

Concordia Theological Quarterly



Volume 73:2

April 2009

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| The Contribution of Kenneth Korby to a Renewed Reception of Wilhelm Löhe's Pastoral Theology | |
| John T. Pless | 99 |
| The Liturgical Shape of the Old Testament Gospel | |
| Alan Ludwig | 115 |
| Its End is Destruction: Babylon the Great in the Book of Revelation | |
| Peter F. Gregory | 137 |
| Another Look at Luther's Battle with Karlstadt | |
| Richard A. Beinert | 155 |
| Theological Observer | 171 |
| Kenneth F. Korby – A Teacher of Pastors | |
| Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009) | |
| Work and Reality in Latvia | |
| The Doctrine of Christ in Theological Education | |
| Löhe Studies Today | |
| Book Reviews | 187 |
| Books Received | 192 |

Another Look at Luther's Battle with Karlstadt

Richard A. Beinert

Reformation scholars have long sought an explanation for the underlying cause behind the conflict and subsequent parting of ways between Martin Luther and Andreas Bodenstein, more commonly known as Karlstadt, the name of his *Heimatstadt* in Franconia. Explanations have been dominated by two basic interpretations, both of which can be traced back to the 1520s. On the one hand, we have a victor's perspective dressed on the skeleton of Luther's scathing rhetoric¹ against his younger colleague,² wherein Karlstadt is both marginalized and vilified as the deserving recipient of Luther's criticism.³ On the other hand, we have Wolfgang Capito's opinion published in 1524⁴ expressing the view that he considered the disagreement between the two Wittenberg reformers to be "peripheral and of no significance."⁵

¹ Luther, for instance, did not hesitate to comment that he considered Karlstadt to be "incarnatus diabolus" ("the devil incarnate"); Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993 [hereafter WA]), TR 1:31. In another place he states that "ibi non homo sed spiritus Satanae ornat se sua sapientia" ("There not man but the spirit of Satan adorns himself with his own wisdom") WA 34.2: 364. Catherine Dejeumont pointed out that Luther's rhetoric against Karlstadt and the Anabaptists was clearly not an invitation to discussion but served principally to exclude them both theologically as well as socially. See Dejeumont, "Schwärmer, Geist, Täufer, Ketzler: de l'allié au criminel (1522–1550)," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 148 (2002): 21–46.

² See Ulrich Bubenheim's entry in the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* s.v. "Karlstadt" where he shows on the basis of archival evidence that Karlstadt was born in 1486 rather than 1477 as was generally held before.

³ For brief discussions of Luther's rhetoric against Karlstadt, see Edward J. Furcha, "Zwingli and the Radicals: Zwingli and Carlstadt," *Fides et historia* 25 (1993): 3–5 and Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt, Prodigal Reformer," *Church History* 35:4 (1966): 379–380. For an example of an unsympathetic biography, see Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation* (London: Epworth Press, 1969).

⁴ Wolfgang Capito, *Was man halten und antwurten soll von der spaltung zwischen Martin Luther und Andres Carolstadt* (Strasbourg, 1524). Reprinted in *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. J. G. Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880–1910), vol. 20, 340–351.

⁵ See Hillerbrand, "Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt, Prodigal Reformer," 379.

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As Hans Hillerbrand has noted, Reformation and historical research has generally followed the tradition of Luther's assessment rather than Capito's.⁶ The question of where the disagreement between the two erstwhile colleagues actually lies has, as a result, passed largely into the realm of theological caricatures as well as marginal comments.⁷ Most scholars would agree with the view of Carter Lindberg that the practical differences between the two men are best explained in terms of "conflicting theological orientations."⁸ This is certainly the position reflected in two comparative doctrinal studies of the two reformers' theologies by Ernst Wolf⁹ and Friedel Kriechbaum.¹⁰ Ronald Sider, however, has taken an opposite view. Rather than locating the conflict in theological differences, he dismisses them (in a manner similar to Capito) as being insignificant and instead frames the entire episode in terms of a personality clash sparked over a disagreement about "how to proceed" with the Reformation in the city context of Wittenberg.¹¹ Certainly both theological and practical differences were present as contributing tinder to fuel the debate,¹² but neither of these traditional interpretations does an adequate job of uniting the various facets of the conflict within the broader

⁶ Hillerbrand, "Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt, Prodigal Reformer." See also Peter James Cousins, "Karlstadt e a Reforma de Lutero: O Caso da Herança Histórica," *Vox Scripturae* 7 (1997): 54, 60.

⁷ See Sigrid Looß, "Radical Views of the Early Andreas Karlstadt (1520-1525)," in *Radical Tendencies in the Reformation: Divergent Perspectives*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Publishers, 1988), 43.

⁸ Carter Lindberg, "Conflicting Models of Ministry—Luther, Karlstadt, and Muentzer," *CTQ* 41 (1977): 35.

⁹ Ernst Wolf, "Gesetz und Evangelium in Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit den Schwärmern," *Evangelische Theologie* 5 (1938): 96-109.

