

Leipzig Disputation between Martin Luther and Johann Eck (1519)

Abstract

The Leipzig debate took place two years after the issuance of Martin Luther's (1483–1546) Ninety-Five Theses had inaugurated the Reformation in Germany. The participants in the debate were Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541), a Protestant theologian at the University of Wittenberg, Johannes Eck (1486–1543), a Catholic prelate and professor at the University of Ingolstadt, and Luther himself. The debate centered on grace and free will and was initiated by Karlstadt and Eck in June 1519. Luther entered the discussion a month later, taking Karlstadt's place. By that time, Eck had branded Luther a heretic, and Luther had replied with his own public attacks on Eck.

The excerpt below focuses on the authority of the pope and the Councils and touches on the interpretation of Scripture and the relevance of tradition. Over the course of the debate, Luther denied the authority of the pope and declared Scripture alone to be the basis of authority (over even the Councils and the writings of the Church Fathers). In response, Pope Leo X promulgated the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* (1520), which threatened Luther with excommunication.

Source

This is the disputation between the excellent theologians Joh. Eck and Martin Luther, Augustinian, which was begun on July 4, 1519 at 7 am.

LUTHER *began as follows:*

In the name of the Lord. Amen. I accept and follow the terms of the debate established by the esteemed gentlemen, Andreas Carlstadt and Johann Eck. I add this one thing, that in deference to the highest pontiff and the Roman church I would gladly have avoided this unnecessary and extremely distasteful matter had it not been for the thesis of the esteemed Dr. Joh[a]n[n] Eck. I am sorry to note the absence of those who ought to be here, those who both privately and publicly have so many times charged me with heresy. Now, when knowledge of the case is available, they absent themselves, those inquisitors to whom brotherly admonition and teaching are less important than making accusations.

Subject of the debate (scope):

On the authority, or rather the primacy of the Roman pope.

ECK: In thy name, sweet Jesus. Before I descend into the arena, I declare before you, most illustrious, noble, distinguished, and excellent lords, that all things which are about to be said by me or have been said are subject first of all to the judgment of the highest [the papal] chair and its occupant, then to others with the responsibility of correcting those who are in error and returning them to knowledge of the truth.

The reverend father declares in his opening statement, as if excusing himself, that he would have gladly avoided this whole matter in deference to the supreme pontiff had it not been for my thesis. The reverend father should be reminded of the following: Had he himself not denied the supremacy of the Roman pontiff before the time of Sylvester, it would not have been necessary for me to submit my thirteenth thesis. And he asserted during

proceedings before the legate of the apostolic see that the blessed pontiff Pelagius – one who more than all the others received the words of Christ according to the interpretation of the sacred fathers – distorted the gospel writing. The reverend father therefore strives in vain to cast on me the blame for what he has brought on himself on more than one occasion.

But now, without further digression, let us proceed to the major issue under the guidance of God. Reverend father, your thirteenth thesis, in answer to mine, affirms that the “supremacy” of the Roman church rests on utterly worthless decrees of Roman popes issued within the last four hundred years. Such decrees, you say, are opposed by the text of Sacred Scripture and the accepted histories of eleven hundred years. To this I reply as follows: Monarchy and a single sovereignty have been established in the church of God by divine law and by Christ. Therefore the texts of Sacred Scripture or accepted history are not in opposition, because the church militant (like one body, in the view of St. Paul) has been founded and patterned after the image of the church triumphant, where there is one monarch, with everyone arranged in order, culminating in one head, which is God. Therefore, such an order has also been established by Christ on earth, since John 5 [19] asserts that the Son does nothing except what he sees the Father doing. Therefore, he is not from heaven who refuses to submit to the head, just as he is not from heaven, but from Lucifer, who does not wish to be subject to God.

