

CHAPTER 23

LUTHER AND CARLSTADT

The case of Carlstadt worthy of notice - His difficulty with Luther respecting the Epistle of James - His boldness in standing with Luther against the pope - What Carlstadt did during Luther's captivity - How far he came under fanaticism - Who acted with Carlstadt in the removal of images from the churches, the suppression of masses, and the abolition of the law of celibacy - Luther on returning restored the mass and suppressed the simple ordinance of the supper - Carlstadt submitted to Luther's correction - After two years, Carlstadt felt constrained to oppose Luther respecting the supper - The grounds of their difference respecting the Reformation - Luther said Christ's flesh and blood were literally present IN the bread and wine - Carlstadt said they were simply represented by them - The controversy which followed - Carlstadt refuted by banishment - His cruel treatment in exile - He was not connected with the disorderly conduct of the Anabaptists - Why Carlstadt has been so harshly judged - D'Aubigne's estimate of this controversy - Carlstadt's labors in Switzerland - Luther writes against him - Luther and Carlstadt reconciled - D'Aubigne's estimate of Carlstadt as a scholar and a Christian - Carlstadt a Sabbatarian - Wherein Luther benefited Carlstadt - Wherein Luther might have been benefited by Carlstadt.

It is worthy of notice that at least one of the reformers of considerable prominence - Carlstadt - was a Sabbatarian. It is impossible to read the records of the Reformation without the conviction that Carlstadt was desirous of a more thorough work of reformation than was Luther. And that while Luther was disposed to tolerate certain abuses lest the Reformation should be endangered, Carlstadt was at all hazards for a complete return to the Holy Scriptures.

The Sabbatarian principles of Carlstadt, his intimate connection with Luther, his prominence in the early history of the Reformation, and the important bearing of Luther's decision concerning the Sabbath upon the entire history of the Protestant church, render the former worthy of notice in the history of the Sabbath. We shall give his record in the exact words of the best historians, none of whom were in sympathy with his observance of the seventh day. The manner in which they state his faults shows that they were not partial toward him. Shortly after Luther began to preach against the merit of good works, his deep interest in the work of delivering men from popish thralldom led him to deny the inspiration of some portion of those scriptures which were quoted against him. Dr. Sears thus states the case:

"Luther was so zealous to maintain the doctrine of justification by faith, that he was prepared even to call in question the authority of some portions of Scripture, which seemed to him not to be reconcilable with it. To the Epistle of James, especially, his expressions indicate the strongest repugnance."¹

Before Luther's captivity in the castle of Wartburg, a dispute had arisen between himself and Carlstadt on this very subject. It is recorded of Carlstadt that in the year 1520,

"He published a treatise 'Concerning the Canon of Scripture,' which, although defaced by bitter

attacks on Luther, was nevertheless an able work, setting forth the great principle of Protestantism viz., the paramount authority of Scripture. He also at this time contended for the authority of the Epistle of St. James, against Luther. On the publication of the bull of Leo X. against the reformers, Carlstadt showed a real and honest courage in standing firm with Luther. His work on 'Papal Sanctity' (1520) attacks the infallibility of the pope on the basis of the Bible."2

Luther, as is well known, while returning from the Diet of Worms, was seized by the agents of the Elector of Saxony, and hidden from his enemies in Wartburg Castle. We read of Carlstadt at this time as follows:

"In 1521, during Luther's confinement in the Wartburg, Carlstadt had almost sole control of the reform movement at Wittenberg, and was supreme in the university. He attacked monachism and celibacy in a treatise 'Concerning Celibacy, Monachism, and Widowhood.' His next point of assault was the Mass, and a riot of students and young citizens against the Mass soon followed. On Christmas, 1521, he gave the sacrament in both kinds to the laity, and in German; and in January 1522, he married. His headlong zeal led him to do whatever he came to believe right, at once and arbitrarily. But he soon outran Luther, and one of his great mistakes was in putting the Old Testament on the same footing as the New. On Jan. 24, 1522, Carlstadt obtained the adoption of a new church constitution at Wittenberg, which is of interest only as the first Protestant organization of the Reformation."3

There were present at this time in Wittenberg certain fanatical teachers, who, from the town whence they came, were called "the prophets of Zwickau." They brought Carlstadt for a time so far under their influence, that he concluded academical degrees to be sinful, and that, as the inspiration of the Spirit was sufficient, there was no need of human learning. He therefore advised the students of the university to return to their homes.4 That institution was in danger of dissolution. Such was Carlstadt's course in Luther's absence. With the exception of this last movement, his acts were in themselves right.

