

## The Sidelineing of a Reformer.

A surprising discovery nudges us to look again at Andreas Karlstadt

by Thomas Kaufmann

*Andreas Bodenstein, called Karlstadt (1486-1541), was a brilliant member of the Wittenberg Reformation. After the disagreement with Luther he fell out of favour. Unjustly, the Göttingen church historian Thomas Kaufmann argues, as highlighted by the discovery of the text of the Reformation's first illustrated pamphlet, conceived and produced by Karlstadt.*

A whiff of tragedy surrounds him – Andreas Rudolff Bodenstein, known from his Franconian town of origin as Karlstadt. When he, accompanied by enthusiastic and armed Wittenberg students, entered Leipzig for the great disputation on 24 June 1519, his wagon had an accident and Karlstadt fell to the ground. In the wagon behind him sat his colleagues, Luther and Melanchthon. A bystander's later comment, that this was seen by the people as an omen that Luther would triumph and Karlstadt be a loser, is totally anachronistic. For when the Leipzig Disputation took place exactly 500 years ago, the Wittenbergers were travelling as a team. For several weeks, Karlstadt and Luther disputed with the wily Johann Eck, the star theologian from Ingolstadt. It was an intellectual event, which sparked off the rapid spread of the reforming movement and made Wittenberg Europe's best attended university.

In November 1517 Karlstadt had been the first theologian to speak out publicly on behalf of Luther and his theology of grace based on the Church Father, Augustine. He resisted Eck's attacks publicly with his own scholarly theses and deliberately set about preparing that scholarly gladiatorial contest, the Leipzig Disputation. Only much later was Luther to step into the arena as the second Wittenberg participant.

No way was Karlstadt destined to be the runner-up, the eternal loser. Rather Luther's "victory" over the man who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him from the very beginning was the result of a profound alienation, which only came to light in the Spring of 1522, when the bearded exile returned from the Wartburg.

From that point on Karlstadt was dubbed by Luther and his followers as a *Schwärmer*, a screw-ball, a notorious iconoclast, an apostate. Luther was victorious over him, and the close relationships, which had been there before, and had furnished the initial foundation of the Wittenberg Reformation, gave way to a *damnatio memoriae*. The one-time colleague at the birth-pangs of the movement eventually found refuge and sustenance outside Saxony in Switzerland. He was sidelined geographically as well. When Karlstadt died in 1541 of the plague in Basel, Luther even let it be known that the Devil had taken him. Another stain, this, on the doublet of the top dog of the Saxon Reformation. Contrary to the image of the "unprepossessing heretic", as transmitted by Lutheran tradition, there is good evidence that the historical Karlstadt was a good looking. Cranach probably made this oil painting of him in 1522 on the occasion of his marriage. Quite a handsome fellow!



Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt  
(Cranach the Elder, National Gallery Washington/ Samuel Kress Collection)

## No loser!

To rehabilitate Karlstadt, to do him justice, to offer him a Lessing-style vindication, hasn't much of a chance after five centuries of him being defamed as an insurgent and as an art-vandal. Yet the historian is obliged to restore the open-endedness of the past and to question retrospective judgements. For at least one thing is clear: initially Karlstadt was no loser. On the contrary, in many cases he led the field. A young cleric with a promising career ahead of him, a cathedral canon, archdeacon in Wittenberg, Doctor both of Theology and of Secular and Canon Law, a highly learned scholastic theologian, a glowing admirer of Erasmus, Reuchlin and open to humanism, the doctoral supervisor of the mendicant monk and academic late-developer Luther.

When things really got moving, when Luther and he found their way to one another theologically in the Spring of 1517, Karlstadt was once again in many respects out there in front. On 26 April 1517 he was the first to pin up theses promoting Augustine's doctrine on grace. The logistics of that event (printed theses openly displayed, with no fixed date, and addressed to the wider public beyond Wittenberg) and his choice of time – a well attended celebration of indulgences – anticipated what Luther was to do some months later to much greater resonance, on the Eve of All Saints, the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1517, with his 95 Theses. Initially, too, Karlstadt kept the initiative; he was the first Wittenberg theologian to print with Hebrew lettering, the first publicly to advocate breaking with celibacy, and to enter the estate of marriage himself, the first publicly to attack monastic vows, the first to distribute the Lord's Supper in both kinds – in the presence of all the leading figures in the town – the first to compose a reformed church order, and also the first to underline the significance of a scriptural principle, to reflect on the canon of Scripture systematically. Later he was the first to deny the bodily presence of Christ in the bread and the wine and so unleashed the Eucharistic controversy within Protestantism. The results of that are still with us today in the form of different Protestant churches and denominations. But because Luther, the prophet returning from the Wartburg, could not tolerate face to face criticism he was demoted to the second rank, to being a loser.