¹⁰ Friedel Kriechbaum, *Grundzüge der Theologie Karlstadts* (Hamburg—Bergstedt: Herbert Reich Evangelischer Verlag, 1967).

¹¹ Ronald J. Sider ed., *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). See, for example, his introduction on pages 1-4. Compare also Hillerbrand, "Radicalism in the Early Reformation: Varieties of Reformation in Church and Society," in *Radical Tendencies in the Reformation: Divergent Perspectives*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 37-39.

¹² Carlos Eire tries to draw a balance between the policy and theology of the two reformers in *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) but ends up again anchoring the disagreement between the two men in the realm of theology, arguing that the practical veneer which is apparent in Luther's *Invocavit* sermons is merely a testament to Luther's polemical genius. See Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 69.

religious context of the Reformation.¹³ It is my contention that the fundamental disagreement between Luther and Karlstadt was rooted in diametrically opposing conceptions of how an individual Christian is formed in the faith. The ensuing rhetorical battle between Luther and Karlstadt, therefore, can be explained as reflective of the unhappy collision of two conflicting patterns of Reformation spirituality.

I. What was the Real Question in This Battle?

This, of course, brings together two different lines of inquiry that have appeared recently within the field of Reformation studies. On the one hand, there is Scott Hendrix's characterization of Europe's Reformation period in terms of a broad agenda of re-Christianization.¹⁴ He suggests that the "Reformers saw themselves in a missionary situation in which the faith had to be taught to a populace they judged to be inadequately informed."¹⁵ According to this understanding, they thus saw themselves engaged in a process of forming Christians out of people who were either nominal in their faith or had no faith at all. On the other hand, there is the recent trend which uses *spirituality* as the interpretive filter through which the thought, faith, and piety of various Reformation figures and movements is explored.¹⁶

Hendrix, in an article on "Martin Luther's Reformation Spirituality," has creatively brought these two interpretive streams together.¹⁷ He states:

¹³ There were also undoubtedly political and academic factors which likewise helped to shape this conflict but I have chosen to focus on the religious dimension of the debate. For a discussion of the political background to the debate, see Looß, "Radical Views"; for an excellent survey of the political and academic dimensions of the events, see James S. Preus, *Carlstadt's Ordinaciones and Luther's Liberty: A Study of the Wittenberg Movement 1521-1522* (Boston: Harvard College, 1974).

¹⁴ See Scott H. Hendrix, "Rerooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization," *Church History* 69 (2000): 558-577, and his *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Hendrix, *Vineyard*, 172.

¹⁶ For excellent discussions of spirituality in relation to Reformation thought, see Alister McGrath, "Reformation Spirituality: A Usable Past," *The Drew Gateway* 60 (1991): 3-27; Egil Grislis, "Piety, Faith, and Spirituality in the Quest of the Historical Luther," *Consensus* 19 (1993): 29-53; and Emil Grislis, "The Spirituality of Martin Luther," *Word & World* 14 (1994): 453-459.

¹⁷ Hendrix, "Martin Luther's Reformation Spirituality," in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); originally published under the same title in *Lutheran Quarterly*

Luther did not just write about living more devotionally as a Christian in the same way he might have done if there had been no Reformation. Instead, once the Reformation was underway, Luther and the evangelical movement proposed to change the actual pattern of Christian living, and they urged that pattern upon the faithful as the genuine way of being spiritual, as authentic Christian spirituality.¹⁸

One need not look very far within the Luther corpus to discover works like his 1520 "The Freedom of a Christian"¹⁹ and his 1527 "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague"²⁰ which demonstrate the theological and socially oriented character of his reformed vision of Christian spirituality. The same can be seen reflected throughout his German hymns²¹ as well as his *Small Catechism*, including the "Table of Duties" or *Haustafel*, which outlines from Scripture the social responsibilities of Christians based on their station in life.²² This concern with the deepening of a Christian's faith and religious identity is similarly reflected throughout Karlstadt's writings. Both his 1520 and 1523 tracts on the virtue of *Gelassenheit*, as well as his 1524 sermon "Regarding the Two Greatest Commandments: The Love of God and of Neighbor,"²³ illustrate a comparable concern for the regeneration of faith within the experience and expression of the

13 (1999): 249-270. All references to this article will be to the pagination in the 2004 monograph reprint.

¹⁸ Hendrix, "Luther's Reformation Spirituality," 242. Compare this also to McGrath's comments that "the Reformation represents a sustained attempt to relate the Christian faith to the conditions and lifestyles of [the early modern] era." And again, that the Reformation was a "quest for Christian authenticity, based on the belief that the medieval church had lost its way." McGrath, "Reformation Spirituality," 5, 7.

¹⁹ English translation from Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 31:327-378 [henceforth LW].

²⁰ English translation from LW 43:113-138.