All these things I am able to confirm on wide authority, but especially through that holy saint, the blessed Dionysius the Areopagite, who says in his book on *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of the church: “For our hierarchy, sacredly ordained in the orders handed down by God, conforms to the hierarchy of the saints and heavenly beings.” So Gregory of Nazianzus says in his *Apology* that the sacred mystery is celebrated in accordance with a heavenly pattern, through which we are associated on earth with the heavenly orders. For what a monstrosity the church would be without a head, something that almost all heretics have sought to bring about, as St. Cyprian pointed out to Rogatianus and Puppianus. By weakening the head, they might insinuate their errors and poison into the minds of men.

This was the principal reason, along with other related ones, why the highly regarded University of Paris condemned John of Tornaix for his denial of the primacy of the Roman church. Such also was the error of Wycliffe, that the Roman church was not superior to others according to the law of the gospel.

LUTHER: When the esteemed doctor argues that there is just one head of the universal church, he does very well. And if there is anyone who wishes for private reasons to defend the opposite point of view against his lordship, let him stand up. This does not concern me.

ECK: Since the reverend father asserts that he is not concerned with the opposite of what I am attempting to prove – that according to divine law there is a monarchy in the church militant as well as in the church triumphant – I commend him for this, because in this he agrees with the divine word of John in Revelation: “I saw the new holy city descending,” and so on.

But, examining the subject more closely, if the church militant has not been without a monarchy, I would like to hear who that monarch was or ever has been except the Roman pontiff, or what other primary seat there is except the chair of Peter and his successors. This is the view of St. Cyprian in his third letter to Cornelius, the Roman pontiff, where he speaks against the Novatians who had attacked Rome underhandedly, saying, “Over and above all this, after the heretics had set up a false bishop for them, they dared to travel to Rome and bring letters by apostates and unholy people to the seat of Peter and the principal church, from which sacred unity arose, without considering that the Romans are people whose faith has been praised by the apostle and to whom disloyalty can hold no appeal.”

Jerome took a stand against the followers of Lucifer when he said, "The welfare of the church depends on the dignity of the chief priest. Unless preeminent authority is given him by all, as many schisms as there are priesthoods will arise in the church." And that this supreme priest is a Roman is evident in two letters of this same blessed Jerome to Pope Damasus, almost every word of which is relevant to this matter. But for the sake of brevity, let me note only the following: "I am speaking with the successor of the fisherman and the disciple of Christ. Seeking no reward except Christ, I approach Your Holiness, that is, the chair of Peter. I know that on this rock the church was founded." And later: "Whoever is not joined together with you is dispersed."

From these statements every good Christian easily infers that sacerdotal unity flows from the Roman pontiff; that this has always been the chief seat, preferred above all others; and that this is the rock, as Jerome affirms, on which the church has been established. Let the reverend father point out another monarchy in the church of antiquity.

LUTHER: I grant by all means that there is a monarchy in the church militant, and that its head is not a man but Christ himself, and this on divine authority in 1 Corinthians 15 [25]: "He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." And a little earlier: "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every earthly power." St. Augustine in the last chapter of his first book on the Trinity speaks about the reign of Christ in the present: "So it is clear that Christ, the head of the church, will transform us, who are his kingdom, to his image."

So Matthew says in his final chapter: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." Likewise in Acts 9 [4], where Paul heard a voice from heaven – "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" – Augustine says again that the head is speaking for its members. Therefore one must not listen to those who drive Christ out of the church militant into the church triumphant, that is, the kingdom of faith. The point is this, that we do not see our head, yet we have him. Psalm 122 says, "He sits in judgment over the House of David." Surely there are many seats on which Christ alone sits. We see the seats, not the occupant, or the king.

Coming then to the authorities of the gentleman, where he asserts that in the church militant there is one head, established by divine law and by Christ, he speaks for himself, but he proves nothing. For, in my opinion, he contradicts himself by his first authority, that of Paul in Ephesians 4 [15], since Paul speaks there most certainly about the church militant and he calls Christ its head. The same idea, contradictory to him, is to be found in 1 Corinthians 3 [5, together with 1:13]: "Who then is Apollos? Who is Cephas? Who is Paul? Is Christ divided?" and so on. Here he clearly forbids any other head than Christ.

