

Virginia Synod Luther Studies 2016-17

The Leipzig Debate (LW 31: 313-325)

Introduction

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The Leipzig Debate was something of a debacle for Luther. He was lured into a trap set by Johannes Eck, who would go on to make a career out of persecuting Luther. Eck got Luther's vain colleague, Andreas von Karlstadt, to agree to debate, with Luther accompanying him. But Karlstadt was helpless without books to consult, even though in Luther's mind he bested Eck on the substance of the questions. But the unfriendly crowd in Leipzig could not think so. Still allied with Karlstadt, Luther could hardly admit openly that the learned colleague was losing the audience! But after a week, Luther could no longer silently sit by and joined the fray.

Eck had opposed first Karlstadt and then Luther on the question of indulgences and the related theological issues involved on the bondage of the sinner's will and hence the need for grace. When Luther had taken the bait and joined in the debate, Eck then switched. He conceded all the points on grace and merit and the unfreedom of the will, but accused Luther of renewing the heresy of Jan Hus in rejecting papal authority. Indeed, he got Luther to state openly for the first time that popes, councils and churches can err. Luther consequently viewed Eck as a deceitful enemy, driven by blind ambition rather than an academic theologian's love for truth.

Both characters in this little drama went on to play dramatic roles in Luther's career. Karlstadt, a psychologically troubled individual envious of Luther's rise to prominence, was captivated by the Zwickau prophets during Luther's tenure in hiding at the Wartburg. He joined the cause of the spiritualizing and anti-sacramental iconoclasts. Karlstadt adopted a theology of Biblical primitivism; abandoning his doctoral regalia and university teaching post, he tried to live as a commoner, advocating radical egalitarianism. Luther's significant treatise, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, which lays down the principle of the external Word that comes to the self from outside of the self to transform the self is in part directed against his erstwhile faculty colleague. After the Peasants War, Luther took into his own house a destitute Karlstadt and family, only to see the man wander off again into obscurity.

Eck, proud that he had trapped Luther into revealing the underlying presupposition of his theology as rejection of papal authority, took his case against Luther to Rome and was instrumental in getting the Bull of Excommunication drafted and approved and communicated back to Germany. Nor did Eck stop there. He prepared the way for the papal *Confutatio* at Augsburg in 1530 with his *404 Articles* of Lutheran heresy. He wrote to the Emperor in the months preceding the 1530 meeting in Augsburg: "Martin Luther, the Church's enemy within the Church, has refused to heed the admonitions addressed to him by your Majesty and hurled himself into a veritable whirlpool of godlessness: he calls the Pope of Rome the "anti-Christ," the Church a "harlot," the bishops "worms and idols," the schools of theology (*studia generalia*) "synagogues of Satan;" monasteries he calls "brothels," theologians "bats," secular princes "louse's eggs, fools, insane drunkards worse than the Turks"...He has fallen into a deep pit of despair; he blasphemes God; he has no reverence for saints or sacraments and no respect for ecclesiastical or secular magistrates..."

In the excerpt given below, Eck seized on the final 13th thesis as proof of Luther's Hussite heresy. Following that, we read Luther's account of the proceedings, which Luther calls a "tragedy" in the end. Luther published his account so that the world would see that on the issues he cared about and which had motivated the attack on indulgences, grace and human need, he and Karlstadt had won the debate. But the treacherous Eck had snatched his victory from this defeat by switching the subject to authority in the church.

The recently adopted ecumenical statement, *On the Way*, after describing all the remarkable progress in doctrinal convergence between Lutherans and Catholics, admits that on the question of papal authority we come to root convictions that have no immediate prospect of reconciliation. Undoubtedly that is true. In this "ecumenical winter," however, let us Lutherans not be content with this state of affairs. Our own house is not in order. As Bishop Easter wrote in a recent column,

In a recent survey of ELCA Lutherans, Kenneth Inskip, director for research and evaluation, asked the question: "What must you do to be saved?" Fifty percent answered: "Do good works." Fifty percent of Lutherans. At least half of us admit that, deep down, we believe it's still up to us. Let's not beat ourselves up-this isn't a Lutheran phenomenon, this is not an American phenomenon, this is not a 21st-century phenomenon-it's a human phenomenon. We either disbelieve for joy or don't want to give up control. This is precisely why we need well-trained confessional, scriptural, theological, liturgical, compassionate pastors and deacons: to keep us pointed to Jesus, to the law, to the cross, to the resurrection and away from the world's siren song of self-help, self-determination and self-righteousness. And this is precisely why we need confessional, scriptural, theological, liturgical, compassionate laypeople: so we "... fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it" (The Small Catechism)

To reflect the lesson of the Leipzig Debate one might put the Bishop's point this way: far too many Protestants affirm only the anti-Papal negative, not the affirmative of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. But one can be anti-Papal for all the wrong reasons.