The changes made at Wittenberg during Luther's absence, whether timely or not, are generally set down to Carlstadt's account, and said to have been made by him on his individual responsibility, and in a fanatical manner. But this was quite otherwise. Dr. Maclaine thus states the case:

"The reader may perhaps imagine, from Dr. Mosheim's account of this matter, that Carlstadt introduced these changes merely by his own authority; but this was far from being the case; the suppression of private masses, the removal of images out of the churches, the abolition of the law which imposed celibacy upon the clergy; which are the changes hinted at by our historian as rash and perilous, were effected by Carlstadt, in conjunction with Bugenhagen, Melancthon, Jonas Amsdorf, and others, and were confirmed by the authority of the Elector of Saxony; so that there is some reason to apprehend that one of the principal causes of Luther's displeasure at these changes, was their being introduced in his absence; unless we suppose that he had not so far shaken off the fetters of superstition, as to be sensible of the absurdity and the pernicious consequences of the use of images."5

Carlstadt had given the cup to the laity of which they had long been deprived by Rome. He had set aside the worship of the consecrated bread. Dr. Sears rehearses this work of Carlstadt, and then tells us what Luther did concerning it on his return. These are his words:

"He [Carlstadt] had so far restored the sacrament of the Lord's supper as to distribute the wine as well as the bread to the laity. Luther, 'in order not to offend weak consciences,' insisted on distributing the bread only, and prevailed. He [Carlstadt] rejected the practice of elevating and

adoring the host. Luther allowed it, and introduced it again."⁶

The position of Carlstadt was at this time very trying. He had not received "many things taught by the new teachers" from Zwickau. But he had publicly taught some of their fanatical ideas relative to the influence of the Spirit of God superseding the necessity of study. But in the suppression of the idolatrous services of the Romanists, he was essentially right. He had the pain to see much of this set up again. Moreover the elector would not allow him either to preach or write upon the points wherein he differed from Luther. D'Aubigne states his course thus:

"Nevertheless, he sacrificed his self-love for the sake of peace, restrained his desire to vindicate his doctrine, was reconciled, at least in appearance, to his colleague [Luther], and soon after resumed his studies in the university."⁷

As Luther taught some doctrines which Carlstadt could not approve, he felt at last that he must speak. Dr. Sears thus writes:

"After Carlstadt had been compelled to keep silence, from 1522 to 1524, and to submit to the superior power and authority of Luther, he could contain himself no longer. He, therefore, left Wittenberg, and established a press at Jena, through which he could, in a series of publications, give vent to his convictions, so long pent up."⁸

The principles at the foundation of their ideas of the Reformation were these: Carlstadt insisted on rejecting everything in the Catholic church not authorized in the Bible; Luther was determined to retain everything not expressly forbidden. Dr. Sears thus states their primary differences:

"Carlstadt maintained, that 'we should not, in things pertaining to God, regard what the multitude say or think, but look simply to the word of God. Others,' he adds, 'say that, on account of the weak, we should not hasten to keep the commands of God; but wait till they become wise and strong.' In regard to the ceremonies introduced into the church, he judged as the Swiss reformers did, that all were to be rejected which had not a warrant in the Bible. 'It is sufficiently against the Scriptures if you can find no ground for it in them.'

"Luther asserted, on the contrary, 'Whatever is not against the Scriptures is for the Scriptures, and the Scriptures for it. Though Christ hath not commanded adoring of the host, so neither hath he forbidden it.' 'Not so,' said Carlstadt, 'we are bound to the Bible, and no one may decide after the thoughts of his own heart.'"⁹

It is of interest to know what was the subject which caused the controversy between them, and what was the position of each. Dr. Maclaine thus states the occasion of the conflict which now arose:

"This difference of opinion between Carlstadt and Luther concerning the eucharist, was the true cause of the violent rupture between those two eminent men, and it tended very little to the honor of the latter; for, however the explication, which the former gave of the words of the institution of the Lord's supper, may appear forced, yet the sentiments he entertained of that ordinance as a commemoration of Christ's death, and not as a celebration of his bodily presence, in consequence of a consubstantiation with the bread and wine, are infinitely more rational than the doctrine of Luther, which is loaded with some of the most palpable absurdities of transubstantiation; and if it be

supposed that Carlstadt strained the rule of interpretation too far, when he alleged, that Christ pronounced the pronoun this (in the words This is my body) pointing to his body, and not to the bread, what shall we think of Luther's explaining the nonsensical doctrine of consubstantiation by the similitude of a red-hot iron, in which two elements are united, as the body of Christ is with the bread of the eucharist?"[10](#)

Dr. Sears also states the occasion of this conflict in 1524:

"The most important difference between him and Luther, and that which most embittered the latter against him, related to the Lord's supper. He opposed not only transubstantiation, but consubstantiation, the real presence, and the elevation and adoration of the host. Luther rejected the first, asserted the second and third, and allowed the other two. In regard to the real presence, he says: 'In the sacrament is the real body of Christ and the real blood of Christ, so that even the unworthy and ungodly partake of it; and "partake of it corporally" too, and not spiritually as Carlstadt will have it.' "[11](#)

That Luther was the one chiefly in error in this controversy will be acknowledged by nearly every one at the present day. D'Aubigne cannot refrain from censuring him:

"When once the question of the supper was raised, Luther threw away the proper element of the Reformation, and took his stand for himself and his church in an exclusive Lutheranism."[12](#)

The controversy is thus characterized by Dr. Sears:

"A furious controversy ensued. Both parties exceeded the bounds of Christian propriety and moderation. Carlstadt was now in the vicinity of the Anabaptist tumults, excited by Muntzer. He sympathized with them in some things, but disapproved of their disorders. Luther made the most of this."[13](#)

It is evident that in this contest Luther did not gain any decisive advantage, even in the estimation of his friends. The Elector of Saxony interfered and banished Carlstadt! D'Aubigne thus states the case:

"He issued orders to deprive Carlstadt of his appointments, and banished him, not only from Orlamund, but from the States of the electorate."[14](#)

"Luther had nothing to do with this sternness on the part of the prince: it was foreign to his disposition, - and this he afterward proved."[15](#)

Carlstadt, for maintaining the doctrine now held by almost all Protestants, concerning the supper, and for denying Luther's doctrine that Christ is personally present in the bread, was rendered a homeless wanderer for years. His banishment was in 1524. What followed is thus described:

"From this date until 1534 he wandered through Germany, pursued by the persecuting opinions of both Lutherans and Papists, and at times reduced to great straits by indigence and unpopularity. But, although he always found sympathy and hospitality among the Anabaptists, yet he is evidently clear of the charge of complicity with Muntzer's rebellion. Yet he was forbidden to write, his life was sometimes in danger, and he exhibits the melancholy spectacle of a man great and right in many respects, but whose rashness, ambition, and insincere zeal, together with many fanatical opinions,

had put him under the well-founded but immoderate censure of both friends and foes."[16](#)

Such language seems quite unwarranted by the facts. There was no justice in this persecution of Carlstadt. He did for a brief time hold some fanatical ideas, but these he did not afterward maintain. The same writer speaks further in the same strain:

"It cannot be denied that in many respects he was apparently in advance of Luther, but his error lay in his haste to subvert and abolish the external forms and pomps before the hearts of the people, and doubtless his own, were prepared by an internal change. Biographies of him are numerous, and the Reformation no doubt owes him much of good for which he has not the credit, as it was overshadowed by the mischief he produced."[17](#)

Important truth relative to the services of Carlstadt is here stated, but it is connected with intimations of evil which have no sufficient foundation in fact. Dr. Sears speaks thus of the bitter language concerning him:

"For three centuries, Carlstadt's moral character has been treated somewhat as Luther's would have been, if only Catholic testimony had been heard. The party interested has been both witness and judge. What if we were to judge of Zwingle's Christian character by Luther's representations? The truth is, Carlstadt hardly showed a worse spirit, or employed more abusive terms toward Luther, than Luther did toward him. Carlstadt knew that in many things the truth was on his side; and yet, in these, no less than in others, he was crushed by the civil power, which was on the side of Luther."[18](#)

D'Aubigne speaks thus of the contest between these two men:

"Each turns against the error which, to his mind, seems most noxious, and in assailing it, goes - it may be --beyond the truth. But this being admitted, it is still true that both are right in the prevailing turn of their thoughts, and though ranking in different hosts, the two great teachers are nevertheless found under the same standard - that of Jesus Christ, who alone is TRUTH in the full import of that word."[19](#)

