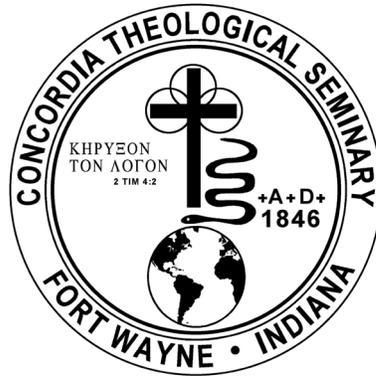


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#### **Editor's Note**

This year marks the 150th anniversary of Concordia Publishing House. Since her founding, she has supported the church in a number of ways, most especially through the publication of materials used to proclaim God's word. The Editors now take this opportunity to thank Concordia Publishing House for her work, in general, and for supporting the publication of this issue in particular. May the Lord grant Concordia Publishing House increased blessing in service to him.

The Editors

## **A Debatable Theology: Medieval Disputation, the Wittenberg Reformation, and Luther’s Heidelberg Theses**

**Richard J. Serina Jr.**

Lutherans typically do not consider the medieval academic disputation an indispensable part of Martin Luther’s development or necessary for the growth of the Reformation. But it was. Indeed, the practice of disputation was part and parcel of the reforms that began in Wittenberg. It is not possible to mention the start of the Reformation, for instance, without reference to the *Ninety-Five Theses* disputing the indulgence trade or the Leipzig Disputation dealing with papal authority or the Heidelberg Theses, from which some contemporary Lutheran theology derives its theology of the cross. The early Reformation depended heavily upon the medium of the academic disputation to articulate its views as part of an interscholastic debate over contested points of theology. These disputations and related theses provided a basis for ongoing conversation between rival theological schools during the formative years, 1516–1521. An understanding of the prevailing disputation culture will reveal what such disputations sought to do—and what they did not seek to do. This essay will introduce the assumptions, practice, and goals of medieval disputation, describe how disputation influenced the university theology of the early Wittenberg Reformation, and finally suggest some important implications for how we should view the theology emerging out of these disputations, chiefly the oft-misunderstood Heidelberg Disputation.

### **I. The Medieval Culture of Academic Disputation**

Medieval intellectual life revolved around the disputation. Disputations were held in universities and monasteries, for bachelors in the arts through doctors in higher faculties, and across all academic fields—theology, law, even medicine.<sup>1</sup> Two important features led to the emergence of the theological disputation in the Middle Ages. The first was the use of Aristotelian logic, in particular the subset

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Lawn, *The Rise and Decline of the Scholastic ‘Quaestio Disputata’: With Special Emphasis on Its Use in the Teaching of Medicine and Sciences* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 18–38, deals with how the disputation influenced the sciences.

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*Richard J. Serina Jr. is Pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church in Ringwood, New Jersey. He can be contacted at rick.serina@gmail.com.*

of logic known as dialectic.<sup>2</sup> Logic had been a part of the medieval curriculum, including the works of Aristotle, but took precedence with the fresh translation into Latin of the so-called *Logica nova*, or New Logic. Logic had a place in the medieval trivium because of the sixth-century thinker Boethius, who, in addition to his own writings on logic, translated Aristotle's *On Categories* and *On Interpretation*, as well as Porphyry's *Isagoge*, into Latin. Together, these came to be called the *Logica vetus*, or Old Logic. The *Logica nova* included Aristotle's *Topics*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, and *Sophistical Reflection*, rounding out the canonical version of Aristotle's *Organon*. Aristotelian logic provided formal rules for making an argument, but it was the specific form of dialectic that had the greatest impact on medieval disputation. Dialectic is best defined as a dialogue or discussion where truth is sought through question and answer, thesis and antithesis, problem and solution, or—as the famous medieval text of Peter Abelard put it—*Sic et Non* (“Yes and No”). Using dialectic, medieval scholastics could resolve theological problems by contrasting their ideas with other proposed solutions.<sup>3</sup>

