



Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt

A BIBLE STUDY ON ANDREAS BODENSTEIN VON KARLSTADT



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A Theologically inept reformer who forced sweeping changes upon the Christians in Wittenberg

“Built on the Rock”

(TLH 467; LW 291; LSB 645)

(Matt. 16:13–18; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Cor. 3:11–16; Acts 17:24)

“I may say that of all my enemies who have opposed me up to this time none have brought me so much grief as you.”

—Martin Luther preaching on the wrong-headed actions of Karlstadt in Wittenberg (Fifth Sermon after Invocavit, March 13, 1522)

“In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank beer with my friends Philipp [Melancthon] and [Nikolaus von] Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything. Had I desired to foment trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; indeed, I could have started such a game that even the emperor would not have been safe. But what would it have been? Mere fool’s play. I did nothing; I let the Word do its work.”

—Martin Luther (Second Sermon after Invocavit, March 10, 1522)

Karlstadt mistakenly thought he could take on Johann Eck and debate the merits of Luther’s reforms during the Leipzig Debate (June and July 1519). Luther had to quickly take over after Eck complained that Karlstadt relied too heavily on simply reading from the many theological books he had brought to the debate.

Later, in his attempt to erase all distinctions between pastors and laity, Karlstadt renounced his theological degrees and asked that he be called “Brother Andreas.” In the winter of 1521–22, Karlstadt felt he could not wait for Luther to return from the Wartburg, and he initiated sweeping changes in the Wittenberg congregations. Images were condemned and removed. Karlstadt decided to celebrate the Lord’s Supper dressed in peasant clothing and

excised all sacrificial language from the liturgy. Karlstadt also banned private confession, the use of Latin in the Mass and all fasting. He argued that the Holy Spirit enlightens the Christian independent of instruction in Christian doctrine and the biblical languages, and he taught that the Sacraments were mere symbols of God’s grace.

Upon his return to Wittenberg, Luther preached eight sermons against such radical actions, warning of the harm done to weak consciences and the impossibility of forwarding the Gospel through the wholesale enforcement of new church rules.

STANZA ONE

Built on the Rock the Church shall stand / Even when steeples are falling. / Crumbled have spires in ev’ry land; / Bells still are chiming and calling, / Calling the young and old to rest, / But above all the souls distressed, / Longing for rest everlasting.

In this hymn by Danish Lutheran theologian, author and educator Nikolai Fredrik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872), the often weak-looking Christian Church on earth is contrasted with the efficacy of the Word of God and the Sacraments in the lives of distressed sinners. Grundtvig points the Christian to the presence of the gracious and merciful Redeemer, who is present to bless and to give His life-giving promise to all who will receive it in faith.

1. By its very nature, the Law of God demands obedience and condemns all transgression. Its chief function after the fall is to condemn all human attempts to create a saving righteousness and drive us to despair. The problem is not with God’s holy and perfect will — the problem is our complete inability to measure up to the standards of the 10 Commandments. Karlstadt mistakenly was convinced that enforcing new church regulations would nurture true Christian faith and further the Reformation. Why is God’s Law completely powerless to save weak and helpless sinners? (See “The Law of God Is Good and Wise,” *LSB* 579.) Why do church leaders (in the 16th century and today) get it completely wrong when they think forcing obedience will change the sinner’s heart and mind?

2. Why was the wholesale destruction of images in the churches destructive to the weak in faith living in Wittenberg? (See Luther's argument concerning God's command to fashion the bronze serpent in Num. 21:9 and King Hezekiah's command to destroy the bronze serpent in 2 Kings 18:4.)

3. Why do sudden and wholesale demands by well-meaning church leaders today harm the timid faith of some in the congregation? (Examples: "Next Sunday, everyone will be forced to attend adult confirmation class." "Next Sunday, everyone will be required to make the sign of the cross during the Invocation.")

STANZA TWO

Surely in temples made with hands / God, the Most High, is not dwelling; / High above earth His temple stands, / All earthly temples excelling. / Yet He who dwells in heav'n above / Chooses to live with us in love, / Making our bodies His temple.

The "yet" in this second stanza is critical. We believe God is not contained within church buildings (ACTS 17:24). We dare not assume God's presence just because some religious structure appears grand and glorious. God has not come in Christ through the Holy Spirit to take up residence after we have made ourselves holy by eliminating all sin in our lives.

4. Karlstadt foolishly believed a wholesale purging and cleansing of the church buildings in Wittenberg, as well as imposing new regulations to clean up the behavior of local Christians, would be blessed by God and strengthen the Reformation. How is this foolish thinking present in well-meaning religious leaders today? How is the Christ-enabled sanctified life a fruit and not a cause of God's saving presence with His people?