Martin Luther will defend the following theses against new and old errors at the University of Leipzig.

1. Every man sins daily, but he also repents daily according to Christ's teaching, "Repent" [Matt. 4:17], possibly with the exception of a person who has just been made righteous and who does not need repentance, although the heavenly vinedresser daily prunes the fruit-bearing vines [Cf. John 15:1-2]
2. To deny that man sins even when doing good; that venial sin is pardonable, not according to its nature, but by the mercy of God; or that sin remains in the child after baptism; that is equivalent to crushing Paul and Christ under foot.
3. He who maintains that a good work and penance begin with the hatred of sins and prior to the love of righteousness and that one no longer sins in doing good work, him we number among the Pelagian heretics, but we also prove that this is a silly interpretation of his holy Aristotle.
4. God changes an eternal punishment into a temporary one, that is, the punishment of carrying the cross. Canons or priests have no power to burden one with the cross or to remove it, although deceived by harmful flatterers, they presume that they can do this.
5. Every priest should absolve the penitent of sin and guilt. He sins if he does not do so, as does a higher prelate if he hides secret matters without very good reason, though the usage of the church that is, of the flatterers, is opposed to this.
6. Perhaps the souls in purgatory do render satisfaction for their sins. It is brazen rashness, however, to assert that God demands more of a dying person than a willingness to die since in no way can this assertion be proven.
7. He who babbles about the free will being the master of good or evil deeds shows he does not know what faith, contrition, or free will are; nor does he know who imagines that he is not justified alone by faith in the Word, or that faith cannot be removed by a heinous sin.
8. It is contrary to truth and reason to state that those who die unwillingly are deficient in love and must therefore suffer the horror of purgatory, but only if truth and reason are the same as the opinions of the would-be theologians.
9. We are familiar with the assertion of would-be theologians that the souls in purgatory are certain of their salvation and that grace is no longer increased in them; but we marvel at these very learned men that they can offer the uneducated no cogent reason for this their faith.
10. It is certain that the merit of Christ is the treasure of the church and that this treasure is enhanced by the merits of the saints; but no one expect a filthy flatterer or one who strays from the truth and embraces certain false practices and usages of the church pretends that the merits of Christ are the treasure of indulgences.
11. To say that indulgences are a blessing for a Christian is insane, for they are in truth a hindrance to a good work; and a Christian must reject indulgences because of their abuse, for the Lord says, "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake" [Isa. 43:25], not for the sake of money.
12. Completely unlearned sophist and pestiferous flatters dream that the pope can remit every punishment owed for sins in this and the future life and that indulgences are helpful to those who are not guilty. But they cannot prove this with so much as a gesture.
13. The very feeble decrees of the Roman pontiffs which have appeared in the last four hundred years prove that the Roman church is superior to all others. Against them stand the history of eleven hundred years, the text of divine Scripture, and the decree of the Council of Nicea, the most sacred of all councils.

In the year 1519

LETTER FROM LUTHER TO SPALATIN CONCERNING THE LEIPZIG DEBATE

Wittenberg, July 20, 1519

To the Illustrious Georg Spalatin, Court Chaplain and Librarian of His Highness the Elector of Saxony, His Friend in Christ.

Greetings! That our highness the prince and you all have returned safely pleases me, my dear Spalatin. May Christ claim the soul of Pfeffinger, Amen. I should have written you long ago about our famous debate, but I did not know where or about what. Certain people of Leipzig, neither sincere nor upright, are celebrating victory with Eck. It is from this nonsense that rumor has spread, but the truth of the matter will not bring everything to light.

Almost at the very moment of our arrival, even before we had gotten out of our wagon, the Inhibition of the bishop of Merseburg was affixed to the doors of the churches to the effect that the debate should not be held, together with that newly published explanation concerning this matter of indulgences. This Inhibition was disregarded and the person who had posted it was thrown into jail by the city council because he had acted without its knowledge.

Since our enemies got nowhere with this trick, they tried another. Having called Andreas Karlstadt to meet alone with them, they tried hard to get him to agree to hold the debate orally, according to Eck's wishes, without stenographers taking down the proceedings in writing. Eck hoped that he might carry off the victory by his loud shouting and impressive delivery, means which he had long used to his advantage. Karlstadt, however, opposed this and insisted that they proceed according to a previous agreement, that is, that the statements of the disputants be written down by stenographers. Finally, to attain this, he was compelled to agree that the account of the debate made by the stenographers should not be published prior to a hearing by a court of judged.

