

A STUDY OF THE

Protestant Reformation

1517 - 2017

The 500th Anniversary





Introduction: Part 12

On July 4, 1519, the disputation between Johann Eck and Martin Luther commenced. The preparations were complete, and the Pleissenburg Palace Hall, with facing pulpits, tapestry-decorated chairs, and mounted portraits of St. Martin and St. George, was astir with dignitaries, theologians, students, and watchful guards. Since June 27, the beginning of the disputation, Wittenberg professor Andrew Carlstadt had been engaged with Johann Eck on the subjects of free will and divine grace. Eck had “strained every nerve to appear the conqueror,” but Luther reported that Eck “had commenced the battle with so many bravados, abandoned his standard, deserted his army, and became a shameless runaway.”



Introduction

Even before the Leipzig Disputation began, Luther had set a serious tone for the debate by responding to Eck's thirteen theses and lifting everyone's eyes away from mere mortals – as accomplished as Eck and Luther were - and pointing to God's eternal and unchanging plan: "This man calls Carlstadt his antagonist, and at the same time attacks me. But God reigns. He knows what He will bring out of this tragedy. It is neither Doctor Eck nor myself that will be at stake: God's purpose will be accomplished. Thanks to Eck, this affair, which hitherto has been mere play, will become serious, and inflict a deadly blow on the tyranny of Rome and of the Roman pontiff."



Introduction

I will commit an anachronism by saying that it would have been a memorable moment if Johann Eck could have been addressed before the disputation by the great twentieth-century theologian, Carl F.H. Henry. “Dr. Eck, ‘man is made to know and love and serve God and, under God, is to reclaim the earth and mankind for the Creator’s holy purposes. Only if man lives in the light of this **scriptural perspective** can he **escape ensnarement by ancient or modern myths.**’” Solomon, in all of his wisdom, would have agreed with Luther and Henry: “To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue” (Prov. 16:1). “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails” (Prov. 19:21).



Introduction

But for now, let's return to the Pleissenburg Palace Hall. The stage is set. Historian Merle D'Aubigne records that "the two combatants entered the arena resolved not to lay down their arms until victory declared in favor of one or the other....These combatants, both sons of peasants, and the representatives of the two tendencies that still divide Christendom, were about to enter upon a contest on which depended, in great measure, the future prospect of the State and of the Church."



A List of Dignitaries at the Disputation

- **Duke George the Bearded** (1471-1539), Duke of Saxony
- **Prince John**, heir to Duke George
- **Duke of Pomerania**, Bogislaw X (1454-1523)
- **Prince George of Anhalt**, then twelve years old (1507-1553); he was a student at the University of Leipzig; Luther ordained him into the ministry in Merseburg on August 2, 1545
- **Peter Schade Mosellanus** (1493-1524); opened the Disputation
- **Andreas Rudolph Bodenstein von Karlstadt**, Wittenberg University professor and friend of Luther
- **Johann Eck** and **Martin Luther**, along with counts, abbots, & knights



Leipzig Disputation

By Julius Hübner (1806-1882)

Oil on linen

New Masters Gallery, Dresden

Halberds at the Disputation

- 76 citizens were armed with halberds.
- “A military weapon, especially in use during the 15th and 16th centuries; a kind of combination of spear and battle-axe, consisting of a sharp-edged blade ending in a point, and a spear-head, mounted on a handle five to seven feet long” (OED).





July 4, 7:00 am

- Luther began: “In the name of the Lord, Amen! I declare that the respect I bear to the sovereign pontiff would have prevented my entering upon this discussion, if the excellent Dr. Eck had not dragged me into it.”
- Eck: “In thy name, gentle Jesus! Before descending into the lists (taking part in a contest or argument), I protest before you, most noble lords, that all that I may say is in submission to the judgment of the first of all sees, and of him who is its possessor.”





The Subject of the Debate

- The topic to be debated was the legitimacy of “papal primacy” or “papal authority.”
- “To what extent,” writes Leonardo de Chirico, “can the papacy as an institution be traced back to the Bible?”
- Was Peter the first pope?
- When Jesus said, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church” (Mt. 16:18), was He establishing an hierarchical organization with Peter as the head? “This text is deemed to be the cornerstone of the biblical doctrine of the papacy, and is the foundation of the doctrinal and ecclesiastical development that shaped the papacy as we now know it” (de Chirico).

Duke George's Court Fool

Someone said to the court fool: "Luther maintains that a court-fool may marry, while Eck says that he cannot." The fool greatly disliked Eck, and every time he entered the hall in the duke's train, "he looked at the theologian with a threatening air. The Chancellor of Ingolstadt, who was not above indulging in buffoonery, closed one eye (the fool was blind in one eye) and with the other began to squint at the little gentleman, who, losing his temper, overwhelmed the doctor with abuse." The whole assembly burst into laughter.



Eck Begins the Debate



Johann Eck
1486-1543

“There is in the Church of God a primacy that cometh from Christ himself. The Church militant was formed in the image of the Church triumphant. Now, the latter is a monarchy in which the hierarchy ascends step by step up to God, its sole chief. For this reason Christ has established a similar order upon earth. What a monster the Church would be if it were without a head!”



