

LUTHER'S DOCTORATE AND
THE START OF THE REFORMATION*Richard J. Serina Jr.*

On October 19, 1512, Martin Luther became a doctor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. The proceedings lasted a week. First, the chancellor of the university issued him a license to teach (*licentia docendi*), and Luther took a vow to uphold the teachings of the church. Upon graduation, he received the doctoral insignia, delivered an address on theology (no longer extant), and chaired his first disputation. Finally, the faculty approved his acceptance into their collegium as a fellow master.¹ The ceremony in itself, which Luther facetiously referred to as a “parade” to his Augustinian brethren in Erfurt, was wholly unexceptional for a doctorate of theology at a medieval university.² The impact the whole event had on Luther the theologian, however, far outlasted the medieval ecclesiastical structure that the Reformation stretched to the breaking point.³

During the course of that Reformation, Luther made frequent reference to his doctorate. In official correspondence with princes Albrecht of Mainz and Frederick the Wise after the publication of his Ninety-Five Theses, he specifically referred to himself as “Martin Luther, Doctor of Theology” rather than his customary “Martin Luther, Augustinian.”⁴ He prefaced his controversial 1520 reform treatise, “Address to the Christian Nobility,” with an appeal to his office as a “sworn doctor of theology.”⁵

Luther's doctorate became increasingly more significant in later years as the Wittenberg theology spread, was subjected to misinterpretation, and demanded clarification. Against those who questioned his appeals to Scripture he defended his right to translate, interpret, and preach the Scriptures on the basis of that doctorate. As late as 1532, he even identified his doctorate as his call into ministry:

I have often said and still say, I would not exchange my doctor's degree for all the world's gold. For I would surely in the long run lose courage and fall into

despair if, as these infiltrators, I had undertaken these great and serious matters without call or commission. But God and the whole world bears me testimony that I entered into this work publicly and by virtue of my office as a teacher and preacher, and have carried it on hitherto by the grace and help of God.⁶

Such descriptions of what today appears little more than an academic achievement (often deprecated as “letters behind a name”) may strike American Lutheran ears strangely. Why would Luther place so much stock in an academic degree? Why does he appeal to that doctorate more than, say, his ordination? What intellectual, ecclesiastical, or political cache did the doctorate give him?

The doctorate in the medieval university system was far from a secular degree. On the contrary, it carried important ecclesiastical significance and initiated the degree-holder into a caste of scholars responsible for propagating and defending church teaching. Medieval universities themselves received charters directly from the pope, making them effectively arms of the church. If they were to receive a charter from another source (as, ironically, the University of Wittenberg did), it nonetheless required papal confirmation in order to staff a theology faculty.⁷ The chancellor of the university was responsible for licensing teachers or university masters, conferring upon them the right to teach. The chancellor did this, however, as a representative of the pope.⁸

The medieval doctor then took his place within something like a subsidiary ecclesiastical hierarchy. The chancellor functioned as a bishop, while the theology faculty—all ordained—were the priesthood of this *de facto* diocese. The theologians aided the bishop in examining and censuring heretical teachings. In fact, bishops of the late Middle

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Ages were advised not to proceed against more complicated theological cases before first seeking the opinion of the faculty. This, of course, is the reason that Albrecht, as prince-bishop of Mainz, sent Luther's theses to the Mainz theological faculty for their opinion before sending them on to Rome.⁹ The faculty members were subject to the same ecclesiastical rules as secular and monastic clergy. For instance, the Paris faculty once alleged that their chancellor, John Blanchard, was guilty of simony (purchasing of ecclesiastical offices) by extorting fees from university masters in exchange for academic promotions or faculty positions.¹⁰

The doctor of theology in the medieval university also took on certain pastoral responsibilities. The doctors were desirable candidates to fill pulpits, not just at university churches but also in cathedral and parochial churches. Bishops had long been the principal preachers of the church until the mendicant orders, such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, arose to assist where bishops were either absent or not competent to preach.¹¹ Both secular and mendicant doctors provided alternatives to churches in need. In the France of the late fifteenth and

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early sixteenth centuries, for instance, university masters were ubiquitous in pulpits during the Lenten season.¹²

Thus Luther's call as *Prediger* at the Wittenberg Castle Church followed his graduation to doctor of theology. He did not provide pastoral

care, as a common German diocesan priest or parish pastor (*Pfarrer*) might have done. Instead, like many other late medieval doctors of theology, he offered his exegetical wares to a parish in need of sound preaching. This may be why Luther at times parallels his being a *doctor* with being a *Prediger*. In the medieval context, the license to teach church doctrine as a doctor of theology also served as a license to preach in medieval church pulpits.¹³

Altogether Luther's doctorate was far more than a secular academic credentialing. Upon receiving his doctorate, Luther had a call from the pope through the university to serve as a master of Holy Writ (*magister sacrae paginae*). Even more than his monastic vows and ordination, the doctorate initiated him into the medieval ecclesiastical order by granting him a specific place within the institutional hierarchy. This implied official approval of the church to teach the Scriptures, to judge doctrine, and to preach in pulpits, but also a willing submission to the authority structures within the church and to canon laws governing the medieval church's clergy.

