

The 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

A Turning Point in World History

by Angelo Ferrara

“Who had the more convincing argument at the Leipzig Debate: John Eck or Martin Luther?”

The Debate of Faith: Eck vs. Luther

In 1519, as the Renaissance was in its full glory, change was on the horizon for the Roman Catholic Church. Forces within the church were questioning the doctrines, beliefs and policies of Catholicism. Critics questioned the Church's ideas on authority, indulgences and the immortality of the soul. One such critic was Martin Luther, a priest and professor of theology at Wittenberg University. Luther was known for his 95 Theses which called into question the Roman Catholic policy of indulgences - a practice which allowed people to pay the church to absolve themselves of their sins and be guaranteed entry into heaven. Luther posted his 95 Theses on a church door at Wittenberg to make public his opposition to the Church's practices. It was Luther's belief that people received eternal life through their faith, not through paying the Church for their salvation. Luther had hoped that his 95 Theses would spark a debate, but it was not until two years later that he had the opportunity to voice his beliefs in a public forum at Leipzig. However, his 95 Theses did spread throughout Germany and into other parts of Europe. Even Pope Leo X was sent a copy of Luther's 95 Theses, but at the time, did not find it to be a concern.

In response to Luther's writings, John Eck, a renowned Roman Catholic professor of theology, wrote a pamphlet attempting to prove him wrong. Luther's Theses had a significant impact on religious beliefs because it loosened the Roman Catholic Church's hold on its members by presenting a new way to look at some of the foundations of the Catholic religion. In addition, Luther's Theses caused irreparable damage to the sale of indulgences, which forced Pope Leo X to finally take Luther seriously. Andreas Carlstadt, one of Luther's fellow professors at Wittenberg, wrote a set of theses challenging Eck. Eck

replied by inviting Carlstadt to a debate at Leipzig. While Carlstadt tried his best to be a worthy adversary to Eck, Luther eventually found it necessary to replace Carlstadt. Once Luther entered the debate, the battle of words became more intense. While there was no definitive victor named in the debate, and most historians believe that Eck probably won, Luther presented the more convincing argument because he relied on scriptures instead of human interpretation, was more prepared than Eck, and was able to convince devout, educated Roman Catholics to question their faith.

Reverend Martin Luther had a more convincing argument at the Leipzig Debate than John Eck because Luther based his findings and beliefs on scripture, not on opinion or human reasoning. He did this because he believed that the Roman Catholic religion should be reformed and based on scriptures and passages, not what a priest or the pope thought. For example, when Eck cited the passage, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it,” (Matthew 16:18), he was offering evidence that the pope was the ultimate being which the Church is built upon. The passage was the words of Jesus being relayed to Peter, saying that he would essentially be the pope. While Luther agreed that the passage signified that Peter would be the bishop, he did not think that the passage signified that a pope would have ultimate authority to interpret scripture, or exclude himself and the Church from wrong doing. This is because Luther felt that the pope and church officials were abusing their power for their own benefit. In addition, Luther did not believe in indulgences, a practice established by the Roman Catholic authorities to give Catholics an opportunity to pay money to the Church for their sins, thus absolving them of their sins and granting them a leeway to heaven. Luther cited scripture to support his belief that indulgences were inappropriate, such as, “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus,” (Romans 3:22-24). Luther used these verses in scripture in his defense to explain that the sale of indulgences is an unnecessary practice since all people sin and all people will have redemption. Luther’s reliance on scripture to support his argument showed that the word of God, not some human’s

interpretation, was the true essence of Roman Catholicism, and this served as a successful technique of persuasion.

In addition to Luther's reliance on scripture, he was also more prepared than Eck to debate on the topics they discussed. While both Luther and Eck were known to have impeccable knowledge of and memory for scripture (religion-online.org), Luther had the advantage because before he entered the debate, he had prepared appropriate scriptures that could be read to defend his argument. Another reason why Luther was more prepared was that being a priest and a monk, he was already fully acclimated to all of Eck's arguments, which were the basis of the Roman Catholic Church's teachings. Knowing what Eck might say gave Luther a preconceived structure to base his arguments on. Also, before Eck debated Luther, he debated Andreas Carlstadt, who did not put up much of a challenge for Eck. This may have lead Eck to put his guard down and to believe that the road to winning the debate might be easy. Luther entered the debate with extreme confidence in his arguments, which was a different experience for Eck. According to Amy Leonard, Georgetown University professor and expert in the Protestant Reformation, Luther's reputation preceded him. "It was well known (and acknowledged by Eck) that Luther had a prodigious memory and ability to argue and debate that made him a formidable opponent," notes Leonard. Also, Luther's debating expertise and knowledge of the subject matter gave him the advantage of being able to give confident, unrehearsed responses to anything Eck might bring to light. In addition, Luther's ability to think on his feet and formulate his thoughts on command kept Eck struggling to provide thorough and appropriate responses.

Along with being knowledgeable and well-prepared to debate, Martin Luther was also able to capture the attention of devout, educated Roman Catholics with his new ideas. He did this by presenting new, thought-provoking ideas and backing them up by scriptures that were relevant to the world back then. Luther "was—for lack of a better description—charming and disarming" so he was able to get the attention of Roman Catholics through the forum of the debate (christian-online.org). Luther's friendly attitude was one of his many attributes that contributed to him getting the attention of devout Catholics and encouraging them to question the Church. Also, after Luther's appearance at the Leipzig Debate, his

following increased. In particular, students of Leipzig University who heard Luther's arguments transferred to Wittenberg University so that they could be with Luther. These followers were the ones who would eventually become the first Lutherans - those who followed Luther's religion that he created soon after the debate. Luther's new followers would prove to be helpful after the debate. Soon after the debate, Pope Leo X sent a papal bull - a formal proclamation - to nobility that denied Luther's ideas and requested to have Luther and his followers sent to the Pope and burn all of his writings. This meant that the Pope was excommunicating, or banning, Luther from the Roman Catholic Church and all of its services, including heaven. To post this papal bull, the pope called on John Eck to deliver it to Germany, where he was extremely disliked because he disagreed with Luther at the debate. When Eck tried to post the bull at Leipzig University, Luther's followers from Wittenberg University attacked Eck and tore the bull to shreds. Also, at Erfurt, another university where Luther went to school, the faculty who received the papal bull, refused to post it and the students tore it up and threw it into the water. While there were some Catholic countries that did burn Luther's writings, Luther's ideas began to take hold. The Leipzig Debate served as a means for Luther to spread his ideas and cause many Roman Catholics to question their belief in their religion, thus laying the groundwork for a new religion.

Both Eck and Luther performed honorably at the Leipzig Debate by presenting their respective opinions and laying out their arguments for consideration. However, Luther had a more convincing argument than Eck because he relied on scriptures instead of human interpretation, was more prepared than Eck to debate many of the topics, and was able to convince devout, educated Catholics to question their faith. At the debate, Luther had Eck guessing what he would present next, which gave Luther one of the many advantages that he had over Eck. With due respect to what both sides presented at the debate at Leipzig, Luther clearly was more convincing as evidenced by his ability to gain followers and supporters of his ideas. While most historians might believe that Eck won the debate, it is interesting to ponder why the authorities refused to declare a winner. Perhaps they were too scared to state who won the debate because of what it might mean in terms of breaking from the Church. Perhaps Luther had the more convincing arguments and was, in fact, the victor.

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