²¹ See, for example, stanza 1 and 10 of Luther's hymn "Jesus Christ, Our God and Savior": *Jesus Christ, our God and Savior, turned away God's wrath forever, by his bitter agony helped us out of hell's misery. Fruit of faith therein [thy heart] be showing that thou art to others loving; to thy neighbor thou wilt do as God in love hath done to you.* See WA 35:435-437 for the German text and LW 53:250-251 for this English translation.

²² See *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsbургischen Konfession 1930*, Dritte verbesserte Auflage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1956), 499-541.

²³ Each of these tracts is available in English translation in *The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen Tracts by Andreas Bodenstein (Carlstadt) from Carlstadt*, translated and edited by Edward J. Furcha (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1995). All references to Carlstadt's writings, unless otherwise indicated, will be from this volume.

individual Christian.²⁴ Recognizing that this was a prominent theme that ran throughout Karlstadt's writings, Edward Furcha has offered the bold suggestion that Karlstadt be counted, alongside Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, as a leading figure of the Reformation era, granting him the title: "reformer of nominal Christians."²⁵

This common interest in the pastoral dimension of churchly reform that both Hendrix and Furcha have observed in the writings of Luther and Karlstadt should not surprise us. Both men lived and worked in the same cultural climate; they breathed the same city air. Both were involved in implementing social and religious change within the Wittenberg city context.²⁶ They each likewise shared an interest in Augustinian theology as well as the spiritual ideals of the German mystical tradition. Their subsequent bitter opposition, given this common starting ground, is a question that has not yet been adequately addressed. It would certainly be easy to offer the standard historiographical caricature that the "great parting of ways"²⁷ between these two men was the result of a differing emphasis on discipleship and doctrine²⁸ or a competition between a *fides qua creditur* and the *fides quae*.²⁹ Both Sider's and Lindberg's views of the matter fall into this kind of an interpretive pattern, but the pattern does not fit the evidence. It must be remembered that Karlstadt held no less than

²⁴ For a discussion of Karlstadt's mystical theology, see Ronald J. Sider, "Karlstadt's Orlamünde Theology: A Theology of Regeneration," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 45 (1971): 191-218, 352-376 later reworked into his monograph volume *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

²⁵ Edward J. Furcha, "Zwingli and the Radicals," 6. Furcha adds Karlstadt's name to Gottfried Locher's categorizations of Martin Luther as the "reformer of the faith," Jean Calvin as the "reformer of the church," and Ulrich Zwingli as the "reformer of society." See Gottfried Locher, "Die reformatorische Katholizität Huldrych Zwinglis," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 42:1 (1986): 5. Calvin Augustine Pater also moves in the same direction in his book *Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements: The Emergence of Lay Protestantism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

²⁶ See Carter Lindberg, "There should be no beggars among Christians: Karlstadt, Luther, and the Origins of Protestant Poor Relief," *Church History* 46 (1977): 313-334. Cousins similarly argues that Karlstadt be counted among the "Fathers of the Protestant faith." Cousins, "Karlstadt e a Reforma de Lutero," 62.

²⁷ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 66.

²⁸ Harold S. Bender, "Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24 (1950): 25-32. See also Robert Friedmann, "Anabaptism and Protestantism," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24 (1950): 17.

²⁹ J. A. Oosterbaan, "The Reformation of the Reformation: Fundamentals of Anabaptist Theology," trans. by Elizabeth Bender and Nel Kopp, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 51 (1977): 181, 186; also Cousins, "Karlstadt e a Reforma de Lutero," 59.

three academic doctorates: one in theology, one in civil law, and one in canon law. He was eminently versed in the currents of scholastic theology but, like Luther, chose to reject it.³⁰ Luther, as Bengt Hoffman as well as recent Finnish scholarship has amply unveiled, likewise maintained strong social and mystical dimensions within his own theological thought.³¹ Something more is going on here that a simple comparison of theological *loci* has not been able to reveal.

Carlos Eire came close to the heart of the matter when he suggested that "the most important difference between Luther and Karlstadt remained their understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and the material in worship."³² He rightly points out that Karlstadt not only followed Erasmus in his critique of the material and ritual dimensions of medieval Roman Catholic piety but also went beyond it, asserting that these "visible and external acts of worship were of little value in themselves."³³ He introduced a sharp division between the spiritual and the material within his own Reformation agenda. This sharp division became a foundational principle throughout the whole of his theological vision. Luther, on the other hand, countered Karlstadt's view by arguing a fundamental unity between the material and spiritual dimensions of the world. As Eire pointed out, for Luther "the spiritual life could never be totally disembodied."³⁴ Luther was willing to tolerate images and retain the sacraments in the service of the church, provided that they were properly used and not abused by both faithful and clergy alike.³⁵

³⁰ "Cognovi enim me in scholasticis mille sententiis deceptum, Asinum ad molam, Cecum ad lapidem et perperam hallucinatum fuisse." Ernst Kähler, *Karlstadt und Augustin, Der Kommentar des Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt zu Augustins Schrift De Spiritu et Litera* (Halle, 1952), 5. See also Hillerbrand, "Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt," 381.