D'Aubigne says of them after Carlstadt had been banished:

"It is impossible not to feel a pain at contemplating these two men, once friends, and both worthy of our esteem, thus angrily opposed."[20](#)

Sometime after Carlstadt's banishment from Saxony he visited Switzerland. D'Aubigne speaks of the result of his labors in that country, and what Luther did toward him:

"His instructions soon attracted an attention nearly equal to that which had been excited by the earliest theses put forth by Luther. Switzerland seemed almost gained over to his doctrine. Bucer and Capito also appeared to adopt his views.

"Then it was that Luther's indignation rose to its hight; and he put forth one of the most powerful but also most OUTRAGEOUS of his controversial writings, - his book 'Against the Celestial Prophets.' "[21](#)

Dr. Sears also mentions the labors of Carlstadt in Switzerland, and speaks of Luther's uncandid book:

"The work which he wrote against him, he entitled 'The book against the Celestial Prophets.' This was uncandid; for the controversy related chiefly to the sacrament of the supper. In the south of Germany and in Switzerland, Carlstadt found more adherents than Luther. Banished as an Anabaptist, he was received as a Zwinglian."[22](#)

Dr. Maclaine tells something which followed, which is worthy of the better nature of these two illustrious men:

"Carlstadt, after his banishment from Saxony, composed a treatise against enthusiasm in general, and against the extravagant tenets and the violent proceedings of the Anabaptists in particular. This treatise was even addressed to Luther, who was so affected by it, that, repenting of his unworthy treatment of Carlstadt, he pleaded his cause, and obtained from the elector a permission for him to return into Saxony."[23](#)

"After this reconciliation with Luther, he composed a treatise on the eucharist, which breathes the most amiable spirit of moderation and humility; and having perused the writings of Zwingli, where he saw his own sentiments on that subject maintained with the greatest perspicuity and force of evidence, he repaired the second time to Zurich, and thence to Basil, where he was admitted to the offices of pastor and professor of divinity, and where, after having lived in the exemplary and constant practice of every Christian virtue, he died, amidst the warmest effusions of piety and resignation, on the 25th of December, 1541."[24](#)

Of Carlstadt's scholarship, and of his conscientiousness, D'Aubigne speaks thus:

" 'He was well acquainted,' says Dr. Scheur, 'with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew;' and Luther acknowledged him to be his superior in learning. Endowed with great powers of mind, he sacrificed to his convictions fame, station, country, and even his bread."[25](#)

His Sabbatarian character is attested by Dr. White, lord bishop of Ely:

"The same [the observance of the seventh day] likewise being revived in Luther's time by Carolastadius, Sternebergius, and by some sectaries among the Anabaptists hath both then and ever since been censured as Jewish and heretical."[26](#)

Dr. Sears alludes to Carlstadt's observance of the seventh day, but as is quite usual with first-day historians in such cases, does it in such a manner as to leave the fact sufficiently obscure to be passed over without notice by the general reader. He writes thus:

"Carlstadt differed essentially from Luther in regard to the use to be made of the Old Testament. With him, the law of Moses was still binding. Luther, on the contrary, had a strong aversion to what he calls a legal and Judaizing religion. Carlstadt held to the divine authority of the Sabbath from the Old Testament; Luther believed Christians were free to observe any day as a Sabbath, provided they be uniform in observing it."[27](#)

We have, however, Luther's own statement respecting Carlstadt's views of the Sabbath. It is from his book "Against the Celestial Prophets:"

"Indeed, if Carlstadt were to write further about the Sabbath, Sunday would have to give way, and the Sabbath - that is to say, Saturday - must be kept holy; he would truly make us Jews in all things, and we should come to be

circumcised: for that is true, and cannot be denied, that he who deems it necessary to keep one law of Moses, and keeps it as the law of Moses, must deem all necessary, and keep them all."[28](#)

The various historians who treat of the difficulty between Luther and Carlstadt, speak freely of the motives of each. But of such matters it is best to speak little; the day of Judgment will show the hearts of men, and we must wait till then. We may, however, freely speak of their acts, and may with propriety name the things wherein each would have benefited the other. Carlstadt's errors at Wittenberg were not because he rejected Luther's help, but because he was deprived of it by Luther's captivity. Luther's error in those things wherein Carlstadt was right were because he saw it best to reject Carlstadt's doctrine.

