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ANDREAS BODENSTEIN VON KARLSTADT AND MARTIN LUTHER: IT'S COMPLICATED

By Stryder Matthews

The Reformation was undoubtedly a period of great tumult. It was more surprising when two individuals, who were so closely connected, who seemed to have had similar theological backgrounds and were in fact allies from the start fought in a grand and vehement manner. Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and Martin Luther were these such men. The divide between these two was primarily a result of Luther's consistent misunderstanding of Karlstadt and his conservative shift upon his return to Wittenberg in 1522. Though the men disagreed over issues such as the practice of the Eucharist, the method of salvation, the manner in which God works, and a vast number of minor points, none were primarily responsible for their divide. Rather, circumstantial and historical difficulties, particularly the German Peasant's War, combined with Luther's attempts to moderate the path of reform, were the cause of their complicated and harsh relationship.

The understanding of the Karlstadt-Luther debate forwarded in this paper stands in opposition to the contention of historian Ronald J. Sider in *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate*. He framed Luther and Karlstadt in liberal-radical terms. He emphasized the primacy of strategic debate and attempts to amalgamate many theological disputes as being, fundamentally, strategic.¹ Embedded in this understanding of the Karlstadt-Luther relationship was that Karlstadt had to be a radical reformer while Luther was liberal. Sider did attempt to soften the strict view of Karlstadt as a radical reformer which had been present within most historiography, however, Karlstadt fell under that umbrella nonetheless. Essentially, the idea of a "Radical Reformer" was a strict dismissal of authority in favor of more absolute adherence to some given doctrine, i.e. Müntzer in his upheaval of social order for the sake of bringing about ecclesiastical change. In contrast to the radical reformer was the conservative who generally sought to enact change by means of the system in place, i.e. Erasmus who pursued improvement within the Catholic Church as opposed to outside of it. Additionally, the liberal reformer generally attempted to create change without the upheaval of a system but by altering it significantly. The liberal title fit Karlstadt who considerably changed

¹ Ronald J. Sider, "Conclusion: The Perennial Debate," in *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther*, 157.

the actions of the Church without abolishing the connection to the Catholic Church entirely. In light of this, Karlstadt was certainly liberal. In 1524, Karlstadt penned his “doctrine of change” so to speak: *Whether One Should Proceed Slowly, and Avoid Offending the Weak in Matters that Concern God’s Will*. His answer to this question was a strict “no”. This came about as a result of Luther’s attempts to moderate the many changes in Wittenberg during his absence.



Karlstadt in the 1540s

Karlstadt did, however, enact one radical reform. In line with his new theology, on January 1, 1522 Karlstadt led a mass with all partaking of the wine in addition to the bread.² Previously, the laity took only the bread while the clergy took both. He even spoke the mass in German and offered the bread and the cup to the laity themselves, letting them take hold of it in their occasionally shaky hands. Nervousness and tension mounted in this event where apparently even one man “dropped his wafer and was too terror-stricken to pick it up.”³ The sacrosanct status of the Eucharist made such a slip-up absolutely horrifying. This was nothing new, however, since as early as 1520 Luther himself had called for these exact reforms (those being the use of German and the cup being given also to the laity).⁴ Also in 1522, Karlstadt further attacked images and ordained a sort of iconoclasm. “It is good, necessary, laudable, and godly to do away with [images],”⁵ and he enforced this reform consistently within Wittenberg.

At the same time, a general unease throughout Saxony arose alongside Karlstadt’s developments, accompanied by rioting and occasional violence. Although Wittenberg was not a hotbed of such activity, Frederick the Wise considered it wise to bring Luther back.⁶ Upon Luther’s return he quickly

² Carter Lindberg, “Conflicting Models of Ministry-Luther, Karlstadt, and Muentzer,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (October 1977): 40.

³ Ronald J. Sider, “Karlstadt as Reformer: The Sermon for the First Evangelical Eucharist,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 5-6.