³¹ See Bengt Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics: A Re-Examination of Luther's Spiritual Experience and His Relation to the Mystics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976) as well as the various essays presented in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) and Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

³² Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 72. See also Cousins, "Karlstadt e a Reforma de Lutero," 59.

³³ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 55.

³⁴ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 72.

³⁵ It should be noted that this is usually described as Luther's mature teaching on the subject of images which was undoubtedly shaped through the tensions of this conflict. On this point, see Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 68-73.

It would be a mistake, however, to read this disagreement between Luther and Karlstadt in terms of a purely theoretical debate;³⁶ it was a battle over the very salvation of the people whom they served. For each of these men, theology was to be not merely a matter of ideas; it outlined the pattern, shape, and dynamic of the Christian life.³⁷ "Theology" functioned, as the French philosopher Pierre Hadot has recently argued (albeit in relation to an earlier period of Christian history), as a "spiritual exercise" that framed the very process of religious formation for the individual within society.³⁸ When understood from this perspective, the debate between the two men did indeed turn on a question of practical theology. The question, however, was not an anachronistically framed debate between Liberal and Radical factions within the Reform movement in sixteenth century Wittenberg over "how to proceed," as Ronald Sider would have it.³⁹ The question at issue was far more fundamental. Both men were grappling with how faith is formed in the individual or put another way: "How are Christians made?" It is from this starting point that their disagreement concerning the relationship between spiritual and material within Christian life and worship is properly read.

These two reformers certainly understood the root of their mutual disagreement in these terms. Luther, for instance, in his 1525 *Preface* which was published together with Karlstadt's written *Apology*, writes that in matters of doctrine he considered Karlstadt to be his "greatest antagonist."⁴⁰ He described the nature of their disagreement in terms of a

³⁶ Cf. Looß, "Radical Views of the Early Andreas Karlstadt (1520–1525)," 43.

³⁷ Luther's recurrent criticism of scholastic theologians provides ample evidence to support this point.

³⁸ See Pierre Hadot, "Spiritual Exercises," and "Ancient Spiritual Exercises and 'Christian Philosophy,'" in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995). This certainly was the perspective of the author of the *Didaché* who frames the whole of his work around this teaching of the "two ways" — one of life, the other of death. See chapters 1–6. Friedman argued that the early Anabaptists conceived of their theology in this kind of way in his article "Anabaptism and Protestantism," 14–15. He thereby echoed and perpetuated the historiographical bias that this was uniquely a dimension of early Anabaptist writers and that the Magisterial Reformers somehow failed to grasp this broader conception within their own understanding of theology, seeing it instead as something that was purely academic and doctrinal in nature.

³⁹ See Sider, *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther*.

⁴⁰ "Wie wol aber Doctor Carlstad meyn hoechster feynd ist der lere halben." WA 18:436.18.

“clash”⁴¹ or, as Luther suggests within the German of his original text, a fundamental opposition of theological perspectives⁴² that was centered in what he referred to as Karlstadt’s “error regarding the Sacrament.”⁴³ It would be easy to interpret his comments here strictly in terms of an academic disagreement over the question concerning the Real Presence of Christ’s body and blood within the bread and the wine of the Lord’s Supper. Indeed, Karlstadt expressed that the center of his theology was intimately wrapped up with his uniquely peculiar deictic interpretation of the *verba testamenti*.⁴⁴ Once again, we must move beyond a mere dogmatic reading of these comments to one that contrasts the broader spiritual agenda of their respective theologies.

II. Karlstadt’s Position

Karlstadt baldly states that his argument against what he calls the “tainted popish sacrament”⁴⁵ flows directly from his faith in Christ.⁴⁶ For Karlstadt, Jesus himself—specifically Christ on the cross—is the only true cornerstone of grace,⁴⁷ the benefits of which are appropriated inwardly by the believer without the mediation of any external means. Already in his 1523 tract “The Manifold, Singular Will of God, The Nature of Sin,” he takes the position regarding Baptism that it is simply an external sign, like circumcision was for the Jews, which attests outwardly to the faith that the individual possesses inwardly. In Karlstadt’s own words:

Where this righteousness is not in the spirit, there the sign is wrong and disregarded by God . . . a spiritual person is not bound to externals. Neither is it essential that inner oneness must be confirmed and attested to by an external sign, nor that the spirit must accomplish its life and work

⁴¹ See Furcha’s translation in *Essential Carlstadt*, 396.

⁴² “darueber wyr beyde so hart aneynander gesezt haben, das keyne hoffnung da ist blieben eyniges vertrags odder ferner gemeynschafft.” WA 18: 436.19–20.

⁴³ “...seyne yrthum ym Sacrament...” WA 18: 436.35; also WA 18: 437.3–4.