Luther's Response

“When Dr. Eck declares that the universal Church must have a head, he says well. If there is any one among us who maintains the contrary, let him stand up! As for me, it is no concern of mine....The head of the Church militant is Christ himself, and not a man. I believe this on the testimony of God's Word. ‘He must reign,’ says Scripture, ‘until He has put all His enemies under His feet’ (I Cor. 15:25). Let us not listen to those who banish Christ to the Church triumphant in heaven. His kingdom is a kingdom of faith. We cannot see our Head, and yet we have one.”



A Summary of Arguments

- **Eck:** St. Cyprian (200-258 AD) claimed unity proceeded from Rome.
- **Luther:** Isn't Jerusalem the "nursing mother of all the churches?"
- **Eck:** Jerome (347-420 AD) said if an extraordinary power, superior to all others, were not given to the pope, there would be as many sects as there were pontiffs.
- **Luther:** Yes, but even if every believer consented to the pope, his power would still be conceded by *human right* (not *divine right*).
- **Luther:** "Even in our own days, does not the Greek Church refuse its assent to Rome?"



A Summary of Arguments

- At this point, Luther denied the pope had authority by divine right. It was not until much later that he denied that submission was due to him in any way. This happened as a result of the Leipzig Debate.
- Both of them argued from the Church Fathers, but all those in the hall were “struck with Luther’s superiority over his rival.”
- Luther then turned toward the church councils, “which consider the Bishop of Rome as only the first among his peers.”
- **Luther:** “We read in the decree of the Council of Africa, that “the bishop of the first see shall neither be called prince of the pontiffs, nor sovereign pontiff, nor by any other name of that kind; but only bishop of the first see.”



A Summary of Arguments

- **Eck:** “The bishop of Rome, if you will have it so, is not universal bishop, but bishop of the universal church.”
- **Luther:** “ I shall make no reply to this: let our hearers form their own opinion of it. Certainly this is an explanation very worthy of a theologian, and calculated to satisfy a disputant who thirsts for glory. It is not for nothing, it seems , that I have remained at great expense at Leipzig, since I have learned that the pope is not, in truth, the universal bishop, but the bishop of the universal Church!”
- **Eck:** “I will prove it by this expression of Christ: *Thou art Peter, and on this rock will I build my Church.*”



A Summary of Arguments

- **Eck** (after Luther appeals to St. Augustine): “I am surprised at the humility and modesty with which the reverend doctor undertakes to oppose, alone, so many illustrious Fathers, and pretends to know more than the sovereign pontiffs, the councils, the doctors, and the universities! It would be surprising, no doubt, if God had hidden the truth from so many saints and martyrs – until the advent of the reverend father!”
- **Luther**: “The Fathers are not against me....Let my opponent then set a curb upon his tongue. To express himself as he does, will only serve to excite contention, and not be to discuss like a true doctor.”



A Summary of Arguments

- At this point, Eck had “no idea that his opponent’s learning was so extensive, and that he would be able to extricate himself from the toils that were drawn around him.” [**Toils:** net or nets forming an enclosed area into which a hunted quarry is driven].
- **Eck:** “The reverend doctor has come well armed into the lists. I beg your lordships to excuse me, if I do not exhibit such accuracy of research. I came here to discuss, and not to make a book.”
- At this point, Eck had no more arguments. But he had a malicious trick up his sleeve which would at least embarrass Luther – if not beat him. He would accuse him of being connected to John Huss.



A Summary of Arguments

- Hus was a Bohemian and was condemned by the Council of Constance (1414-1418) to be burned at the stake because of his doctrinal views. To insinuate that Luther and Huss were of one mind would inflict a terrible blow on Luther.
- **Eck:** “From the earliest times, all good Christians have acknowledged that the Church of Rome derives its primacy direct from Christ himself, and not from human right. I must confess, however, that the Bohemians, while they obstinately defended their errors, attacked this doctrine. I beg the worthy father’s pardon, if I am an enemy of the Bohemians, because they are enemies of the Church, and if the present discussion has called these heretics to my recollection; for in my humble opinion, the doctor’s conclusions are in every way favorable to these errors.”



A Summary of Arguments

- **Luther** (at two in the afternoon): “Among the articles of faith held by John Huss and the Bohemians, there are some that are most Christian. This is a positive certainty. Here, for instance, is one: ‘That there is but one universal Church’; and here is another: ‘It is not necessary for salvation to believe the Roman Catholic Church superior to all others.’ It is of little consequence to me whether these things were said by Wycliffe or by Huss...They are truth.”
- **Duke George:** “He is carried away by rage!”
- “The impression produced on Duke George’s mind by these words was never effaced (erased); from this moment, he looked upon the reformer with an evil eye, and became his enemy” (D’Aubigne).