The second element contributing to the development of the disputation was the *quaestio*, or a disputed topic in theology. This primarily began in the study of Scripture by asking a question about a specific biblical text or gloss of the text.<sup>4</sup> It would eventually furnish the subject matter for disputations in all academic disciplines, enabling the organization of specific theological topics, or *loci*, for analysis, whether in Peter Abelard's *Sic et Non*, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, or Gratian of Bologna's collection of canon law, the *Concordance of Discordant Canons*. Ultimately, Aristotelian dialectic and the disputed question in theology supplied the method and the subject matter for the practice of disputation in the universities of the twelfth century and would shape its practice for the next four centuries.<sup>5</sup>

What was that practice? What did a medieval debate look like? While the particulars changed depending on the occasion for the disputation, the most common type followed a framework not dissimilar from modern debate. A *magister*, or teacher, presided over the debate. He would usually put forward a disputed question, accompanied by his own proposed solution to the question, called

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<sup>2</sup> On these developments, see Alex J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 63–66, 108–14; and John Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy (1150–1350)* (London: Routledge, 1987), 35–49.

<sup>3</sup> On medieval logic in general, see the treatments in E. J. Ashworth, *Language and Logic in the Post-Medieval Period* (Boston: Reidel, 1974); and Alexander Broadie, *Introduction to Medieval Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> For the origins of the *quaestio* in medieval exegesis, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 66–82.

<sup>5</sup> Lawn, *Rise and Decline*, 6–17.

*propositiones*, or theses. One of his students would take the position of the *respondens*, or respondent, in the debate, while another would take the role of *opponens*, or opponent. It was the respondent's responsibility to defend the theses of the magister. He didn't have to agree with the theses or even prove them. He simply had to defend them. The opponent, on the other hand, had to establish why the theses were wrong and to substitute his own resolution to the disputed question. Afterwards—sometimes immediately, sometimes days later—the magister would render his *determinatio*, or judgment of the debate. He would judge one disputant the winner, then he would go on to further substantiate the position he set forward in his theses.<sup>6</sup> By the fourteenth century, a student might attend disputations his first two years in the school of arts, participate in the debates for another two years, and then finally be allowed by his magister to render a *determinatio* in his fifth year.<sup>7</sup> After that, he would become a master of arts, and if he proceeded to the theology faculty, he would have to supervise his own disputations for a year on the way to his doctorate.<sup>8</sup> This meant a medieval doctor of theology—indeed, a doctor of theology just like Luther—had been thoroughly saturated in the logic and practice of disputation.

While disputations tended to follow this formula, they were not formulaic. There were different types of disputations that served different functions within the medieval university. The primary kind most closely resembled what was just described: the private (*privata*) or circular (*circularis*) disputation. This was a required part of the curriculum in the school of arts and in the higher faculties, including theology. The magister had to supervise disputations at regular intervals, often on a weekly basis, that were restricted to his own pupils. A similar version was the solemn (*solemnis*) or ordinary (*ordinaria*) disputation. These disputations followed the same pattern but were open to students and masters from other faculties as well. There was also the *disputatio de quolibet*, a public event that broke from the traditional form. In this instance, the magister would open the debate not only to other faculties but to the community at large. Clerics, prelates, and civic leaders attended. The magister proposed the *quaestio*, offered his theses, and

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<sup>6</sup> There is a lack of documentary evidence describing actual disputations in the Middle Ages, and there were no manuals with prescribed rules. For the above, see Schubert's summary in Anselm Schubert, "Libertas Disputandi: Luther und die Leipziger Disputation als akademisches Streitgespräch," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 105 (2008), 414–419. See also the discussions in Novikoff, *Medieval Culture of Disputation*, 141–147; and Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, 19–20.