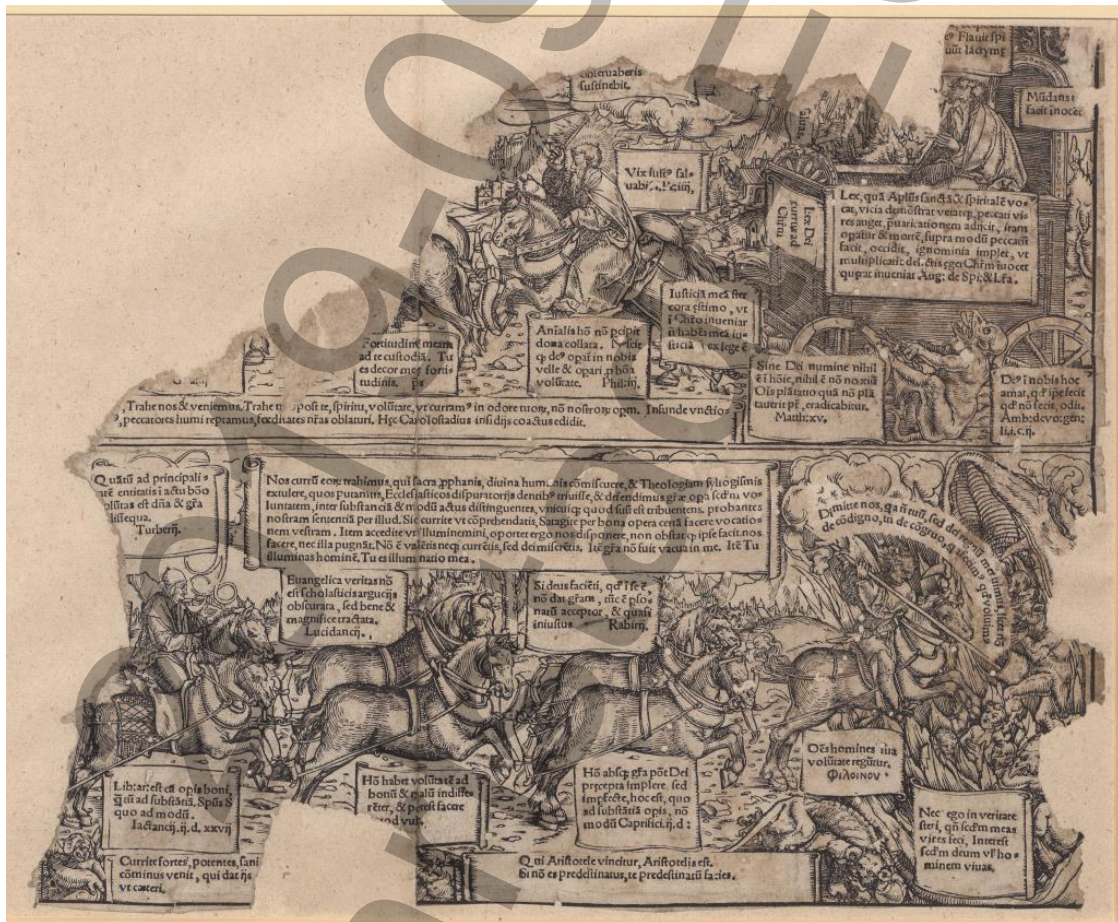
Karlstadt was also the first off the blocks in terms of communication; in his use of illustrated pamphlets to promote the reformation message. In the Spring of 1519 there appeared the "Wagon", a large woodcut which he developed in close conjunction with Lucas Cranach. It is intermixed with 53 sets of texts. For us today it is highly reminiscent of a comic. Two wagons are proceeding in opposite directions and at different levels. A contradictory message corresponds to the visual contrast. The uppermost wagon, drawn by a team of eight horses, is heading for salvation – symbolized by the figure of Christ standing behind an iconic Cross – a mystical motif. The lower wagon, in which a portly monk is proclaiming freedom of the will and good works, is charging into the jaws of Hell.

