

The 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation
A Turning Point in World History
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“Who had the more convincing argument at the Leipzig Debate: John Eck or Martin Luther?”

During the time of the Protestant Reformation, an important event known as the Leipzig Debate occurred. This was primarily between two men with varying views on religion, Dr. Johann Eck and Martin Luther. The latter of these men was a German monk who was the father of Lutheranism, a branch of Christianity that emerged during the Protestant Reformation. John Eck was a German theologian who was friendly with Luther until 1517, which was when Luther published his Ninety-five Theses. Eck deemed these theses to be unorthodox and challenged Luther and one of his disciples to a debate on their differing views of religious doctrine.

The Leipzig Debate took place in Germany in the year 1519, in the great hall of the castle named Pleissenburg, which is in Leipzig. A year before this, in 1518, this public debate was initiated by Johann Eck, who challenged both Andreas Rudolf Bodenstein von Karlstadt and Martin Luther to a debate on Luther's teachings. The discussion between Eck and Luther took place on the dates of July 4 - July 13, during which Luther emphasized his belief of faith in God alone; this stance can be backed up by scripture. John Eck defended Catholic doctrine and walked away the winner of the debate, according to the theologians of the University of Leipzig. Despite the ruling of the University of Leipzig, Martin Luther had the more convincing argument at the Leipzig Debate because he had superior knowledge of background information, he defended doctrine that remains true to the teachings of the *Holy Bible*, and he won over many new followers.

Martin Luther's acute knowledge of history gave him an edge in the debate against Eck; Luther had many convincing arguments backed up by facts from the past. One historic event that he constantly dwelt upon was the execution of John Huss, which took place in the year 1415. Huss was executed by the Council of Constance for his diversion from the traditional religious views of the time. Luther feared excommunication and death, so he made sure to learn from Huss' mistakes. This alertness helped Luther to say the correct things during the debate, as to not

offend anyone or to get himself hurt. Luther also used examples from previous church systems in Rome and Greece to prove his points throughout the debate. This demonstrated preparedness on Luther's part, something that John Eck greatly lacked. One primary source says this: "Eck had no idea that his opponent's learning was so extensive, and that he would be able to extricate himself from the coils that were drawn around him. 'The reverend doctor,' said he, '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.'" (*History of the Sixteenth Century Reformation*, in *The Reformation History Library*, D'Aubinge) This recollection of the debate makes it evident that Eck is clearly shocked at the knowledge that Luther has, and quite a bit taken back by the historical evidence behind Luther's statements. Luther also knew much about the saints in Christianity, which caused Eck to stumble on some of his quite hollow arguments. Luther was able to use his knowledge to back up his views on religion, a skill that Eck was inadequate at.

Luther, being an Augustine monk, followed what Saint Augustine taught. He was taught to be a monk by Dr. Johann Staupitz at a monastery. Both of these men promoted faith as the primary part of religion, and were opposed to indulgences and the questionable behaviors of popes in the Roman Catholic religion. A man by the name of Erasmus supported these views, too. He wrote the book *Praise of Folly*, which criticized the pope and other flaws of the church. He also translated the Bible into Latin and Greek, in the years 1512 and 1514, respectively. These translations allowed Luther to compare texts, which enabled him to form his Ninety-five Theses, the basis of his doctrine, in 1517. This ability to compare texts allowed Luther to decipher the true meanings of scriptural verses, and various words whose meanings were being altered by the typical Catholic standpoints of the time. The translations of the *Holy Bible* are yet another example of Luther's usage of background information. He came prepared to the debate, and this allowed him to be fully equipped to rebuttal stances against his own opinions and doctrine, in addition to having the ability to formulate arguments against Eck and his Roman Catholic viewpoints. Martin Luther's knowledge allowed him to be able to make more convincing arguments than his opponent, John Eck, in the Leipzig Debate.

Martin Luther only made statements that could be backed up by the truth of the scripture in the Leipzig Debate; for this reason he was able to make more solid points against his opponent, the Roman Catholic, Dr. Johann Eck. Throughout the Leipzig Debate Luther used many direct references to scripture and his arguments are more sound because of this. He also quoted from God's holy Word in his pamphlets and books that he wrote in his lifetime. The *Holy Bible* is one hundred percent true; it is factual. When a statement is backed up by a fact, it automatically becomes more powerful and structurally sound.