His second authority is John 5 [19]: "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing." He is not speaking of the church militant or the church triumphant but, in the opinion of all learned men, about his own equality with the Father – that is, that the Father is not able to do anything which the Son cannot also do. I pass over his statement that he is not from heaven who refuses to submit to the head, and that he who is unwilling to submit to God is from Lucifer. For just as his preceding authorities were badly chosen, so these assertions are in poor taste.

[...]

His third authority, Dionysius, does not contradict me, for we are not denying the ecclesiastical hierarchy. We are arguing about the head of the monarchy, not about the hierarchy.

As to the fourth authority which is introduced, that of Gregory of Nazianzus – that we are associated through a sacred mystery with the heavenly orders – it is known to any common scribe that there is nothing here about

monarchy or the head. Now I agree with what he adds, that without a head the church would be a monstrosity. But this head, the divine doctor notwithstanding, can be none other than Christ, which I can clearly prove. For if this head, which they call the Roman pontiff, being a man, dies, the church is then without a head. If Christ is meantime the head of the church until another is chosen, it is no less monstrous that Christ yield to a living pontiff and succeed a dead one.

His fifth authority was St. Cyprian, who persecuted heretics, asserting that they were able to inculcate their own errors in men with impunity when the head was weakened. Again, this has nothing to do with the proposition. For this refers not to a Roman head, but to whatever head of whatever episcopacy was involved. And if the esteemed doctor wishes to stand on the authority of Cyprian, we will finish the debate within the hour. For Cyprian never addressed Cornelius, the Roman pontiff, in any other way than “dearest brother.” . . . Indeed, this same blessed martyr, as Augustine alleges in the second chapter of his second book concerning baptism, said the following: “Let none of us decide he is chief of the bishops, or use tyrannical intimidation to drive his colleagues to the necessity of submitting, since every bishop has his own proper limitation for the exercise of liberty and power: insofar as he cannot be judged by another, in like manner he himself is not able to judge another. But let us await the judgment of our universal Lord Jesus Christ.”

[...]

ECK: The reverend father has descended into the arena well prepared, having his material arranged in good order in a document composed and printed by him. Therefore your illustrious lordships will pardon Eck, occupied for a long time now with other matters, if he has not been able to put together from the sources such an abundance and such accurate material as the reverend father has assembled. He has come to debate, not to publish a book. But let us consider in order what the reverend father has said.

First of all, he undertakes to prove that Christ is the head of the church, which is superfluous, since none presumes to deny this unless he be Antichrist. I am surprised that he has not done what he promised to do in the proceedings before the legate of the apostolic see – that he has not presented evidence from a certain theologian versed in law to the effect that there can be many subordinate heads, and that the concept of a mystical head or even of a symbolical head differs from the concept of a natural head. From this it follows that another head can be sought in the church in addition to Christ. Whether or not the apostle Paul had Peter in mind in 1 Corinthians 1 [13 and 3:5] (“Is Christ divided?” and so on), St. Jerome did not speak falsely in *Contra Jovinianus*, Book I: “One is chosen, that having been established as head, the occasion of division might be removed.” He clearly calls Peter the appointed head of the church. But let us dismiss these matters and begin our rebuttal.

[...]

Source of English translation: Donald Jenks Ziegler, *Great Debates of the Reformation*. New York: Random House, 1969, pp. 5–12. *Please note: we were unable to determine the rightsholder for this English translation. If you have information regarding the rights status, please contact the GHI-Washington.*

Source of original Latin text: Otto Seitz, *Der authentische Text der Leipziger Disputation, 1519: aus bisher unbenutzten Quellen*. Berlin: C. A. Schwatschke, 1903. Available online at:

<https://archive.org/details/derauthentischeooeckgoog/page/n3>

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