⁴ Amy Nelson Burnett, *Karlstadt and the Origins of the Eucharistic Controversy: A Study in the Circulation of Ideas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 40.

⁵ Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt, “On the Removal of Images,” in *The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen Tracts*, 102.

⁶ Carter Lindberg, “Conflicting Models of Ministry-Luther, Karlstadt, and Muentzer,” 40-41.

preached eight sermons in an attempt to stem the tide of radicalism that had grown within Wittenberg. He spoke of having “patience with [our brother’s] weakness and help him bear it,”⁷ and espoused an intent to talk and reach man’s ears in these matters, but only to talk, giving “free course to the Word and not add[ing] our works to it.”⁸ He essentially sought to prod men with his words in the hope of opening their hearts to the work of God but not to force upon them certain actions, as he saw outward acts to have little prescriptive benefit. To thus act as Karlstadt had was to impede the reformation of the heart, and fail to truly pierce the core of the issue and instead push away and attempt to do what only God can do. This rebuttal displayed a crucial difference in their understanding of faith formation and showed a marked conservative shift in Luther’s path to reform, seeking change within the church as it was through conviction, not systemic change.

After 1524, there was little chance for reconciliation of these reformer’s further actions. Karlstadt unequivocally stated “each one should do what God commands, even if the whole world hesitates and does not want to follow.”⁹ He continued; “again, may I blaspheme God as long as the others do not stop blaspheming?”¹⁰ He even attacked Luther’s idea of brotherly love as justification for patience as equivalent to failing to take a knife from a child. “Their love is like the love of a crazy mother who allows her children to go their own way – and to end on the gallows.”¹¹ His opposition was consistently vehement, displaying a deep-seated conviction and fear of all that he perceived to be against God. He denied any distinction between what was required and what was good for an individual, which Luther put forward in his Eight Sermons.¹² Karlstadt saw all of these acts as absolutely necessary for the preservation of the soul. This split was deeply rooted and theologically motivated despite being technically about strategy. Even more so, Luther was shifting to a far more conservative strategy of gradual change, while Karlstadt stuck to a liberal mode of reform.

⁷ Martin Luther, “The First Sermon, March 9, 1522, Invocavit Sunday”, in “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 19.

⁸ Martin Luther, “The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit,” in “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 22.

⁹ Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, “Whether One Should Proceed Slowly,” in *The Radical Reformation*, 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 52.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 65.

¹² Martin Luther, “The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit,” in “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 22.

A primary issue between Luther and Karlstadt was the handling of the Holy Eucharist. The Catholic position was preoccupied with the Eucharist as “the essence of stability of social order and of dominant ideology,”¹³ and was ever important which perhaps can help to explain why these discussions were so absolutely inflamed. The theology of the Catholic Eucharist essentially was transubstantiation, which ascribed to the bread and the wine the real presence of Christ. A genuine miracle occurred, and the bread and wine were literally transformed. This also entailed a result which Karlstadt, particularly, attacked. With the doctrine of transubstantiation and the ever-growing importance of this sacrament, the wine was no longer given to the laity for fear of spilling and potentially trampling upon the literal blood of Christ.¹⁴ As previously noted, Karlstadt acted quickly to begin giving the wine to the laity as well.

Karlstadt argued against the current papal position and considered it beyond repair: “In sum, everything is perverted: word, manner, work, fruit, and use of the mass.”¹⁵ He intended to scrap the custom and instead sought “the place where [the sacrament] springs from the ground.”¹⁶ What then was this source according to Karlstadt? Early on in 1521, while Luther was still in hiding after his close call at the Diet of Worms, Karlstadt enacted the first “Evangelical Eucharist.” His sermon revealed his theology and he declared “faith makes God’s Word useful,”¹⁷ affirmed “faith alone makes us holy and righteous,”¹⁸ and strongly emphasized throughout the power of the sacrament to forgive sins.¹⁹

At this time was Luther justified in his later opposition to Karlstadt? Perhaps on one point. Karlstadt did attack oral confession in a somewhat

¹³ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 350.