A Summary of Arguments

- Luther was not intimidated. One of his principal arguments was that the Greeks had never recognized the pope and yet they had never been declared heretics.
- Eck responded that the Greeks and Orientals, in abandoning the pope, had also abandoned the Christian faith and were indisputably heretics.
- **Luther:** “What! Are not Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, and an immense number besides of Greek bishops – are they not saved? Any yet they did not believe that the Church of Rome was above the other Churches! It is not in the power of the Roman pontiffs to make new articles of faith. The Christian believer acknowledges no other authority than Holy Scripture.”



Luther's Assertions

1. The pope exercised his authority by human, not by divine, right and was therefore not infallible, although he should be obeyed in order to prevent schism;
2. The Church of Rome was not supreme over the other churches;
3. The Church councils could and did err because they were composed of erring men and did not exist by divine right;
4. Scripture was the ultimate, divine authority in all matters pertaining to religion.

The Disappearing Sands



Now Luther had even thrown off the authority of the councils, “declaring that no council could lay down a new article of faith and claim to be infallible. Thus had all human authorities fallen successively before him; the sands that the rain and the torrents carry with them had disappeared; and for rebuilding the ruined house of the Lord nothing remained but the everlasting rock of the Word of God.”



The Aftermath

- The debate on the papacy had lasted 5 days. “The subject of the discussion furnished matter for conversation in every place. In the inns, the university, and the court, each man expressed his opinion.”
- Next, the discussion centered on purgatory, then indulgences, repentance, absolution of the priest, and satisfactions, and, finally, human merit in good works. As was his custom, Eck quoted from the scholastic doctors, the Dominicans, and the pope’s canons. Luther closed the disputation with these words: “The reverend doctor flees from the Scriptures, as the devil from before the cross. As for me, with all due respect to the Fathers, I prefer the authority of Holy Writ, and this test I would recommend to the judges.”

Christ, the Head of the Body

“There is also the figure of the *body* of Christ. This metaphor stresses the unity of the church with Christ, and the unity of each Christian with all the others. One part of our physical body is dependent on the others, so every member of the body of Christ, each believer, depends on the others, and the others depend on him....In a somewhat different use of the image, **Christ is the head, distinguished from the rest of the body** (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19). This image encourages us to be subject to him, to accept his direction.”



John M. Frame

1939 –

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Westminster Confession of Faith

- **Of Christ the Mediator:** “It pleased God, in his eternal decree, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man; the Prophet, Priest, and King; the **Head** and Savior of his Church...”
- **Of the Church:** “The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, **under Christ the head thereof**; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all.”

Westminster Confession of Faith

- **Of the Church, Section VI:** “There is **no other head of the Church** but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God.”
- **Scriptural Proofs:** “**He is also head of the body, the church;** and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything” (Col. 1:18).
- “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23).



Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin asks, “By what arguments do they prove their possession of the true Church? They appeal to ancient records which formerly existed in Italy, France, and Spain, pretending to derive their origin from those holy men who, by sound doctrine, founded and raised up churches, confirmed the doctrine, and reared the edifice of the Church with their blood; they pretend that the Church thus consecrated by spiritual gifts and the blood of martyrs was preserved from destruction by a perpetual succession of bishops....They have laid aside all regard to truth, and make it their only aim to prosecute their own ends in whatever way they can.”



A Selection of Calvin's Arguments

- Why don't you quote Africa, Egypt, and all of Asia?
- Why do you consider the Greeks schismatics?
- Nothing is more absurd than to disregard doctrine and place succession in persons.
- "Although they exhibit a temple, a priesthood, and other similar masks, the empty glare by which they dazzle the eyes of the simple should not move us in the least to admit that there is a Church where the word of God appears not."
- "Where the Word of the Lord is not, it is not a union of believers, but a faction of the ungodly."



A Selection of Calvin's Arguments

- “When heresies and schisms arise, it is because men return not to the origin of the truth, because they seek not the head, because they keep not the doctrine of the heavenly Master.”
- “Scarcely can we hold any meeting with the papists without polluting ourselves with open idolatry. Their principle bond of communion is undoubtedly in the Mass, which we abominate as the greatest sacrilege....Show me one prophet or pious man who once worshipped or offered sacrifice in Bethel.”
- “We do not deny that there are churches among them” (God preserves His people).



The Effect of the Leipzig Disputation

“The Disputation at Leipzig, by stimulating Luther to further studies into the origin of the Papacy and into the character of Hus and of his opinions, brought his mind to a more decided renunciation of human authority, and to a growing suspicion that the papal rule was a usurpation in the Church and a hateful tyranny. Up to this time his attempt had been to influence the ecclesiastical rulers; now he turned to the people. His *Address to the Christian Nobles of the German Nation* was a ringing appeal to the German laity to take the work of reformation into their own hands, to protect the German people against the avarice and tyrannical intermeddling of the Roman ecclesiastics, to deprive the Pope of his rule in secular affairs, to abolish



The Effect of the Leipzig Disputation

compulsory celibacy, to reform the convents and restrain the mendicant orders, to come to a reconciliation with the Bohemians, to foster education.”

- George P. Fisher, Yale University, New Haven, January 15, 1873