Luther's office as a doctor of theology would decisively influence his reforms in the earliest days of the Protestant Reformation. It has become common parlance to assert that Luther did not set out to start a new church but to reform an existing one. The origin of the Reformation in a university context with a professor of Holy Scripture as its chief voice reveals *why* this truism is true.

Luther the doctor of theology was a medieval professor engaged in a series of protracted disputes about the very nature of theology itself. The late medieval university provided a threshing floor for the debate between various ways (*viae*) or methodological approaches to the study of theology.¹⁴ The *via antiqua* was championed by Thomistic scholastics, who employed Aristotelian realism to articulate divine truth. The *via moderna*, traced back to William of Ockham, taught

a philosophical and theological nominalism that countered the views of the Thomists. There was also a modified version of the *via antiqua* offered by Duns Scotus, an Augustinian approach influenced by Gregory of Rimini, and a more classically and biblically based alternative promoted by humanists.

Well before Luther penned the Ninety-Five Theses and became an ecclesiastical lightning rod, he spearheaded Augustinian and humanist educational reforms at Wittenberg against *both* scholasticism and nominalism. In 1516 he wrote to his Augustinian brother at Erfurt, Johannes Lang, "Our theology and Augustine are progressing well and with God's help rule at our university. Aristotle is falling from his throne and his final doom is only a matter of time... Teachers cannot expect any students unless they teach this theology, that is, lecture on the Bible, St. Augustine, or another famous teacher of the church."¹⁵ The interscholastic battles at Wittenberg gave Luther the forum to question many of the theological ideas he would ultimately come to reject.

Furthermore, when Luther's earliest reforms entered the public arena, they did so through the means most characteristic of a doctor of theology: the disputation. Besides lectures, the primary responsibility of a university master was to confer degrees upon students through conducting and judging disputations. This just so happens to be how Luther first came to prominence. His Theses against Scholastic Theology in September 1517, one month before the Ninety-Five Theses, were a broadside against the predominant theological orientations of both the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*. Similarly, before the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 became a rallying cry for a distinctively Lutheran *theologia crucis*, it was a referendum on those same predominant scholastic and nominalist theologies.

Even the infamous Theses on indulgences were penned not as a

sermon, reform treatise, or theological exposition but as a series of loosely connected—and sometimes unconnected—propositions for academic debate. These were the works

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of a university master, not an ecclesiastical reformer. In fact, Luther's sermons and polemical writings from 1517 to 1519 were most often responses to criticisms, not attempts to promote his teaching outside its interscholastic context.¹⁶ His intentional efforts, however, occurred in the context of the medieval academic disputation.

Nor were such writings purposely intended to contradict official church teaching. On the contrary, as a doctor of theology he had pledged to submit himself to those teachings. This was customary for all university masters. They were licensed on theological faculties under chancellors representing popes and at universities commissioned by popes. They were not independent theologians free to accept or reject church authority as they wished, and their vows upon graduation to the doctorate reflected that. They had the liberty to question and debate, but only within certain limits.¹⁷

This same obligation to submit to church teaching appears clearly in some of Luther's earliest encounters. It is the reason he sent a letter

to Albrecht of Mainz, the archbishop most directly responsible for the selling of indulgences in the region, notifying him of his plan to contest the practice.¹⁸ It is the reason he sent his later explanations of the Theses to the pope with a letter claiming that he had "not undertaken to diminish the authority and power of the keys and the high Pontiff."¹⁹ It is also the reason Luther made a clear confession of his submission to church teaching at the outset of the debate with John Eck at Leipzig in July 1519, even though his break with Rome over the primacy of the pope had become virtually inevitable by then.²⁰ Luther may have been playing coy or paying political deference. But he just as easily could have been doing what was entirely customary for the medieval doctor of theology: pledging fidelity to the church that calls, licenses, and graduates its doctors.

But this did create a dilemma that would prove pivotal for Luther when official church organs rejected his teaching, from the hasty reply of Sylvester Prierias in Rome and Cardinal Cajetan's demand that Luther revoke his positions in 1518, to the bull of excommunication in January 1521 and the Edict of Worms in May 1521 that censured his teachings in the Holy Roman Empire. If the church called, licensed, graduated, and ultimately commissioned him to teach the Scriptures, and if as a doctor of theology he came to a particular conviction about the interpretation of Holy Scripture on a matter pertaining to faith and morals, then what was he to do in the event that the church rejected his teaching?