<sup>7</sup> William J. Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1987), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars*, 41.

defended them in response to objections from the gathered audience.<sup>9</sup> Later in the Middle Ages, celebratory graduation or promotion (*pro gradu*) disputations were held, where masters or doctors taking the next degree would have to preside over a disputation in connection with their graduation ceremony. These last disputations would play an instrumental role in the articulation of Reformation theology at Wittenberg.

What should be noted, though, is the purpose disputations had in medieval university theology: a disputation was a legitimate search for truth on the part of the participants. Yes, to a certain extent, they were observed simply for the sake of academic exercise (*exercitii causa*) in order to receive a degree. But more than that, the participants genuinely believed that through this ongoing practice of debate—using logic and dialectic, addressing disputed questions and proposing solutions, and objecting and responding—they would gain a greater grasp of truth.<sup>10</sup> These were not monologues or lectures; they were dialogues about contested theological questions governed by the rules of Aristotelian logic and dialectic. Of course, this method would come under fire in the century prior to the Reformation. Nominalism and voluntarism began chipping away at certain features of it, beginning in the fourteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Humanists targeted it, too. Francesco Petrarch wrote of his “aversion to the logicians,” and Lorenzo Valla argued for the

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<sup>9</sup> On these, see Novikoff, *Medieval Culture of Disputation*, 133–147; Lawn, *Rise and Decline*, 12–15; and Marenbon, *Late Medieval Philosophy*, 27–34.

<sup>10</sup> Schwarz and Leppin maintain that Luther and his colleagues shifted the focus of the disputation from this notion of an academic exercise to a search for truth (*inquirendae veritatis causa*); see Reinhard Schwarz, “Disputationen,” in *Lutherhandbuch*, ed. Albrecht Beutel, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 374; and Leppin, “Zuspitzung und Wahrheitsanspruch: Disputationen in den Anfängen der Wittenberger reformatischen Bewegung,” in *Reformation und Rationalität*, ed. Herman Selderhuis and Ernst-Joachim Waschke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 55. But for my opinion, I follow Novikoff, *Medieval Culture of Disputation*, 169–171; and Ernst Wolf, “Zur wissenschaftsgeschichtlichen Bedeutung der Disputationen und der Wittenberger Universität im 16. Jahrhundert,” in *Peregrinatio: Studien zur reformatorischen Theologie, zum Kirchenrecht und zur Sozialethik*, ed. Ernst Wolf, 2 vols. (Munich: Ch. Kaiser, 1965), 1:48, who is forced to admit it through gritted teeth.

<sup>11</sup> The primary target of the nominalists and voluntarists was Aristotelian realism among the Thomistic Scholastics, but their arguments allowed Luther and his colleagues much of the ammunition to criticize both the Thomistic conclusions and confidence in their logic-heavy methodology. For the nominalist and voluntarists, see Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1983); and Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984). For Luther and Aquinas, see Dennis Janz, *Luther on Thomas Aquinas: The Angelic Doctor in the Thought of the Reformer* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989); and O. H. Pesch, *Martin Luther, Thomas von Aquin und die reformatische Kritik an der Scholastik: Zur Geschichte und Wirkungsgeschichte eines Mißverständnisses mit weltgeschichtlichen Folgen* (Hamburg: Joachim Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, 1994).

superiority of Ciceronian rhetoric to scholastic logic.<sup>12</sup> By the time Luther began criticizing scholastic theology and theologians in 1515, widespread humanist and Augustinian curricular reforms had begun in Wittenberg and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

For all the conflict in the academic communities of the late Middle Ages, however, the medieval practice of disputation remained ensconced in educational life as the presumed method to obtain truth. Nominalists like Ockham recorded their *quodlibeta*, and Erasmus praised the practice alongside other methods: “Hilary thunders against heretics, Augustine disputes, Jerome contends in dialogues, Prudentius wars in various forms of verse, Thomas and Scotus fight with the help of dialectic and philosophy. All have the same purpose but each uses a different method. Variety is not condemned as long as the same goal is sought.”<sup>14</sup> The method may have been academic disputation, but the goal was always the discovery of truth. And, most importantly, medieval disputants believed they could arrive at that truth not by the single exegesis of a passage or a single resolution to a disputed question but by the process of proposition, objection, response, and judgment, and then running it back and doing it again.