At this point a new dispute arose over the choice of the judges. At length they compelled him also to consent to postpone coming to an agreement concerning the judges until after the debate had been concluded. Otherwise they did not wish to permit the debate. Thus they attacked us with the syllogistic horns of a dilemma, so that we should be confounded by both alternatives, whether we gave up the debate or placed the outcome into the hands of unfair judges. So you see how barbarous was their cunning, by means of which they robbed us of the freedom which had been agreed upon. For it is certain that the universities and the people will never make a pronouncement, or they would make one against us, and this is what they want.

The next day they called me to appear before them and proposed the same thing. Suspecting, however, the pope as the instigator of this procedure, I refused to accept these conditions, having been persuaded to do so by my colleagues. Then they proposed other universities as judges, without the pope. I requested that the freedom upon which we had agreed be respected. When they were unwilling to do this, I became reluctant and repudiated the debate. Then the rumor spread that I did not want to risk participating in the debate and, what is particularly unfair, that I wished to have no judges. All these accusations were hatefully and malignantly hurled at me and were interpreted in such a way that now they were turning even our best friends against us; and already permanent disgrace to our university was in prospect. After this, upon the advice of friends, I went to them and

indignantly accepted their conditions. I did this in such a way and with the exclusion of the Roman Curia so that my power of appeal would be safeguarded and my case would be not prejudged.

Eck and Karlstadt at first debated for seven days over the freedom of the will. With God's help Karlstadt advanced his arguments and explanations excellently and in great abundance from books which he had brought with him. Then when Karlstadt had also been given the opportunity of rebuttal, Eck refused to debate unless the books were left at home. Andreas [Karlstadt] had used the books to demonstrate to Eck's face that he had correctly quoted the words of Scripture and the church fathers that he had not done violence to them as Eck was now shown to have done. This marked the beginning of another uproar until at length it was decided to Eck's advantage that the books should be left at home. But who was not aware of the fact that if the debate were concerned with the cause of truth, it would be advisable to have all possible books at hand? Never did hatred and ambition show themselves more impudently than here.

Finally this deceitful man conceded everything that Karlstadt had asserted, although he had vehemently attacked it, and agreed with him in everything, boasting that he had led Karlstadt to his own way of thinking. He accordingly rejected Scotus and the Scotuists and Capreolus and the Thomists, as saying that all other scholastic had thought and taught the same as he. So Scotus and Capreolus toppled to the ground, together with their respective schools, the two celebrated divisions of scholasticism.

The next week Eck debated with me, at first very acrimoniously, concerning the primacy of the pope. His proof rested on the words "You are Peter..." [Matt. 16:18] and "Feed my sheep...follow me" [John 21:17, 22], and "strengthen your brethren" [Luke 22:32], adding to these passages many quotations from the church fathers. What I answered you will soon see. Then, coming to the last point, he rested his case entirely on the Council of Constance which had condemned Huss's article alleging that papal authority derived from the emperor instead of from God. Then Eck stamped about with much ado as though he were in an arena, holding up the Bohemians before me and publically accusing me of the heresy and support of the Bohemian heretics, for he is a sophist, no less impudent than rash. These accusations tickled the Leipzig audience more than the debate itself.

In rebuttal I brought up the Greek Christians during the past thousand years, and also the ancient church fathers, who had not been under the authority of the Roman pontiff, although I did not deny the primacy of honor due the pope. Finally we also debated the authority of a council. I publically acknowledged that some articles had been wrongly condemned [by the Council of Constance], articles which had been taught in plain and clear words by Paul, Augustine, and even Christ himself. At this point the adder swelled up, exaggerated my crime, and nearly went insane in his adulation of the Leipzig audience. Then I proved by words of the council itself that not all the articles which it condemned were actually heretical and erroneous. So Eck's proofs had accomplished nothing. There the matter rested.