Eck, though, refers to the teachings of Catholic church councils, which is not all biblically mandated. This is a flawed system for him to use during the debate because it cannot always be backed up with the Bible. Verses that display Luther's views most adequately and completely are Romans 1:16-17, which read: "¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" (New Revised Standard Version) Luther did what these verses say; during the Protestant Reformation he takes it upon himself to share the *Holy Bible* with others. He also strongly supported Romans 1:17 and he believes that the only way to live is by faith in God, and not by doing good works to earn salvation. This notion is from scripture, so it can easily be proven true. Another verse that rules in Luther's favor is Romans 3:28. This scripture states: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law." (New Revised Standard Version) This verse also supported Luther's views and at the same time it breaks down Eck's Catholic teachings. Roman Catholicism is based upon good works, and Romans 3:28 makes it crystal clear that faith is the only way to be justified by God.

Another argument that Luther made during the Leipzig Debate was one regarding the word "repent." He used this word to explore ways to counter the Roman Catholic doctrine regarding indulgences, penance, sin, and good works. Matthew 4:17 reads: "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" (New Revised Standard Version) Thanks to the translations of the *Holy Bible* made by Erasmus and other verses in the Bible, Luther is able to conjure that the meaning of repent is to completely turn from evil. This discovery in the word rebukes the Catholic ritual of "doing penance," and gave Luther strong

biblical evidence to back up this view in the Leipzig Debate. These three verses, among many that are not written about here, helped Luther to make more plausible arguments than his opponent, John Eck.

Martin Luther may have lost the Leipzig Debate by official rulings according to University of Leipzig theologians, but he had more convincing arguments than John Eck because he won over many followers. From this perspective, Luther truly won the debate. Throughout the Protestant Reformation, Luther always had the support of numerous Augustinian monks. This was due to the fact that he, himself, was an Augustinian monk. As written about earlier, Luther used a myriad of biblical evidence to support his views. This use of the scriptures helped him to gain many follows, many of them living in Germany and Switzerland. Historian, Hank Bitten, writes: “It is my personal opinion that Luther did not feel he won the debate because his goal was to reform the church - specifically by ending the aggressive sale of indulgences.” Luther’s primary focus was not to win the debate, but to spread his views on Christianity and biblical truths. In this sense, the debate was a win for Martin Luther. Another analysis of the Leipzig Debate states the following: “One result of the Leipzig Debate was that Luther greatly strengthened his cause among his followers. He made them feel certain that their position was right. Luther also won many new followers, one of whom was Martin Bucer, who became an important leader of the Reformation, and who helped to share the views of John Calvin” (*The Church in History*, B. K. Kuiper). This quotation further proves the point that Luther’s showing at the debate was extremely effective in winning over followers for the Protestant cause and that he had convincing arguments. This helped Luther and his cause more than having the “official win” of the debate. People will only stand on a side where the arguments are solid, and Luther’s noted proof and strong following shows that he had solid arguments. Despite the decision made in John Eck’s favor at the Leipzig Debate, Martin Luther had more convincing arguments because he swayed people to his side and acquired new followers of his Protestant views.

Martin Luther had the more convincing argument at the Leipzig Debate because he had superior knowledge of background information, he defended doctrine that remains true to the teachings of the *Holy Bible*, and he won over many new followers. Luther used historic examples for his viewpoints, something that Eck was lacking knowledge of. This enabled him to have

witty and crafty comebacks and strong offensive arguments throughout the Leipzig Debate. Luther also relied heavily on the teachings of the, *Holy Bible* and he stayed true to God's Word and was not swayed by fictitious teachings of the church councils. He utilized various scriptures to further prove his points not only in the Leipzig Debate, but also in his writings. Verses such as Romans 1:16-17, Romans 3:28, and Matthew 4:17 are essential verses that supported Luther's view in faith alone through Christ alone. Because his arguments were strong, solid, and sound Luther was able to win over many followers for the Protestant cause. This is a sure indicator that Luther had convincing arguments, despite the rulings made in John Eck's favor. For these reasons, it is clear that Martin Luther had arguments that were superior to those of Dr. Johann Eck at the Leipzig Debate of 1519.

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