⁴⁴ Karlstadt affirms this in his tract “Several Main Points of Christian Teaching Regarding Which Dr. Luther Brings Andreas Carlstadt Under Suspicion Through False Accusation and Slander 1525,” in *Essential Carlstadt*, 344.

⁴⁵ *Essential Carlstadt*, 344.

⁴⁶ “There are several others who are so blinded and in error that they can read my booklets without seeing that all my arguments against the sacrament flow from my faith in Christ. They fail to note that the true and pure faith in Christ is so upright and pure that it cannot bear the tainted popish sacrament as it has been used till now, but knocks it down instead.” *Essential Carlstadt*, 344.

⁴⁷ See *Essential Carlstadt*, 345.

with the aid of corporeal things, Jn 4. It can simply be without comfort and trust in externals.⁴⁸

Similarly, in regard to the Eucharist, it is the inward remembrance that matters, not the external elements.⁴⁹ The eating of Christ happens internally⁵⁰ and is simply reenacted outwardly in the rite.⁵¹ He makes his position clear by stating that no divine grace is attached to the Eucharistic rite or the elements themselves.⁵² For Karlstadt, then, it is not the sacrament that validates the faith; rather it is faith which validates the sacrament. Peter, Karlstadt's character in the *Dialogus*, says as much when he summarizes Karlstadt's teaching on the Lord's Supper.

Confess the truth and say that Christ's body is not in the bread and his blood not in the cup. Yet we ought to eat the bread of the Lord in the remembrance or knowledge of his body which he surrendered for us into the hands of the unrighteous, and drink of the cup in the knowledge of the blood which Christ shed for us. To sum up, we are to eat and drink in the knowledge of the death of Christ . . . we must confess the death of the Lord with heart and mind, i.e., we must sense the death of Christ within us and experience the righteousness of Christ and not ours.⁵³

For Karlstadt then, any trust placed by the believer in the external elements of the sacraments is trust that is wasted. He boldly calls it idolatry.⁵⁴ Even the Scriptures, he asserts, as with anything but an external witness to the inner working the Holy Spirit, must be let go.

⁴⁸ "The Manifold Singular Will," in *Essential Carlstadt*, 217.

⁴⁹ For Example, "Die benedeyhung steht im gedechtnuß und verkündigung des tochts Christi." Andreas Carolstat, "Dialogus oder ein geschreibbüchlin von dem gewlichen unnd abgöttischen mißbrauch des hochwirdigsten sacraments Jesu Christi (1524)," in *Karlstadts Schriften aus den Jahren 1523-1525*, Teil II, ed. Erich Hertzsch (Halle: Veb Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1557), 44.27-28, see also "Dialogus," 25.25-31, and "Dialogus," 33.26-28.

⁵⁰ For example, "... das essen des fleisch Christi ein inwendiger schmack ist des leydens Christi." "Dialogus," 24.25-26.

⁵¹ For example, "Denn die verkündigung ist eyn rede des glaubens welche auß dem herten durch den mund außgeht. Darumb ist das eusserlich bekentnuß oder predig des tochts Christi eyn zeychen oder frucht der innerlichen gerechtigkeit das alle die ihene so solliche eusserliche verkündigung hören sprechen müssen." "Dialogus," 28.4-9.

⁵² *Essential Carlstadt*, 344.

⁵³ "Dialogus," 48.40-49.7, 49.19-22. Translation by Furcha from *Essential Carlstadt*, 315-316.

⁵⁴ He calls it "gözen brodt" in the "Dialogus," 46.16, 24; similarly in his tractate "Several Main Points," he lumps both Baptism and Eucharist together under his agenda to "destroy idols." *Essential Carlstadt*, 348-349.

Here I must also state how a truly yielded person must let go of Holy Scripture and not know its letters, but enter into the might of the Lord (as David has it), and ceaselessly pray to God the Lord for true understanding. Then when a person fails to understand something or would like to hear a judgment, he ought to stand in full surrender, i.e., he must divest himself of self, hold back with his reasoning, and earnestly ask for God's favor and hear what God has to say to him.⁵⁵

Faith, which for Karlstadt is intimately interwoven with active love,⁵⁶ springs from the immediate working of the Holy Spirit within the human soul. Using the common domestic illustration of sparks in a fire, Karlstadt explains that God's love similarly has its start when God directly plants such a love and ardent desire within the human heart by allowing "tiny embers of his love to flow into the soul and spark open; he then stands by his work and fans it until it grows into a large fire."⁵⁷ He describes these tiny embers as "heartfelt longings toward the greatest good" which seek the good for its own sake and not for rewards.⁵⁸ Through these desires, he cultivates the heart and makes it "receptive to all godly riches."⁵⁹ The Spirit sows both godly desires as well as "disgust for all that is evil" within the hearts of men and women so that it "inclines towards the good, and desires goodness and righteousness for their own sake."⁶⁰ In this way, Karlstadt ascribes the genesis of faith and love within the believer to the working of the Spirit of God, ensuring that both faith and salvation remain a gift and not reward for a human work. Notably absent is mention of any kind of means. Karlstadt makes it clear that for him faith springs immediately from the inside to the outside through the action of the Spirit.