## II. Academic Disputation and the Wittenberg Reformation

Little work done has been done on the role medieval disputation played in the articulation of early Reformation theology. What literature does exist regrettably seems to begin with Wittenberg and pays far less attention to its medieval context.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, for all the changes occurring on the eve of the Reformation, this

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<sup>12</sup> On these and other related arguments, see James A. Overfield, *Humanism and Scholasticism in Late Medieval Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Erika Rummel, *The Humanistic-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1–18, and 183–86 for the humanist criticism of dialectic in theology.

<sup>13</sup> On the conflict between the respective theological *viae*, or curricular approaches to theology, at the time of the Reformation, see Leif Grane, *Contra Gabrielem: Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Gabriel Biel in der Disputatio Contra Scholasticam Theologiam 1517* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962); and Heiko Oberman, *Masters of the Reformation: The Emergence of a New Intellectual Climate in Europe*, trans. Dennis Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3–110; but see especially Heiko A. Oberman, “Headwaters of the Reformation: Initia Lutheri—Initia Reformationis,” in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era*, ed. Heiko Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 40–88.

<sup>14</sup> Erasmus, *Colloquies*, 633; quoted in Mishtooni Bose, “The Issue of Theological Style in Late Medieval Disputations,” in *Medieval Forms of Argument: Disputation and Debate*, ed. Georgina Donavin, Carol Poster, and Richard Utz (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 2.

<sup>15</sup> One exception is David Luy’s entry in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther, which takes into account many of the same studies. See David Luy, “Disputations,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 518–550. This paper shares the same view on medieval disputation as Luy but will go further than him in suggesting how formative the disputation culture was for early Reformation theology.

medieval culture of academic disputation neither waned nor ceased but directly impacted Luther, Wittenberg, and the early Reformation. Despite its relative newness as an institution and its connection with the Reformation to come, Wittenberg was essentially a medieval university, and that meant academic life there revolved around disputations.<sup>16</sup> The Theology Faculty Statutes of 1508 provided for three different types of disputations.<sup>17</sup> The first was the weekly circular disputation. It constituted a regular part of academic instruction, typically three hours on Friday morning. The magister presided during the term and the bachelors during vacation, and students were required to participate in a certain number of disputations to earn their degree. The second was the public, or solemn, disputation. Faculty were required to hold one per year. These were presumably no different than the public disputations of the medieval variety, with the magister presenting his theses and serving as respondent. The third was the graduation, or *pro gradu*, disputation. Like its earlier analogue, these were primarily ceremonial. The candidate for the degree would serve as respondent. It would last three hours for the bachelor, a day for the license to teach (*licentia docendi*), and two days for the doctorate, with a second disputation at the ceremony itself. The course for Luther's doctorate in 1512 deviated somewhat from these, but the principal pieces were there: private disputation, public address, and a public disputation.<sup>18</sup>

As doctor of theology and professor of Bible, Luther involved himself intimately in these disputations, and out of them emerged some of the more pivotal contributions to the start of the Reformation. Wittenberg had been in the throes of curricular reform, as scholars like Luther and his mentor and predecessor at Wittenberg, Johannes von Staupitz, advocated for humanist and Augustinian ideas over against Thomistic and nominalist positions. They wanted more Bible, church fathers, and ancient rhetoric, and less Aristotle, logic, and medieval scholastic commentary. For one example, note Luther's oft-cited comment from a

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<sup>16</sup> On the university's academic culture, see Jonathan Mumme, "The University of Wittenberg," in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 38–46.

