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The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen Tracts by Andreas Bodenstein (Carlstadt) from Karlstadt (Book Review)

Edward J. Furcha, translator and editor

Classics of the Radical Reformation, 8

Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995. 449 p.

E. J. Furcha (late Professor of Church History at McGill University) has done an admirable job of translating and editing 15 selected tracts from the early 16th century reformer Andreas Bodenstein from *Karlstadt*, commonly known as *Carlstadt*. Furcha has captured the essence of Carlstadt's theology, his struggle to find support and protection amid his fervent spirit of reform. Furcha's translations have also preserved the earthy language of the 16th century, reminiscent of Luther's *Table Talks*.

Carlstadt has been placed with the "radical reformers" (Anabaptists), a category that George H. Williams made popular. Yet Carlstadt had some affinity with the magisterial reformers, and he is often included on the fringes of the larger "Reformed" movement and, as Calvin Pater has demonstrated, his theology makes him the "father" of the Baptists. Many of these tracts show both similar roots of other reformers—from Augustine to Renaissance humanism—and great disagreements about the application of religion—to the current political struggles of the 16th century.

Carlstadt eventually had problems with Luther, although he had started out as Luther's Dean of Theology at the University of Wittenberg. Early in Luther's first struggles he and Carlstadt had stood side by side defending their new interpretations, such as during the famous Leipzig debates. Then Carlstadt and others pushed the reform too far for Luther. Tract Four demonstrates his call for iconoclasm which angered Luther. Many of these tracts are addressed to Carlstadt's many protectors, some well-known, like Albrecht Diirer, most of them obscure and without any real power. When Carlstadt faced off with Luther on the question of the eucharist (Tracts 11, 13, 14) it was hard, therefore, to compete with Luther's better resources from powerful princes and publishing houses. Carlstadt could no longer accept the scholastic understandings of transubstantiation, yet he struggled with how the divine mysteries were present in material objects. He avoided a pure memorial approach, however: "I know, then, without wavering that consecrated bread is body of Christ—and as such Christ, as he said—i.e., the total and living Christ, and that consecrated wine is blood of Christ" (p. 45). Carlstadt's defence rests on his better knowledge of Scripture, and he even claimed that "I also understand Paul more thoroughly than Dr. Luther" (p. 344)—an implicit statement that Luther had not fully rejected scholastic notions and practices.

One of Carlstadt's greatest contributions, perhaps, is the unique blend in his work of contemporary humanism and mysticism with early Christian practice—in a way he was a Protestant desert father. Via the-devotional literature of the day, such as the *Tkeologia Germanica* and the *imitatio Christi*, and older asceticism, he developed the key concept of *Gelassenheit*. This describes a position of "yieldedness" whereby one becomes a "detached person." Tract One (from 1520) and Tract Six (from 1523) are devoted to the explanation of how God becomes united to the human soul that has completely surrendered the ego (*Ichheit*). This is a lifelong journey, Carlstadt reminds his reader, and the path of "renunciation" (*renunciart*) is "carrying the cross" daily: "Anyone who loves God aright seeks nothing other than God's honour in suffering and works, in sweetness and bitterness" (p. 37). What follows is a psychological understanding of the self, and all its deceptions, before one can understand God or Scripture. With the Protestant reformers in general he condemned the papacy for its dominant authority and clung to the free examination of Scripture, God's word. *Gelassenheit* has very practical manifestations in good works. Referring to Deut. 15 ("there ought to be no beggars among you") or Lev. 23 (allow gleaning), Carlstadt warned Christians to help anyone in need, and drew a distinction between

the poor who will always be in the community yet can readily seek assistance from Christians and the beggar who is no one's responsibility. Carlstadt eventually went to Switzerland and found greater affinity with Anabaptists and Reformed, and from 1534 until his death in 1541 he worked at the University in Basel.

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