Undoubtedly publishing this large broadsheet, with dimensions of some 30 by 40 cm, would have been a time-consuming and expensive process. Most of the costs would have been borne by Karlstadt himself, who also promoted its circulation, taking advantage of the courier services of the Saxon court. Copies of this pioneering Reformation broad-sheet were sent to multipliers in Erfurt, Nuremberg, and Augsburg. Among them was Albrecht Dürer, Germany's most renowned artist. His reaction has not been recorded but it will have been cordial, because two years later in November 1521, Karlstadt dedicated to his fellow Franconian a writing about the Lord's Supper. Some three copies of the German edition of the "Wagon" have been

known for about a century – considerably more than is the case for most of the broad-sheets later produced by the Reformation.

Previous to the German edition of the “Wagon” Karlstadt composed a Latin version: the “Currus”. Till very recently it was only known in fragmentary form, having been identified by Konrad von Rabenau in 1983. As a member of the High Consistory of the Evangelical Church of the Union von Rabenau made a valuable contribution to the discovery, safe-guarding and cataloguing of historical libraries in the area of the GDR – work that in many respects needs to be followed up today. Rabenau found this fragment in Nordhausen. It was in two pieces. (cf. “Currus”). Today it is preserved in the research collection for Reformation history in Wittenberg.

Only about a third of the Latin text of the “Currus” was known from the fragment. All that has now changed. Two staff members of the Göttingen research team for the Critical Edition of Karlstadt’s Letters and Writings, Harald Bollbuck and Alejandro Zorzin, came across a long handwritten entry in the end-paper of a copy of Karlstadt’s writing, *Verba Dei* (1520) held by the State and Civic Library of Augsburg. Because its text was identical with that of the fragment the significance of the find was at once obvious to the researchers; this was the complete transcribed text of the Latin version of the Reformation’s first ever illustrated pamphlet.



Currus, Reformationsgeschichte Forschungsbibliothek Wittenberg

### **An absorbing read.**

The book was owned by the Augsburg Benedictine monk, Veit Bild, a humanist, though not of the first rank, who corresponded with many of the leading figures of his time and was respected as a mathematician and an expert instrument maker. The Saxon Elector Frederick commissioned many window sundials from him. Veit Bild was a very sympathetic observer of the early Reformation. He corresponded with many of its protagonists in the early days, especially with Luther, eagerly devouring his writings. But in these years of 1518-1520 side by side with Luther, not below or opposed to him, was Karlstadt. Bild was interested in his works too.

Because Bild transcribed the entire text of the “Currus” we can now reconstruct fully the Latin edition of the Reformation’s first illustrated broadsheet. It is unclear why he transcribed it. Presumably either because he only had it in his possession briefly or because he wanted a secure copy of it by keeping it in the book – aware as he was of the poor survival record of broadsheets.

The texts in the “Currus” let us see Karlstadt as an author who attacked colleagues in Leipzig University very much in the style of the authors of the “*Letters of Obscure Men*”, the fictitious satires from the years 1515-1517 which mocked the ignorant scholastics and defended Johan Reuchlin from their attacks. Karlstadt’s pivotal concern is true penitence and the justification of the sinner; the latter is portrayed in the top half of the picture, sitting in the wagon. While the theologians in the lower half of the illustration put their faith in “free will” and “good works”, the penitent sinner follows Paul and Augustine – the two riders in the top half of the picture, who take the path of doubt and temptation and find their stay and salvation in God’s grace alone.

### **A brilliant populariser of Reformation theology**

Karlstadt’s pamphlet, which in the Latin version – as we now can see – is decidedly more polemical than the German one, represents an outstanding attempt to characterize the complex theology of grace of the “Wittenberg School”, since 1517 propagated as their distinctive brand, in a form which is comprehensible to the learned and to lay people alike. With Cranach’s artistic assistance he shows in visual form that it is only by surrendering our autonomy and any pretence at self-justification that we can approach a merciful God. To this end he combines text and image. Granted, the conscientious drive of the scrupulous theologian, Karlstadt, has swamped the illustration with a superfluity of detailed text. He even adds in the German version a heading referring to “the interpretation of the wagon” – a separate pamphlet in which Karlstadt exegetes in dozens of pages how the illustrated broadsheet is to be understood. Yet the imperfect execution of the work takes nothing away from the fact that we have before us a unique attempt in word and image to offer an accessible primer of reformation theology. No other Reformer attempted anything similar.

Karlstadt was an original. He contributed to no small degree to “the Wittenberg team” attracting countless people, not least the young. Luther’s sidelining of him, the champion of a reformation centred on and supported by the local congregation, was to have regrettable effects. Now that the “Constantinian Era” is well and truly over, it makes rational and theological sense to turn our attention to Karlstadt again.

(translated by Peter Matheson)