

The Road to the Reformation

Step Four

The Leipzig Disputation of 1519

After Luther's acerbic meeting with Cardinal Cajetan, a number of people worked to bring about an acceptable compromise that would end the indulgence controversy. Luther's lord, the Elector Frederick the Wise wanted peace and compromise and so did the papal diplomat Karl von Miltitz (c1490-1529). The problem was that the Pope and many people around him were not inclined to make accommodations with people who opposed them. Luther's ideas also had struck a chord with the many Germans who were anti-papal and anti-Italian. Still Luther attempted to work with Frederick the Wise and von Miltitz. The problem was that other people were continuing to stir up the indulgences debate and the issue of papal authority.

Two people helped to escalate the conflict over Luther's ideas and both were friends of his. One was Johannes Eck (1486-1543) and the other was Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1480-1541). Eck was a professor of theology at the University of Ingolstadt and a rising star of the academic world in Germany. As fellow academics, Luther and Eck had been friends for a number of years. Karlstadt was both a friend of Luther's and colleague. He was dean of the faculty of theology at the University of Wittenberg which meant he was Luther's superior. After the appearance of the Ninety-Five Theses, Karlstadt had evolved into being an enthusiastic supporter of Luther.

By 1518, Eck's friendship toward Luther had cooled and he began to oppose Luther. Initially Eck's opposition manifested itself in a pamphlet debate with Andreas Karlstadt. The two men were at odds over the role of grace in the salvation of humans and the nature of free will. Luther had been serving as a mediator between the two men, but Eck wanted to draw Luther into the argument. So on 14 March 1519, he directly criticized Luther. Eck also raised the issues of papal primacy which Luther was coming to oppose. This action brought Luther into the dispute as Karlstadt's partner. It also took Luther's attention away from trying to work with von Miltitz for a reconciliation and compromise with the Pope.

The debate between Eck on the one side and Luther and Karlstadt on the other was scheduled to take place in Leipzig, the capital of Ducal Saxony where Duke George ruled. Duke George had been sitting on the fence as to whether to support Luther or the Pope at this time, but he was leaning toward the Pope. He gave Karlstadt a safe conduct pass to come to Leipzig but waited until the last moment to give Luther a similar pass.

Eck and Karlstadt began the debate on 27 June. It would continue until 15 July lasting for two and a half weeks. Eck was a great debater and far quicker verbally than Karlstadt. Luther took over from Karlstadt and debated with Eck from 4 to 14 July. Eck argued that the pope held his power as head of the church by divine right. Luther disagreed. He stated that Christ alone was head of the Church and that the papacy was an institution established by human laws and traditions. Luther based his

assertions on scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the facts of church history. Additionally he disagreed that popes could formulate new articles of faith.

Eck's biggest strategy was to discredit his opponents by labeling them as heretics. In a clever maneuver, he tricked Luther into defending some of the ideas of Jan Hus, the leader of an early fifteenth century religious movement in Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. The Council of Constance in 1415 had condemned Hus's ideas as heretical and burned him at the stake. Germans continued to dislike Hus and his followers as heretics. But they disliked the Bohemians because Hussite armies had devastated parts of Germany in retaliation for the burning of Hus. By associating Luther with Hus, it was an attempt to make Luther look bad both as a true Christian and as a German. In addition, Luther in supporting some of Hus's ideas had rejected the authority of church councils to judge doctrinal disputes. Not only was Luther challenging papal primacy, he was challenging the authority of general councils of the Church.

Eck won the debate or battle at Leipzig on the rhetorical level. But he lost the war of words at the political level because most Germans liked Luther's attacks on the papacy and indulgences. Luther's theology became more popular than ever. As a result Eck advocated the excommunication of Luther by the Pope in Rome. Excommunicating Luther, however, would only serve to further aggravate the growing split in the Catholic Church and would goad Luther into taking a more radical stand on his idea. That is exactly what happened during 1520.