¹⁴ Miri Rubin, 70-71.

¹⁵ Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, *The Eucharistic Pamphlets of Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, ed. by Amy Nelson Burnett, (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2015), 51.

¹⁶ Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, “On Both Forms in the Holy Mass, On Signs in General and What they Effect and Signify, Those Who Receive Both Forms are Not Bohemians or Heretics but Evangelical Christians,” in *The Eucharistic Pamphlets of Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, 51.

¹⁷ Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, “A Sermon of Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt at Wittenberg Concerning the Reception of the Holy Sacrament,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-15.

surprisingly vitriolic manner. "It is nothing other than the devil's trick and the Antichrist's hovel when the word of the cup does not carry as much weight with one as the invented form of a miserable priest [oral confession]." ²⁰ After Luther's return he preached on this particular point and essentially reached the conclusion that confession was far from an abominable thing. Though he would not compel any individual into it, neither would he take it from anyone. ²¹ However, this is an ancillary point as Luther never engaged Karlstadt on the question of confession though it could have reinforced Luther's disagreement with Karlstadt.

Onto this initial conception of the Eucharist, what was their point of contention? Luther's theology on this point was certifiably difficult to truly unearth but perhaps with a few major points, a workable outline can be created. For one, he emphasized the power of the Word of Institution. "Who is worthy to receive the sacrament? Those who are moved by the Word to believe the sacrament's promises." ²² In this point there did not seem to be significant differences. Worthiness as derived from understanding and belief was directly what Karlstadt discussed. His mentions of faith alone also find reverberance in Luther's own theology. "The doctrine of justification is nothing else than faith," ²³ and this doctrine of justification was the Eucharist and its use. By 1522, there was no significant and apparent difference in their actions or theology, except in Luther's growing concern over the perceived radicalism of Wittenberg.

Over time, however, divergence did begin to occur. Luther is well known for his consideration of the Eucharist as consubstantiation. He believed in the universal God, existing in all areas at all times, but considered the sacrament a time when Christ is "especially concentrated in the Eucharist," ²⁴ although the bread and wine continue to exist in tandem. Here Karlstadt had some genuine divergences from Luther. This distinction was most apparent in 1524 with his tract of the *Misuse of the Lord's Bread and Cup*. In this, Karlstadt

²⁰ "A Sermon of Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt at Wittenberg Concerning the Reception of the Holy Sacrament," 14.

²¹ Martin Luther, "The Eighth Sermon, March 16, 1522, Remiscere Sunday" in "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg," in *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther*, 34-35.

²² Thomas J. Davis, "'The Truth of Divine Words': Luther's Sermons on the Eucharist, 1521-1528, and the Structure of Eucharistic Meaning," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 2, (Summer 1999): 327.

²³ Paul Althus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1966), 225.

²⁴ Chris Thornhill, *German Political Philosophy: The Metaphysics of Law*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 38.

distinguished the sacrament and the body of Christ as two wholly distinct elements, purporting the sacrament not as the object of salvation, but rather the vehicle of remembrance of this salvation. It was a symbolic Eucharist, one which did not save but pointed to what saves, and was in this way not the body and blood of Christ, nor was there anything spiritually imbibed in the bread and wine.²⁵ This was a clear and marked distinction between Luther and Karlstadt, and on this point their debate grew vehement. After this tract and subsequent writings on the Eucharist by Karlstadt, Luther, in 1525, penned a letter which truly showed the depth of their divide. “Doctor Andreas Karlstadt has deserted us, and on top of that has become our worst enemy.”²⁶ This rift was devastating towards their already tenuous relationship.

