to one of the Christian faithful who is present with attention and devotion at the preaching of the holy word of God ...

50. The Reading of Holy Scripture.

A partial indulgence is granted to one of the Christian faithful who reads Holy Scripture with the veneration due to a divine communication and in the manner of spiritual reading. But the indulgence will be plenary if he does this for at least half an hour.

Exceptions (p.15)

In accordance with tradition, indulgences are not attached to participation in the Sacrifice of the Mass and in Sacraments, on account of their outstanding efficacy for sanctifying and purifying.