⁵⁵ *Essential Carlstadt*, 153–154. In this fascinating section, Karlstadt plays off the reasoned use of Scripture with the intuitive Spirit-inspired understanding of the believer. He goes on to say that after having received this inner revelation of the meaning of spiritual realities, the believer "would soon recall and then verify and justify it with Holy Scripture." *Essential Carlstadt*, 153–154. It should be noted, however, that the inner Word of the Spirit holds priority over the written word within Karlstadt's hermeneutical theory, even though Karlstadt, I would suspect, does not envision any instance in which the two would disagree.

⁵⁶ For example, "Lieb Gottes on kunst und on verstand is blind und verfürisch. Glaub oder kunst gottes on liebe ist küle unnd tode . . . Glaub on lieb taug mit. Liebe on glauben behagt mit. Drumb ist dz rcht wreck ein liebreicher glaub oder glaubreiche lieb." *Karlstadts Schriften*, 52.7–9; see also 52.16–18.

⁵⁷ "Von den zweyen höchsten gebotten," 59.14–18.

⁵⁸ "Von den zweyen höchsten gebotten," 59.22–24.

⁵⁹ "Von den zweyen höchsten gebotten," 59.32–33.

⁶⁰ "Von den zweyen höchsten gebotten," 59.34–36, 60.2–3. Translation from *Essential Carlstadt*, 237.

Outward rites serve as external testaments to this inner reality. They are never, however, the means through which such a faith is given and established within an individual.

III. Luther's Position in Contrast to Karlstadt

The contrast between Luther's and Karlstadt's understanding of the movement of God's grace in the formation of the Christian life is very sharp. Luther never abandoned the Scriptural understanding of Baptism and the Eucharist as a physical means through which forgiveness and grace—even Christ and the Holy Spirit—are communicated to the individual recipient. As Luther expressed in his sermon to the people of Wittenberg on Reminiscere Sunday (March 16) of 1522, God is not stingy with his grace. He has provided many means or channels through which his forgiveness⁶¹ is communicated to humanity. Luther specifically mentions five such means within this sermon. The first is divine forgiveness as it is shared between human beings based on the passage from Matthew 6:14: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."⁶² "Another comfort," Luther writes, "we have in the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses.'"⁶³ Thirdly, he points to baptism as an assurance of divine grace and mercy: "Then we have private confession, when I go and receive a sure absolution as if God himself spoke it, so that I may be assured that my sins are forgiven."⁶⁴ And then finally, Luther points to the Eucharist wherein sinners "eat [Christ's] body and drink his blood as a sign that [they] are rid of [their] sins and God has freed [them] from all [their] frailties."⁶⁵ He closes this section by emphasizing the assurance that such communing gives: "In order to make me sure of [his grace], he gives me his body to eat and his blood to drink, so that I shall not and cannot doubt that I have a gracious God."⁶⁶ Lest one think that such a sacramental focus ends in forgiveness and fails to animate the individual in fervent love towards their

⁶¹ Luther specifically uses the word "absolutions." LW 51:99.

⁶² LW 51:99

⁶³ LW 51:99

⁶⁴ LW 51:99

⁶⁵ LW 51:99

⁶⁶ LW 51:99. This description of the means of grace is echoed later in Luther's mature doctrine from his 1537 *Smalcald Articles* Part III, Article IV where he breaks down the external means through which the Gospel comes to believers as 1) the spoken Word [preaching], 2) Baptism, 3) the Eucharist, 4) the power of the Keys [the pastoral office], and 5) the "mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren."

neighbours, Luther points out that the fruit of the sacrament is nothing short of love. The Christian, he says, "should treat [his] neighbor as God has treated [him]."⁶⁷

In a manner similar to Karlstadt, Luther has a strong social and ethical dimension to his understanding of Christian spirituality. Faith is to spring forth in works of love toward one's neighbor. The point at which Luther and Karlstadt differ, however, is the way in which faith was understood to be conceived and formed within the individual Christian. For Karlstadt, such a faith was communicated immediately to the individual through the working of the Spirit within the human heart; for Luther, however, such an individual faith is dependent upon that person having received Christ externally through both word and sacrament. Luther describes this aspect of his evangelical spirituality in his 1525 tract "Against the Heavenly Prophets." Luther there explains his view:

Now when God sends forth his holy Gospel, He deals with us in a twofold manner, the first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the Gospel and through material signs, that is baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly He deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined [*beschlossen*] to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ LW 51:95. Luther captures the same in his hymn "Jesus Christ, Our God and Savior" (see n. 21 above). He opens the hymn with a strong gospel assertion of God's divine mercy towards sinners in Christ (stanza 1) and then progresses to meditate on the true physical presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament as God's enduring testament of his mercy which he gives to comfort and rest to individual Christians (stanzas 3-8). He closes the hymn with a verse calling Christians to rightly confess this gospel with their mouths (stanza 9) and with their lives (stanza 10) through acts of love toward their neighbors. LW 53:250-251.