The Eucharistic conflict, however, was not limited to Karlstadt and Luther but appeared throughout the Reformation period as a common theme. Luther later had a “shouting match” at Marburg with Zwingli in 1529, wherein the argument was over the Eucharist as purely symbolic or still as a genuine piece of Christ’s body and blood.²⁷ This issue even brought in Martin Bucer, a contemporary Reformer, who was relatively prolific in his attempts to subdue the issue and had organized the Marburg Colloquy just mentioned. Bucer was far less concerned with the matter, saying, “leave disputing, love one another, until you become sanctified.”²⁸ The fight between transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or symbolic Eucharist in its many forms was central to the Reformation. Luther and Karlstadt existed in a much wider conflict that was a fundamental theological sticking point for many reformers and thus begat heated debate all across the Reformation.

Although Karlstadt was intensely involved in the Eucharist debate, peculiar to him was his frequent admonition of the laity and his identification with them, although in a more protective sense. He viewed himself “as the

²⁵ Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, “Concerning the Anti-Christian Misuse of the Lord’s Bread and Cup Whether Faith in the Sacrament Forgives Sin; and Whether the Sacrament is an Arrabo or Pledge of the Forgiveness of Sin. Exegesis of the Eleventh Chapter of the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, Concerning the Lord’s Supper,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 74-91.

²⁶ Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 94.

²⁷ B. A. Gerrish, “Discerning the Body: Sign and Reality in Luther’s Controversy with the Swiss,” *The Journal of Religion* 68, no. 3 (July 1998): 378.

²⁸ Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 65.

shepherd, angrily and lovingly concerned for his sheep.”²⁹ Neil R. Leroux, in considering the rhetoric of Karlstadt’s Evangelical Mass described “Karlstadt’s role as the *people’s prophet*,” his turn of phrase painting him in a role which is of the people and in assistance rather than on the outside.³⁰ It was perhaps no surprise that he was considered to be in some way culpable for the Peasant Revolts. The initial indictment of this activity came from Luther himself and was a good exemplar of how their relationship played out. Luther often spoke of the “rebellious spirit” of Müntzer and Karlstadt alike which seemed to have been the primary factor leading up to the Confrontation at the Black Bear Inn. This incident occurred shortly after Luther’s Eight Sermons at Wittenberg in which Luther repeatedly indicted Karlstadt and his teachings. Soon after they agreed to meet at the Black Bear for a brief discussion in which not much was said but quite a few feelings were hurt. Thankfully, an anonymous individual took consistent notes on the event and provided a compelling account.³¹ Karlstadt began: “For today in your sermon, Mr. Doctor [Luther], you attacked me somewhat severely and you interwove me in one number and work with the riotous murdering spirits, as you call them.”³² This was a clear refusal by Karlstadt to be thought of in tandem with Müntzer and the Peasant Revolts.

Luther’s amalgamating of his many opponents in one broad stroke was not peculiar to Karlstadt, rather, it was a consistent black mark on Luther’s actions. He frequently attacked all his opponents in one motion displaying an odd sort of metaphysical assumption about them. Luther had a notion that all his opponents were under the same satanic spirit, which speaks to his belief that he was engaged in a spiritual struggle against the devil’s work. This enabled him to decry of the spirit of his opponents rather than in engaging their arguments more specifically.³³ This issue displayed prominently in his attacks on Karlstadt particularly when combining his position with the rebellious spirit of Müntzer.

Karlstadt dealt directly with the accusations of his involvement with Allstedt at length in his *Apology by Dr. Andreas Carlstadt Regarding the False*

²⁹ Peter Matheson, *Rhetoric of the Reformation* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 67.

³⁰ Neil R. Leroux, “Karlstadt’s Christag Predig: Prophetic Rhetoric in an ‘Evangelical’ Mass,” *Church History* 72, no. 1 (March 2003): 135.

³¹ Ronald J. Sider, “Confrontation at the Black Bear,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 36-37.

³² Anonymous, “What Dr. Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt Talked Over with Dr. Martin Luther at Jena, and How They Have Decided to Write against Each Other,” in *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate*, 40.