<sup>17</sup> Wolf, "Zur wissenschaftsgeschichtlichen Bedeutung," 38–51, as well as the shorter summary in Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther's Works (1523–1546)* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1999), 47–50. For a recent treatment of this based upon the best documentary evidence, see Henning Bühmann, "The Wittenberg Disputation Culture and the Leipzig Debate," in *Luther at Leipzig: Martin Luther, the Leipzig Debate, and the Sixteenth-Century Reformations*, ed. Mickey L. Mattox, Richard J. Serina Jr., and Jonathan Mumme (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to the Reformation, 1483–1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 1:125–28; and Ernst Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 193–96. See also Richard J. Serina Jr., "Luther's Doctorate and the Start of the Reformation," *Lutheran Forum* 56, no. 3 (2017): 53–57.

1516 letter: “Our theology and St. Augustine are progressing well, and with God’s help rule at our University. Aristotle is gradually falling from his throne, and his final doom is only a matter of time . . . Indeed no one can expect to have any students if he does not want to teach this theology, that is, lecture on the Bible or on St. Augustine or another teacher of ecclesiastical eminence.”<sup>19</sup> Luther and his growing circle of Augustinian—and humanist—influenced colleagues criticized late medieval scholastic theology for its views on grace, nature, reason, faith, and a host of other positions, and provided a fresh—if not altogether new—alternative.

Yet, alongside Luther’s biblical lectures, the means for engaging those positions was the same as it was for their scholastic opponents: the disputation. In 1516, for instance, a master’s candidate named Bartholomäus Bernhardi presented a set of three theses debating the natural powers of man apart from grace on the occasion of his promotion. The theses directly reflect Luther’s own lectures on Romans, which Bernhardi would have attended. They voiced Luther’s opposition to Thomistic and nominalist notions of free will and expressed a conscious reliance upon the arguments of Augustine.<sup>20</sup> A year later, Luther’s colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt published a set of 151 theses protesting indulgences, in the process decrying the “bad mixture” (*mala mixture*) of Aristotle and theology in a way that evokes Luther’s own arguments.<sup>21</sup> Luther himself composed a set of theses for debate at the September 1517 promotion disputation for Franz Günther to bachelor of Bible. The resulting *Theses against Scholastic Theology* pitted Augustine against the nominalist Gabriel Biel on the ability to love God and keep the commandments.<sup>22</sup> And it was at his own September 1519 disputation for promotion to bachelor of Bible that Philip Melanchthon unveiled a set of theses on the sufficiency of Scripture that many now equate with the original formulation of *sola Scriptura*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, “To John Lang, Wittenberg, May 18, 1517”: vol. 48, p. 42, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86), hereafter AE.

<sup>20</sup> Jens-Martin Kruse, *Universitäts- und Kirchenreform: Die Anfänge der Reformation in Wittenberg 1516–1522* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2002), 78–82; and Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 1:166–67.

<sup>21</sup> Leppin, “Zuspitzung und Wahrheitsanspruch,” 51; and Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 1:170.

<sup>22</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 1:172; and Theodor Dieter, “Martin Luther and Scholasticism,” in *Remembering the Reformation: Martin Luther and Catholic Theology*, ed. Declan Marmion, Salvador Ryan, and Gesa E. Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 55–74. Dieter notes that even the theses did not even receive their current title until the Erlangen edition; prior to that, they were simply identified by the name of Gunter as respondent or described as a debate over nature and grace.

