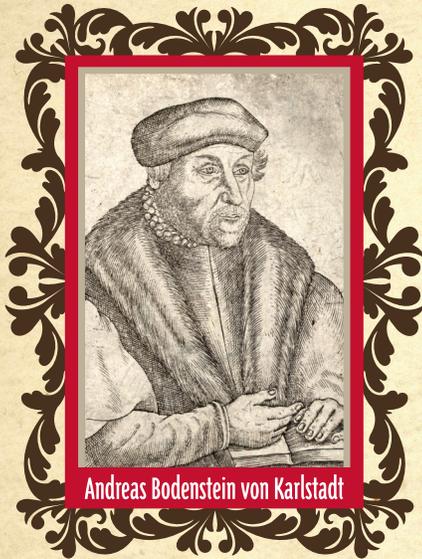


FACES OF THE REFORMATION

ANDREAS BODENSTEIN VON KARLSTADT (CARLSTADT)

Born: ca. 1486 | Karlstadt, Franconia (Germany)

Died: Dec. 24, 1541 | Basel, Switzerland



A Theologically Inept Reformer Who Forced Sweeping Changes upon the Christians in Wittenberg

ANDREAS BODENSTEIN VON KARLSTADT WAS THE DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF THE ARTS AND HELD DOCTORATES IN THEOLOGY AND CIVIL AND CANON LAW when he encountered Luther in Wittenberg. Shortly after he began defending Luther, Karlstadt decided Luther was too moderate in the way that he applied his ideas. Karlstadt pushed Luther's reforms through churches rather than allowing the people to accept them at their own pace. He eventually focused so intently upon the social dynamics of the priesthood of all believers that he separated from Luther's theology.

Karlstadt began contributing to the theological arguments of the Reformation. He then attempted to debate Johann Eck at the Leipzig Debate in 1519, but he found he was not competent and Luther had to take his place. After this, Karlstadt ceased contributing to the theological discussion and instead focused upon applying the doctrines. While Luther was in hiding at the Wartburg, Karlstadt pushed through Luther's reforms in the city of Wittenberg. He instituted the evangelical mass that provided Communion in both kinds and removed all the altar furnishings — without the agreement of the congregation or the prince.

He agreed with Luther that the believer has a direct relationship with Christ and that adoration of relics was inappropriate. Karlstadt argued that Luther had not gone far enough, however, and claimed that all images of any kind should be abolished because they would distract from the faith that is within us. He included in these images priestly vestments, altar furnishings and crucifixes. He emphasized the theological idea of "detachment" (Gelassenheit). This entails that one "leave everything behind" and fully follow Christ. Karlstadt interpreted this to mean that all other items — including altar furnishings and images — were distractions and should be avoided.

Karlstadt's theology of "detachment" criticized the role of the clergy. If every believer has a direct relationship with Christ, then clergy were a distracting intermediary. He therefore created the "new laymen." He thought that since all Christians were equal before God, they should also be equal in society. This equality should be expressed politically in an abandonment of all ranks and titles among the believers. He further felt it should be expressed economically in a redistribution of wealth in the community. Because of these social reforms, some of his teachings were used as motivation in the Peasants' Revolt. Karlstadt himself, however, condemned the violent action of the rebellion.

His emphasis on "detachment" led him to challenge the real presence of Christ in Communion. He felt that the focus of the Sacrament should be upon the believer, rather than on Christ. He therefore interpreted the Sacrament to be only a representation of Christ. He even went so far as to suggest that the bread and wine simply reminded communicants of their own forgiveness in their flesh, thereby making the Sacrament as much a symbol of the communicant's body as of Christ's body and blood.

Karlstadt illustrates the danger of being so interested in the application of doctrines that the application becomes more important than the doctrine itself.



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