The third week Eck and I debated penance, purgatory, indulgences, and the power of a priest to grant absolution, for Eck did not like to debate with Karlstadt and asked me to debate alone with him. The debate over indulgences fell completely flat, for Eck agreed with me in nearly all respects and his former defense of indulgences came to appear like mockery and derision, whereas I had hoped that this would be the main topic of the debate. He finally acknowledged his position in public sermons so that even the common people could see that he was not concerned with

indulgences. He also is supposed to have said that if I had not questioned the power of the pope, he would readily have agreed with me in all matters. Then he said to Karlstadt, "If I could agree with Martin in as many points as I do with you, I could be his friend." He is such a fickle and deceitful person that he is ready to do anything. Whereas he conceded to Karlstadt that all the scholastics agreed in their teaching, in debating with me he rejected Gregory of Rimini as one who alone supported my opinion against all other scholastics. Thus he does not seem to consider it wrong to affirm and deny the same thing at different times. The people of Leipzig do not see this, so great is their stupidity. Much more fantastic was the following: He conceded one thing in the disputation hall but taught the people the opposite in church. When confronted by Karlstadt with the reason for his changeableness, the man answered without blinking an eye that it was not necessary to teach the people that which was debatable.

When I had concluded my part of the disputation, Eck debated once more with Karlstadt on new topics during the last three days, again making concessions in all points, agreeing that it is sin to do that which is in one, that free will without grace can do nothing but sin, that there is sin in every good work, and that it is grace itself which enables man to do what is in him in preparing for the reception of grace. All these things the scholastics deny. Therefore virtually nothing was treated in the manner which it deserved except my thirteenth thesis. Meanwhile Eck is pleased with himself, celebrates his victory, and rules the roost; but he will do so only until we have published our side of the debate. Because the debate turned out badly, I shall republish my Explanations Concerning the Value of Indulgences.

The citizens of Leipzig neither greeted nor called on us but treated us as though we were their bitterest enemies. Eck, however, they followed around town, clung to, banqueted, entertained, and finally presented with a robe and added a chamois-hair gown. They also rode horseback with him. In short, they did whatever they could to insult us. Furthermore they persuaded Caesar Pflug [the official host] and the prince [Duke George] that this pleased all concerned. One thing they did for us; they honored us, according to custom, with a drink of wine, which it would not have been safe for them to overlook. Those who were well disposed towards us, on the other hand, came to us in secret. Yet Dr. Auerbach, a very fair and just man, and Pistorius the younger, professor in ordinary, invited us. Even Duke George invited the three of us together on one occasion.

The most illustrious prince also called me to visit him alone and talked with me at length about my writings, especially my exposition of the Lord's Prayer. He stated that the Bohemians were greatly encouraged by me and also that with my Lord's Prayer I had caused confusion among many conscientious people who complained that they would not be able to pray one Lord's Prayer in four days if they were compelled to listen to me, and much of a similar nature. But I was not so dull that I could not distinguish between the pipe and the piper. I was grieved that such a wise and pious prince as open to the influence of others and followed their opinions, especially when I saw and experienced how like a prince he spoke when he spoke his own thoughts.

The most recent exhibition of hatred was this: When on the day of Peter and Paul [June 29] I was summoned by our lord rector, the duke of Pomerania, to preach a sermon before his grace in the chapel of the castle, the report of this quickly filled the city, and men and women gathered in such numbers that I was compelled to preach in the debating hall, where all our professors and hostile

observers had been stationed by invitation. The Gospel for this day [Matt. 16:13-19] clearly embraces both subjects of the debate. I got little thanks from the people of Leipzig.

Then Eck, stirred up against me, preached four sermons in different churches, publicly twisting and cutting into pieces what I had said. The would-be theologians had urged him to do this. No further opportunity was given me to preach, however, no matter how many people requested it. I could be accused and incriminated but not cleared. This is the way my enemies also acted in the debate, so that Eck, even though he represented the negative, always had the last word, which I did not have an opportunity to refute.

Finally, when Caesar Pflug heard that I had preached (he had not been present), he said, "I wish that Dr. Martin had saved his sermon for Wittenberg." In short, I have experienced hatred before, but never more shameless or more impudent.

So here you have the whole tragedy. Dr. Hohannes Plawnitzer will tell you the rest, for he himself was also present and helped not a little in preventing the debate from being a complete fiasco. Since Eck and the people of Leipzig sought their own glory and not the truth at the debate, it is no wonder that it began badly and ended worse. Whereas we had hoped for harmony between the people of Wittenberg and Leipzig, they acted so hatefully that I fear that it will seem that discord and dislike were actually born here. This is the fruit of human glory. I, who really restrain my impetuosity, am still not able to dispel all dislike of them, for I am flesh and their hatred was very shameless and their injustice was very malicious in a matter so sacred and divine.

Farewell and commend me to the most illustrious prince

Your

Martin Luther

Wednesday, July 20, 1519.

I met the honorable Vicar Staupitz in Grimma