<sup>23</sup> Schwarz, “Disputationen,” 374. For Melanchthon, see also Volker Leppin, “Die Genese des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips: Beobachtungen zu Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Johannes Eck bis zur Leipziger Disputation,” in *Reformatorsche Theologie und Autoritäten: Studien zur Genese*

Though these are normally treated as part of the early Wittenberg Reformation, they were nonetheless concrete examples of interscholastic debate between medieval schools of theology on contested questions that entered the public realm through, of all things, university disputation.<sup>24</sup> Of course, that is to say nothing yet of the most notable disputations and theses: the *Ninety-Five Theses* of October 1517, the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, and the Leipzig Disputation of 1519. We know the impact of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, even if we do not know when or how they were distributed or for what purpose.<sup>25</sup> We know the implications of the Leipzig Disputation of 1519, which was the first disputation for which we have protocols recording exactly what arguments were set forth and debated during the proceedings.<sup>26</sup> We also know that Luther's ultimate conclusion there—popes and council can err, but Scripture alone is infallible—led to the resumption of heresy charges against him and to his eventual excommunication.<sup>27</sup> But this culture of disputation provides a different insight into the theses Luther composed for debate at Heidelberg and raises important questions about the historical significance of the theology of the cross that twentieth-century Lutheran theologians found in those theses.<sup>28</sup>

### III. Heidelberg in the Context of Academic Disputation

No one looks to the indulgence theses or the protocols of the Leipzig Debate—or, for that matter, the other examples of disputations and theses cited above—as definitive expressions of Reformation or Lutheran theology, yet Heidelberg is

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*des Schriftprinzips beim jungen Luther*, ed. Volker Leppin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 138–139.

<sup>24</sup> For a differentiation of disputations and theses during this period and their goals, see Volker Leppin, "Disputation als Medium der Theologie- und Kirchenreform in der Reformation: Zur Transformation eines akademischen Mediums," in *Lehren und Lernen im Zeitalter der Reformation: Methoden und Funktionen*, ed. Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2012), 115–125.

<sup>25</sup> For the debate on the posting of the theses, see Kurt Aland, *95 Theses: With Pertinent Documents from the History of the Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967); Erwin Iserloh, *The Theses Were Not Posted: Luther between Reform and Reformation*, trans. Martin E. Marty (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968); and, more recently, Volker Leppin and Timothy J. Wengert, "Sources for and against the Posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*," *Lutheran Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2015): 373–98.

<sup>26</sup> Leipzig, interestingly enough, was the first disputation to have official protocols, or record of the proceedings, per agreement between the disputants. On this, see especially Schubert, "Libertas Disputandi."

<sup>27</sup> On the fallout, see Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 1:322–48.

<sup>28</sup> For a possible—but somewhat conjectural—explanation of the historical reasons behind the development of the theology of the cross in the early twentieth century, see James Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 48–78, especially 60–63.

treated differently. And maybe it is treated differently because it has been taught differently to interested readers today. The Heidelberg Disputation has become functional shorthand for the “Theology of the Cross.” In fact, one will strain to find entries in theological or historical reference works on the Heidelberg Disputation. References to the actual disputation itself are normally found as mere keywords in entries titled “Theology of the Cross.” The theses are cast as expressions of a new, distinctly Reformational, even Lutheran vision for theology, with a line directly connecting Heidelberg in 1518 to Luther’s 1525 *Bondage of the Will* and his biblical lectures of the 1530s, in order to substantiate this vision.<sup>29</sup> While this essay cannot address the content of the theology of the cross or the Heidelberg Theses, placing the theses in their context as an academic disputation will shed important light on how to understand their historical significance.

First, while it is customary to speak of the Heidelberg Disputation as occurring at a chapter meeting of the Saxon-Thuringian province of Luther’s religious order, the Augustine Hermits (technically “Order of the Eremites of Saint Augustine,” or OESA), it was actually an academic disputation conducted at the University of Heidelberg.<sup>30</sup> Though the Augustinians technically sponsored the disputation, it was hosted by the school of arts and incorporated faculty and students from Heidelberg and elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> The disputation was consequently an interscholastic debate between rival schools of theology in the late medieval university, and thus it was a place for those rivals to debate their material differences on contested subjects of theology.<sup>32</sup>

Second, we cannot even be sure of Luther’s role at Heidelberg because there is little record of what happened there. The most widely influential account for modern scholarship, that of Luther’s contemporary Martin Frecht, was not written until 1556—nearly forty years after the disputation itself—and was not

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<sup>29</sup> The most representative examples remain Walter von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976); and Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). For a statement that reflects the current consensus in Luther scholarship, see Robert Kolb, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross Fifteen Years after Heidelberg: Lectures on the Psalms of Ascent,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61, no. 1 (2010): 69–85, especially 84.