⁶⁸ LW 40:146; "So nu Gott syn heyliges Euangelion hat auslassen gehen, handelt er mit uns auff zweyerley weyse. Eyn mal eusserlich, das ander mal ynnerlich. Eusserlich handelt er mit uns durchs muendliche wort des Euangelij und durch leypliche zeychen, alls do ist Tauffe und Sacrament. Ynnerlich handelt er mit uns durch den heyligen geyst und glauben sampt andern gaben. Aber das alles, der massen und der ordenung, das die eusserlichen stücke sollen und muessen vergehen. Und die ynnerlichen hernach und durch die eusserlichen komen, also das ers bescholssen hat, keinem menschen die ynnerlichen stuck zu geben on das eusserliche wort und zeychen." WA 18:136.9-18.

For Luther, there could be no inward faith without the external mediation of grace through the oral Word, Baptism, and Holy Communion. Indeed, his use of the German *beschlossen*—locked in—is telling of the absolute necessity which he saw in them. He considered the external means of the Word and the evangelical sacraments essential to the process of faith formation.⁶⁹

The difference between Luther and Karlstadt becomes manifestly clear at this point. The question which divided them from one another, as Stefano Cavallotto has rightly observed, was whether or not salvation was something which is communicated to humanity through external means.⁷⁰ For Karlstadt, faith springs immediately from an inner working of the Spirit which is independent of any external mediation. He goes so far as to suggest that external media not only distract individual believers from grasping a hold of true faith but that they are even detrimental to it.⁷¹ For Luther, on the other hand, “God always meets humans on their own level, that is, through outward, material means.”⁷² He considered the word and the sacraments to be essential means through which the Holy Spirit communicates forgiveness, faith, and salvation to each individual.⁷³ Faith formation without these means is simply impossible within Luther's understanding.

The two men approached the question of “How are Christians made?” from diametrically opposing conceptions of the *ordo salutis*. It should come as no surprise that both men understood their dispute in precisely these terms. In the tract “Several Main Points,” Karlstadt echoes Luther's complaint that “Karlstadt turns God's order upside down” and “puts the last first, the hindmost up front, and the lowest at the top.”⁷⁴ Several pages

⁶⁹ Cf. Calvin Pater, “Religion of Rudolf-Bodenstein von Karlstadt,” in *Leaders of the Reformation*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1988), 100.

⁷⁰ Stefano Cavallotto, “Il recupero di un'immagine: Carlstadt in un recente saggio di A. Gallas,” *Christianesimo nella storia* 22 (2001): 437–450.

⁷¹ *Essential Carlstadt*, 145. This notion is best understood in relation to his teaching regarding *gelassenheit* which, for the believer, must be total, taking leave of everything, so that he/she might find perfect communion with God within the ground of the soul.

⁷² Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 72.

⁷³ See, for example, Luther's descriptions of Baptism, Absolution, and Holy Communion in his *Small Catechism*. See also his comments concerning the Word in the second *Invocavit* sermon which he preached in Wittenberg on March 10, 1522 where he says: “I did nothing; the Word did everything.” *LW* 51: 77.

⁷⁴ *Essential Carlstadt*, 347.

later he complains again that Luther “says that I pervert God’s order by placing the bottommost at the top, and by taking the lowliest for the best, the last as the first.”⁷⁵ The particulars of their respective theology set aside, there is evidently a procedural dispute regarding the very foundations of faith formation taking place here. Karlstadt similarly criticized “Dr. Luther’s order [*ordo salutis*] regarding the mortification of the flesh” as being simply “wrong” in his estimation.⁷⁶ Sider’s suggestion that the theological differences between the two men were minimal and insignificant⁷⁷ thus merely scratches the surface of what was actually going on between them for it fails to take into account the deeper structure of the two reformers’ thought.⁷⁸ Cavallotto is right to discuss the disagreement between them under the rubric of a “soteriology of mediation,”⁷⁹ for in each of their minds, the entire battle between them had to do with the basics of the faith, with how faith and salvation were communicated and established within individual human beings.⁸⁰

Luther’s scathing rhetoric against Karlstadt becomes all the more comprehensible when their disagreement is understood in terms of a soteriological battle between two conflicting and contradictory patterns of Reformation spirituality.⁸¹ From Luther’s perspective, Karlstadt was preaching a form of godliness while denying the very means through which a true saving faith could be communicated. It is thus no wonder that

⁷⁵ *Essential Carlstadt*, 351.

⁷⁶ *Essential Carlstadt*, 359.

⁷⁷ Sider, *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*, 3–4.

⁷⁸ For a fascinating comparative discussion of the “deep structure” of Lutheran and Catholic thought, see Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). More work needs to be done investigating the convergences and differences that emerge on the front between the Lutheran and Radical branches of the Reformation era.