5. Why is it dangerous to seek confirmation of Christ's presence in the life of the Christian by measuring our inward holiness and obedience to the Law? Where should the Christian's confidence be found? (See JOHN 1:29; ROM. 5:18.)

STANZA THREE

We are God's house of living stones, / Built for His own habitation. / He through baptismal grace us owns / Heirs of His wondrous salvation. / Were we but two His name to tell, / Yet He would deign with us to dwell / With all His grace and His favor.

Christ was called and sent to seek and save undeserving sinners who could not produce any saving righteousness of their own. Christ did not bless Luther and the Reformation because Luther and the Lutheran

reformers were more dedicated or more sincere or more intelligent than the rest. Luther faithfully confessed that Christ and His Word did it all.

6. By grace alone, God creates believers in the eternal Gospel. We have nothing to offer God by our many sins, yet He mercifully deigns to come and cleanse and give us the gift of new life in His Son. How does Grundtvig portray the incomprehensible generosity of the Gospel in this stanza?

7. In his misguided zeal, Karlstadt attempted to purge the Wittenberg congregations of all of Rome's abuses but ended up obscuring the Gospel of grace. Why does our old, unbelieving nature always want to make Christ into a new Moses? Why is the saving covenant God cut with Abraham (GENESIS 15; GENESIS 17) completely different than the world's version of deal-making and bartering with heaven to gain salvation? Why is the center of Lutheran theology found in the revelation that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (ROM. 5:8)?

8. The Lord is abundant in bringing His word of forgiveness to our troubled conscience. From the pulpit in Wittenberg on March 16, 1522, Luther said, "For our God, the God we have, is not so stingy that he has left us with only one comfort or strengthening for our conscience, or only one absolution, but we have many absolutions in the Gospel and we are richly showered with many absolutions. For instance, we have this in the Gospel: 'If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you' [MATTHEW 6:14]. Another comfort we have in the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses,' etc. [MATTHEW 6:12]. A third is our Baptism, when I reason thus: See, my Lord, I have been baptized in Thy name so that I may be assured of Thy 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. Finally, I take to myself the blessed Sacrament, when I eat His body and drink His blood as a sign that I am rid of my sins and God has freed me from all my frailties; and in order to make me sure of this, 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." Review these five ways in which God desires to assure us that our sins are forgiven.

STANZA FOUR

Here stands the font before our eyes, / Telling how God has received us. / The altar recalls Christ's sacrifice / And what His Supper here gives us. / Here sound the Scriptures that proclaim / Christ yesterday, today, the same, / And evermore, our Redeemer.

Grundtvig sees no inconsistency between the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 COR. 3:16) and the efficacy

of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Other 16th-century reformers removed the baptismal font and the altar from the congregations, believing Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper were nothing more than New Testament ordinances/commands.

9. Christ reveals His saving presence in His Word — at the baptismal font and at the altar. What is graciously given at the font and altar? How is this explained in the catechism? Why did Karlstadt get it completely wrong when he taught that the Holy Spirit works salvation independent of the water of the font and the bread and wine of the altar? What clear passages from Scripture show the efficacy of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper?

10. The quote from Luther above faithfully gives witness to the efficacy of the Word of God. When it comes to the salvation of the world, we do not pray that we would enact more church rules and force the world to submit to Baptism and memorize the Bible. Reflect on the following prayer for the Church: Almighty God, grant to Your Church Your Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from above, that Your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve You and, in the confession of Your name, abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*LSB*, P. 305)

STANZA FIVE

Grant, then, O God, Your will be done, / That, when the church bells are ringing, / Many in saving faith may come / Where Christ His message is bringing: / "I know My own; My own know Me. / You, not the world, My face shall see. / My peace I leave with you. Amen."

The Bible and the Catechism clearly teach that it is God's good and gracious will that all receive the Gospel of Christ by faith and are saved (1 TIM. 2:4; 2 PETER 3:9; EZEK. 18:23; MATT. 23:37). In this final stanza the "church bells" point to the invitation of the Christian Church to come, hear and believe the redeeming Word of God. It is through God-given faith that we behold Christ, and through Christ the Father and the Holy Spirit.

11. "Your will be done." This includes allowing the Word of Christ — through the prophets and apostles, through the water of the baptismal font, through the bread and wine of the altar — to do the life-giving and life-sustaining work only it can do. Through Baptism, we are made heirs of the redeeming fruits of Christ's perfect life and sacrificial death. He is the cornerstone and the sole foundation of all that is eternal. Reflect on Eph. 2:19–22. Who builds the true Christian Church on earth? How is this a Trinitarian event?

12. Luther preaches against the teachings of Karlstadt that it is impossible to force people to become true Christians. If the Gospel of Christ is pure gift, why do demands and threats obscure the nature of Christ's sweet promises and injure the faith of the weak?