<sup>30</sup> Bühmann, “Wittenberg Disputation Culture,” suggests that the theological and philosophical theses may have been debated at different meetings on consecutive days—the theological to the Augustinians, the philosophical in the broader university forum—but there is no evidence of this, even if there may be precedent for it.

<sup>31</sup> Hans Scheible, “Die Universität Heidelberg und Luthers Disputation,” in *Melanchthon und die Reformation: Forschungsbeiträge*, ed. Rudolf May and Rolf Decot (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1996), 371–91. Also see Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 1:213–15.

<sup>32</sup> Leppin in fact claims this was the primary goal of disputation for Luther: to distinguish between schools of theology. See Leppin, “Zuspitzung und Wahrheitsanspruch,” 50.

discovered until 1934.<sup>33</sup> Frecht seemingly overstates his point that the theses represented Luther's "entire theology" (*seine ganze Theologie*). Further reservations remain about the accuracy of Frecht's recollection and its relation to other accounts. What appears certain is that Luther presided over the disputation as director of his order's program of study and wrote the theses for Wittenberg Augustinian Leonhard Beier. When the disputation was held on April 26, Luther presumably presided as magister but not as respondent tasked with substantiating his own theses; that fell to Leonhard Beier himself.<sup>34</sup> The disputation was as much about Beier as Luther, and that means Heidelberg did not provide Luther the theological or ecclesiastical platform a public disputation like the medieval *quodlibet* would have.

Lastly, if the report of Martin Bucer (then a student at Heidelberg) is to be believed, Luther's proposal for a new "theology of the cross" did not factor centrally into the debate. Earlier scholars discredited Bucer's report because they did not believe the young Dominican with Erasmian tendencies understood the argument of the theses. But Thomas Kaufmann argues that, on the contrary, Bucer recounted the theses correctly and that past scholarship itself had understood the debate wrong by focusing on the *theologia crucis* rather than the more characteristic Wittenberg emphasis on Augustinian views of grace and works.<sup>35</sup> For instance, Bucer's account does not even mention theological Theses 17–24, in which Luther explains his theology of the cross. What stood out to Bucer was not a new method for theology but rather Luther's description of the law in Thesis 1: "The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him."<sup>36</sup> The new view of the law that astounded Bucer during the disputation reflected Wittenberg's characteristic Augustinian theology of grace and works over against scholastic notions of those same doctrines. In this connection, it is worth noting that Luther cites Augustine twice in his proof for Thesis 1 and continues to cite him through subsequent proofs (Theses 5, 13, 14, 15, 26), yet not a single citation of the church father most pivotal for the movement in Wittenberg is found in the proofs for the more celebrated Theses 17–24.

As a matter of fact, by placing the Heidelberg Theses in the context of medieval academic disputation, what emerges is less a distinctively Protestant or Lutheran

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<sup>33</sup> Scheible, "Die Universität Heidelberg," 375, 383–84. The letter is printed in Walter von Freidensburg, "Ein Brief an Matthäus Nāgelin von Strassburg vom 22. Juni 1556," *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 86 (1934): 387–92.

<sup>34</sup> Schwartz, "Disputationen," 378.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Kaufmann, "Bucers Bericht von der Heidelberger Disputation," *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte* 82 (1991): 147–170. Kaufmann includes numerous examples of the scholarly critique of Bucer at 149–150.