Never mind that the basis for these contested theological positions was not in accord with Holy Scriptures; never mind that a church council had not ruled on matters such as indulgences or justification; never mind that church fathers, and even some contemporaneous theologians on good terms with Rome (such as his mentor Johann von Staupitz), articulated positions similar to his without reprimand.

The real dilemma facing Luther at this juncture was that a rejection of his teaching on the pauline doctrine of justification without the prospect of a legitimate debate essentially contravened the *teaching authority* he had as a medieval doctor of theology.²¹ Rome's unwillingness to entertain his positions and facilitate proper academic debate struck Luther as inconsistent with his ecclesiastically endorsed doctorate. As he wrote in 1531, after Charles V had ruled against the Augsburg Confession, his doctorate was the very basis for his entrance into the controversy:

However, I, Dr. Martinus, have been called to this work and was compelled to become a doctor, without any initiative of my own, but out of pure obedience. Then I had to accept the office of doctor and swear a vow to my most beloved Holy Scriptures that I would preach and teach them faithfully. While engaged in this kind of teaching, the papacy crossed my path and wanted to hinder me in it. How it has fared is obvious to all, and it will fare still worse. It shall not hinder me. In God's name and call I shall walk on the lion and the adder, and tread on the young lion and dragon with my feet.²²

The doctorate of theology informed Luther's self-perception throughout his long career. It provided him the initial motivation to interpret the Scriptures for the benefit of the church, gave him a platform to dispute misleading practices and points of theology, and furnished definitive proof that his teachings were not being duly heard or received.

And it may reveal to modern Lutherans just how far removed we are from the context that gave birth to the Reformation. In this quincennial of the celebrated Theses on indulgences, it is tempting to think that Luther took his stand against all instantiations of human authority, whether emperor, pope, bishop, or theologian—at least if the popu-

lar films and documentaries are to be believed. We can rhapsodically depict his posture at Worms as that of an individualistic, autonomous revolutionary. But the stand he took, he took as a called, licensed, and graduated doctor of theology, authorized to teach the Scriptures by the very same medieval church that called him, licensed him, and conferred upon him that doctorate in the first place. \mathcal{L}


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Notes

1. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to the Reformation, 1483–1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 1:125–8, and Ernst Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 193–6.
2. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW], 48:5–7.
3. For other studies of Luther's doctorate, see Bernard Lohse, "Luthers Selbsteinschätzung," in *Martin Luther: Reformator und Vater im Glauben*, ed. Peter Manns (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1985), 118–33; Ulrich Köpf, "Martin Luthers theologischer

- Lehrstuhl," in *Die Theologische Fakultät Wittenberg 1502 bis 1602*, eds. Irene Dingel and Günther Wartenberg (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 71–86; Siegfried Freiherr von Scheurl, "Martin Luthers Doktoreid," *Zeitschrift für bayerische Kirchengeschichte* 32 (1963): 46–52; and Herman Steinleinn, *Luthers Doktorat* (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912).
4. LW 48:43–52.
 5. LW 44:124.
 6. LW 40:387.
 7. Brecht, 1:118–19. Carl Stang, "Luther und der Geist der Renaissance," *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 18 (1941): 4, argues that Wittenberg's charter from Maximilian, the Holy Roman Emperor, reflected the influence of humanism on the university.
 8. Louis B. Pascoe, *Church and Reform: Bishops, Theologians, and Canon Lawyers in the Thought of Pierre d'Ailly, 1351–1420* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 165–81, and Alan E. Bernstein, *Pierre D'Ailly and the Blanchard Affair: University and Chancellor of Paris at the Beginning of the Great Schism* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 1–19.
 9. Roger Gryson, "The Authority of the Teacher in the Ancient and Medieval Church," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 19 (1982): 176–87.
 10. Bernstein, 150–76.
 11. Stephen Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth-Century Germany and Switzerland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 38–46.
 12. Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37–51.
 13. For example, see his comments on Psalm 117 about being a doctor and a preacher

- in LW 14:8 and in a 1524 sermon on Exodus in *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009) [hereafter cited as WA] 16:35, 18.
14. On these schools, see 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.
 15. LW 48:42.
 16. David V. N. Bagchi, *Luther's Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists, 1518–1525* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 17–44.
 17. For examples of this on the eve of the Reformation, see especially Ian C. Levy, *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).
 18. On these events, see Kurt Aland, *Ninety-Five Theses: With Pertinent Documents from the History of the Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), and Erwin Iserloh, *The Theses Were Not Posted: Luther between Reform and Reformation*, trans. Martin E. Marty (Boston: Beacon, 1968).
 19. WA 1:527, 19–28.
 20. W. H. T. Dau, *The Leipzig Debate in 1519: Leaves from the Story of Luther's Life* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1919), 131. Luther prefaced his May 1518 explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses with the same pledge, LW 31:83.
 21. For another variation of this same point, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in Luther's Reformation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 17–18.
 22. LW 34:13.



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