⁷⁹ “Soteriologia della mediazione.” See Cavallotto, “Il recupero di un’immagine: Carlstadt in un recente saggio di A. Gallas,” 449.

⁸⁰ Heiko Oberman notes that “Luther as a reformer cannot be understood unless he is seen located between God and the devil, who have been involved in a struggle—not in a metaphysical, but in a real battle—ever since the beginning of the world—a battle which not “in these last days” is reaching a horrible climax.” Oberman, “Teufelsdröck: Eschatology and Scatology in the ‘Old’ Luther,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19 (1988): 439–440.

⁸¹ Compare this to Hendrix’s observation that the diversification of Western Christianity was already well underway by the time of the sixteenth century. Hendrix, “Vineyard,” 160.

he spared little restraint in calling him an *incarnatus diabolus*.⁸² Although Karlstadt's rhetoric against Luther is arguably more circumspect in the extent of its tone, it is certainly no less vicious.⁸³ Yet what binds the two reformers together in their mutual antagonism is not so much a topical disagreement over selected theological *loci* or even a practical dispute over how quickly to proceed in implementing a city reformation. Their disagreement was more fundamental, and they knew it. It touched on the very *ordo salutis* which they understood, not as a bald scholastic theological *ordo*, but as the dynamic process of the economy of God's salvation in Christ directed towards damned sinners. In a nutshell, it is Article V of the *Augsburg Confession* thrown into full practical, spiritual, and ecumenical relief. Luther and Karlstadt were disputing over the very process by which faith is formed and brought to fruition within and among the faithful.

Luther's rhetoric, as a result, is much more than a verbal assault on an academic rival intended to sway the scales of popular opinion to his own support and favor. It is the cry of an anguished Christian fighting for the very means of salvation through which faith—including his own—is given, formed, and sustained. By inverting the *ordo salutis* and thereby emptying the dominical means of grace of any and all efficacy, Luther saw Karlstadt as effectively deceiving the faithful under a cloud of godly rhetoric while absconding the very means by which true faith could be given. As Heiko Oberman has rightly observed, "the very ferocity of Luther's language, his high pitch, has the double purpose of unmasking the Devil and shouting to God (*clamare, schreien*), so loud that he will intervere to skin the Devil and expose him for all to see" as well as to

⁸² WA TR 1:31. Luther's conception of the sacramentality of the divine economy of salvation as well as his perception of how the devil works are certainly consistent with the prevailing views and perspectives of his day. For an excellent discussion of early modern demonology, see Armando Maggi, *Satan's Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁸³ Karlstadt, for instance, describes Luther as an "arrogant" (*Essential Carlstadt*, 346) egotistical despot ("Run, run, and flee Dr. Luther's judgment, for if he catches you, you will all become his target without mercy. . . . He has new bulls from Wittenberg and Rome and power to rebuke and condemn you as he pleases, as those who have obstructed the gospel. Haste, flee; he thunders already from afar, growls, hails and throws about thunder bolts as one who intends to judge you and your lost generation." *Essential Carlstadt*, 350) who teaches out of frivolity ("I am sure therefore that Dr. Luther shoots winged words from the barrel of his frivolity. . . ." *Essential Carlstadt*, 351). Karlstadt similarly describes him as a misguided ringleader of a mob of "critters" and "bastards." See *Essential Carlstadt*, 347, 359.

"[shock] misguided, captivated Christians out of their blind ignorance so that they can now be converted."⁸⁴

IV. Conclusion

Luther's and Karlstadt's mutual rejection of each other's views concerning this process of faith formation reveals the extent to which these reformers understood their work in terms of a widespread agenda to reform the basic pattern of Christian spirituality. It is likewise significant to note that the same basic patterns of spirituality which continue to shape and draw the lines of ecumenical battles and debates within contemporary Christendom already met and clashed during the nascent decades of the Reformation era.⁸⁵ The root of the dispute between Luther and Karlstadt was neither just theoretical nor simply procedural. It cut to the heart of the very Reformation vision and agenda: the making of a new Christendom. That the two former colleagues, in the end, did not agree undoubtedly had many contributing factors of which differences in personality, pastoral temperament, and the politics of career agendas are unquestionably only a few. A careful reading of their writings on these events, however, reveals that the dispute between them runs deeper than the traditional explanations have allowed. In a similar vein, it is a reminder for us today to be attuned to the deeper spiritual significance of our theological confessions in order that we speak loudly and clearly the truth of the gospel, not simply as an exercise in theological correctness but out of a sincere concern that the fullness of Christ's salvation is made present to our world in both word and sacrament.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Oberman, "Teufelsdreck: Eschatology and Scatology in the 'Old' Luther," 445.

⁸⁵ Cf. Lindberg, "Conflicting Models," 49-50.

⁸⁶ The research for this article was funded in part by a *Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada* doctoral grant as well as a *Manitoba Graduate Scholarship*.