<sup>36</sup> *AE* 31:39.

view of theology than an ongoing interscholastic debate over specific, material doctrines, which Luther and his colleagues addressed chiefly on the basis of St. Paul and Augustine. Heidelberg may not have been the start of a new theological platform at all, but rather the fruition of a conversation taking place in Wittenberg stretching back to 1516 or even earlier.<sup>37</sup> The disputation had more to do with what came before it in Wittenberg than what came after it in Luther's corpus. In that case, instead of a single "theology of the cross" beginning at Heidelberg and running through the remainder of Luther's career, it could be more accurate to speak of something like multiple *theologies* of the cross. The first ends rather than begins with Heidelberg and in some sense punctuates the interscholastic debates revolving around Wittenberg and precipitating the indulgence controversy, then dissipates as debates over papal authority and justification come to the fore.<sup>38</sup> The second relates to Luther's diatribe against the perceived skepticism of Erasmus in *Bondage of the Will*, where he distinguishes between God preached and God not preached in a way strikingly similar to his Eucharistic arguments against Oecolampadius and Zwingli, as well as his emphasis upon the external Word over against "fanatics" like Karlstadt or Anabaptist practice.<sup>39</sup> A third would then appear in his understanding of the "Hidden God" in the 1530s, with its characteristic emphasis upon enduring suffering, possibly explained by Luther's own perception of his reform efforts as a failure.<sup>40</sup> But it appears anachronistic to speak of a single theology of the cross

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<sup>37</sup> And for whatever novelty his position on a theology of the cross may have entailed, it had its own precursor within the late medieval Augustinian tradition. See the discussion of Augustinian Jordan Quidlenberg's theology of the cross in Eric Leland Saak, *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 44–45.

<sup>38</sup> Interestingly enough, there are references aplenty to something like a "theology of the cross" in the year immediately preceding the Heidelberg Disputation, including Luther's response to Eck's *Obeliski* in Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 1:290–291 (hereafter WA); the lectures on Hebrews in WA 57:79; and the *Resolutiones* to the indulgence theses in WA 1:614. His use of a theology of the cross to criticize the theology of indulgences can even be traced back to a February 1517 sermon (WA 1:509.35–510.8). On this, see David Bagchi, "Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and the Contemporary Criticism of Indulgences," in *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits: Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. R.N. Swanson (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 334.

<sup>39</sup> For one example of parallel language in Luther's sacramental writings, see Luther's "That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics," AE 37:68–69.

<sup>40</sup> Take, for instance, Luther's sermon on cross and suffering at Coburg delivered before the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, AE 51:197–208. On Luther's later view of the reform movement, see the classic Gerald Strauss, "Success and Failure in the German Reformation," *Past & Present* 67, no. 1 (1975): 30–63. See also Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 268–308; and Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

beginning with Heidelberg and spanning the majority of Luther's theological career, even if one were to argue that it changes guises over time due to shifting circumstances and language (in which case it becomes a rather unhelpful unifying concept since it is not identifiable as the same concept at all).

Ultimately, Heidelberg provides but one example of how the culture of medieval disputation may help us better contextualize the early Reformation. Medieval disputations were self-contained, internal dialogues over contested questions in the study of theology. These were the same topics debated in different formats and different venues, from Wittenberg to Paris, from Oxford to Rome, from the twelfth century to the sixteenth century, from classrooms to monasteries and city halls. Disputations were not programs or platforms but perennial discussions. They assumed a recurring process of question and proposition, objection and response that would lead to the acquisition of theological truth, but not in a single disputation and not in a single set of disputation theses—even that of Heidelberg. Reading the Heidelberg Disputation in this sense, it is not a paradigm for Lutheran theology to come but is more like the summary statement of an interscholastic debate that had been going on in Wittenberg since Luther's arrival covering free will, nature, grace, reason, Aristotle, Augustine, St. Paul, and any number of academic matters that would give shape to the early Reformation.