1. Carlstadt's error in the removal of the images, the suppression of masses, the abolition of monastic vows, or vows of celibacy, and in giving the wine as well as the bread in the supper, and in performing the service in German instead of Latin, if it was an error, was one of time rather than of doctrine. Had Luther been with him, probably all would have been deferred for some months or perhaps some years.

2. Carlstadt would probably have been saved by Luther's presence from coming under the influence of the Zwickau prophets. As it was, he did for a brief season accept, not their teaching in general, but their doctrine that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in believers renders human learning vain and worthless. But in both these things Carlstadt submitted to Luther's correction. Had Luther regarded Carlstadt, he would have been benefited in the following particulars:

1. In his zeal for the doctrine of justification by faith, he would have been saved from the denial of the inspiration of the epistle of James, and would not have called it a "strawy or chaffy epistle."[29](#)

2. Instead of exchanging transubstantiation, which is the Romish doctrine that the bread and wine of the supper become Christ's literal flesh and blood, for consubstantiation, the doctrine which he fastened upon the Lutheran church that Christ's flesh and blood are actually present in the bread and wine, he would have given to that church the doctrine that the bread and wine simply represent the body and blood of Christ, and are used in commemoration of his sacrifice for our sins.

3. Instead of holding fast every thing in the Romish church not expressly forbidden in the Bible, he would have laid all aside which had not the actual sanction of that holy book.

4. Instead of the Catholic festival of Sunday, he would have observed and transmitted to the Protestant church the ancient Sabbath of the Lord.

3 Carlstadt needed Luther's help, and he accepted it. Did not Luther also need that of Carlstadt? Is it not time that Carlstadt should be vindicated from the great obloquy thrown upon him by the prevailing party? And would not this have been done long since had not Carlstadt been a decided Sabbatarian?

1 Life of Luther by Barnas Sears, D. D., 1st ed. pp. 400, 401. <[Return](#)>

2 M'Clintock and Strong's Cyclopedia, vol. ii. p. 123. <[Return](#)>

3 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

4 D'Aubigne's Hist. of the Ref. book ix. <[Return](#)>

5 Mosheim's Church Hist. book iv. cent. xvi. sect. 3, part ii. paragraph 22, note. <[Return](#)>

6 Life of Luther, p. 401. <[Return](#)>

7 D'Aubigne's Hist. Ref. book ix. p. 282. I use the excellent one-volume edition of Porter and Coates. <[Return](#)>

8 Life of Luther, pp. 402, 403. <[Return](#)>

9 Id. pp. 401, 402. <[Return](#)>

10 Mosheim's Hist. of the Church, book iv, cent. xvi. sect. 3, part ii. paragraph 22, note. <[Return](#)>

11 Life of Luther, p. 402. <[Return](#)>

12 D'Aubigne's Hist. of Ref. book x. p. 312. <[Return](#)>

13 Life of Luther, p. 403. <[Return](#)>

14 D'Aubigne's Hist. Ref. book x. pp. 314, 315. <[Return](#)>

15 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

16 M'Clintock and Strong's Cyclopeda, vol. ii. p. 123. <[Return](#)>

17 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

18 Life of Luther, p. 400. <[Return](#)>

19 D'Aubigne's Hist. Ref. book x. p. 312. <[Return](#)>

20 Id. book x. p. 315. <[Return](#)>

21 Hist. Ref. book x. p. 315 <[Return](#)>

22 Life of Luther p. 403. <[Return](#)>

23 Mosheim's Church Hist. book iv. cent. 16, sect. 3, part ii. paragraph 22, note. <[Return](#)>

24 Id.Ib. Very nearly the same statement is made by du Pin, tome 13, chap. ii. section 20, p. 103, A.D. 1703. <[Return](#)>

25 Hist. Ref. book x. p. 315. <[Return](#)>

26 Treatise of the Sabbath Day, p. 8. <[Return](#)>

27 Life of Luther, p. 402. <[Return](#)>

28 Quoted in the Life of Martin Luther in Pictures, p. 147, Philadelphia, J.W. Moore, 195 Chestnut Street.

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29 M'Clintock and Strong, vol. ii. p. 123; Dr. A. Clarke's Commentary, preface to James. [Return](#)

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