

The Road to the Reformation

Step Two

The Heidelberg Disputation

When Luther presented his Ninety-Five Theses, he forthrightly thought he was letting the Pope know that indulgences were being abused. He expected that his criticisms would be listened to and acted upon. Instead, church officials and other theologians began to attack his ideas. Johann Tetzel, the Dominican indulgence seller, wrote against Luther and much to Luther's disappointment so did Johann Eck (1486-1543), a friend of Luther's and a celebrated professor at the University of Ingolstadt. They were not alone either.

At the same time, news of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and translations into German circulated throughout Germany. People at all levels of society were pleased that Luther was standing up to the Pope and the Italian clergy. Germans felt that they were getting milked for money by the Church in Italy and they were angry about it. So Luther had friends and allies as well as enemies. His colleague Andreas Karlstadt (1480-1541) wrote in his defense and the University of Wittenberg and members of his Augustinian Order rallied to Luther's cause.

Despite news of Luther's ideas getting out to the general public, in the spring of 1518 the controversy over indulgences was still largely a dispute among professors, priests, and monks. Tetzel was a Dominican, and that order of monks supported him while Luther's Augustinian brothers took his side. The various religious orders in the medieval Catholic Church were often intense rivals just as

modern fans of Notre Dame, Marquette, and Loyola are rivals despite all of them being Roman Catholic universities. Luther also had an important patron in his mentor and the head of the Augustinian Order, Johann Staupitz.

It is important to remember that people, including Luther, wanted to end the controversy hopefully through reaching an amicable consensus of all the parties. The problem was that Tetzel and the Dominicans sought to make Luther look bad by emphasizing that his ideas were a challenge to the authority of the Pope. Renaissance Popes were hyper-sensitive to potential threats to their authority. The late fourteenth through the mid-fifteenth century had seen the Councillar Movement attempt to limit papal authority and transform the Catholic Church from a religious monarchy into a sort of republic. The popes had staved off the councillorists, but the movement still existed and so did the formidable Holy Roman Emperors, who periodically quarreled with the Popes.

Getting Luther to back down and compromise was becoming increasingly difficult. His theological ideas about salvation by faith alone and scripture alone as the only source of doctrinal authority were becoming firmer. Luther and other German academics had also begun to reject the traditional scholastic approach to the study of theology. It was based on Aristotelian philosophy and centuries of commentaries on commentaries. The Bible was seldom studied directly in its original ancient languages. Scholasticism's greatest figure was the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274). His star was waning as the new

scholarly methods of Renaissance humanism provided a better way to study theology.

The faculty of the University of Wittenberg had joined with Luther in rejecting scholasticism. So Luther, Karlstadt, and several other Wittenbergers journeyed to Heidelberg to present their ideas at a chapter meeting of the Augustinian Order. From 9 April through 15 May, Luther and his companions debated with members of the theology faculty from the University of Erfurt. Some of them were Luther's old professors. At the end of several weeks of grueling intellectual combat, Luther and his friends emerged the winners of the Heidelberg disputation. The debate served to make Luther more of a celebrity in Germany. But it also made the Pope and Catholic authorities even more determined to silence the troublesome monk.