³³ Mark U. Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 58-59.

Charge of Insurrection which has Unjustly Been Made against Him; Allstedt having been the town in which Thomas Müntzer's peasant uprisings began which so disconcerted Luther and many other reformers. He had been "accused of the uprising in Allstedt and of several others, as if [he] had been the leader and captain of the rebellious peasants."³⁴ Within this he explained the circumstances of his life during these revolts and attempted to prove his innocence. He also discussed his revilement at Müntzer. "How I cursed Müntzer's folly and made known what disaster would come of it ... and that the gospel would suffer irreparable damage ...!"³⁵ He decried Müntzer on all accounts, considering his work a folly, although not without a little grief having preferred to say nothing ill towards a brother. This assessment could, however, be colored by Karlstadt having been at Luther's mercy at this point, the apology being written in 1525.

Turning back a brief moment in time to 1524, Karlstadt wrote a letter to Allstedt, Müntzer's center of unrest, rebuking his attempts to forge some sort of alliance on behalf of the congregation of Orlamünde. Within it, Karlstadt explicitly states "we cannot help you with armed resistance,"³⁶ dismissing any attempts to forge some sort of violent pact. Karlstadt demonstrates, despite his frequent iconoclasm and disdain of moving slowly, it was not to be done through armed resistance. He cited Jesus' command to Peter to sheath his sword (Matthew 26:52), and insisted the people of Allstedt seek not to fight with arms but with faith, prayer, and deference to God and find defense through those means.³⁷

This absolute resistance to extreme methods of religious change demonstrated the strength of Karlstadt's will in opposing highly radical paths of reformation. Luther was undoubtedly mistaken in his ascribing a rebellious spirit to Karlstadt, much more so in having believed he was in some way complicit in Müntzer's rebellion. Their disputes were often obfuscated by the tumult of the day. However, it does not follow that the confusion of the day completely undermined Karlstadt and Luther's mutual understanding. These men had

³⁴ Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt, "Apology by Dr. Andreas Carlstadt Regarding the False Charge of Insurrection Which Has Unjustly Been Made Against Him," in *The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen Tracts*, 379.

³⁵Ibid, 380.

³⁶ Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt, "Letter from the Community in Orlamünde to the People of Allstedt," in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. by Michael G. Baylor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 33.

³⁷ Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt, "Letter from the Community in Orlamünde to the People of Allstedt," in *The Radical Reformation*, 33-34.

known each other well and were familiar with each other's theologies. If anything, Luther's misunderstanding of Karlstadt's position among radicals betrays his failure to fully understand his strategy. If Luther could not ascertain why it would be inconsistent for Karlstadt to support the Peasant Revolts, and it certainly would have been, strategy could not have been central to their debate. It was only central insofar as Luther misunderstood Karlstadt.

The final question arises yet again: over what did these two relatively similar reformers oppose each other? Ultimately, it was less about the *what* and more about the *why*. The various issues Karlstadt and Luther disagreed on were relatively minimal and, barring the Eucharist, were far more similar than opposed. The largest issue at hand was Luther's conservative shift upon his return to Wittenberg. Further than that, however, was an issue which Richard A. Beinert described as a "mutual rejection of each other's views concerning the process of faith formation," as he emphasized their understanding of their reform in the context of shaping the "basic pattern of Christian spirituality."³⁸ Thus, they disagreed on their basic conception of what reform ought to mean in practice. Beyond this, however, was the broader issue of Luther fundamentally misunderstanding Karlstadt's relationship with the German Peasant's War. As such, the relationship between Luther and Karlstadt can only be characterized as complicated. It was two men within a whirlwind of change, doubt, and concern over the very salvation of man's soul mixed with fear of the Catholic Church and the radicalized peasantry.

³⁸ Richard A. Beinert, "Another Look at Luther's Battle with Karlstadt," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (April 2009): 170.