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## Christology as Basis for Lutheran Theology<sup>1</sup>

Aaron M. Moldenhauer

The Leipzig Debate of 1519, among other things, solidified ecclesial authority as a central question between Martin Luther and Catholic theologians. Indulgences, the topic of Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses," were an afterthought at Leipzig; the cursory discussion on indulgences near the conclusion of the Leipzig Debate revealed a great deal of commonality between the debaters. However, this common ground mattered little by the end of the debate. Already before Leipzig, the question of authority had become central, and that question was firmly established as the heart of the conversation and the dividing point at Leipzig. That move proved significant, as Leipzig and its aftermath set the terms of the conversation for the following decades. Ecclesial and papal authority remained a central starting point—perhaps the central starting point—of theological dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics throughout Luther's life. In the last years of his life, Luther objected to the pope's claim to have authority over a council, and to the pope's maneuvering to determine who would attend the council.<sup>2</sup>

One could ask how the Reformation might have gone differently if there were a different starting point for the conversation between Lutherans and Rome. Rather than drift into virtual history, here I aim to analyze something concrete: a different way of approaching theology that Luther laid out in his later years. Luther puts forth Christology as a basis and starting point for theology. But to clear the way for that argument, I will first identify and set aside some paradigmatic notions about Luther in order to consider elements of Luther's thought that do not fit within this paradigm.

Several axioms about Luther function as a kind of paradigm in Luther studies. Luther, as everyone knows, was not a systematic theologian. Luther rejects scholastic theology and philosophy. His works are reactionary, determined by the circumstances around Luther and the opponents he addresses. These axioms are points so well established in the field that no evidence is required or sought for them. Since these are agreed-upon basic principles for studying Luther, they shape the

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the 42nd Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, January 14–16, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532–1546*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 357–361.

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methods by which we study Luther and dictate the kinds of questions we put to Luther studies. That is, since Luther's works are reactionary, Luther studies typically begin by framing the particular controversy Luther is participating in at the moment. Often this framing simply takes Luther's word for what his opponents say rather than read those opponents in their own words. Since Luther rejects scholasticism, scholars do not read the scholastics, and see no need to analyze them or look for points of continuity with them in Luther's thought. And, since Luther is not a systematic theologian, scholars do not bother to look for elements of systematic thought in Luther.

Taken together, these points function like a paradigm in Thomas Kuhn's analysis of the history of science. They constitute an agreed-upon, overarching framework within which Luther research is comfortably done. "Normal" Luther research, like Kuhn's "normal science," works within this paradigm to solve what Kuhn calls "puzzles," questions to which one is certain to find an answer when the paradigmatic research methods are followed. In this way, the paradigm generates productive and useful work in Luther studies. Yet there is a cost: as Kuhn argues, the nature of a paradigm is to discount and exclude contrary evidence. The paradigm governs which questions are asked and which are not addressed.<sup>3</sup> In Luther studies, this means that questions are not asked about the ideas or works of Luther that do not fit the paradigm.

I am, of course, overgeneralizing and stereotyping. There are Luther scholars today questioning these axioms and others, and producing excellent scholarship in the process. To name a few, Volker Leppin's biography of Luther,<sup>4</sup> Sujin Pak's book *The Reformation of Prophecy*,<sup>5</sup> and Eric Saak's book *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages*<sup>6</sup> place Luther into conversation with medieval Catholicism in new ways. In the same way, I would like to lay aside paradigmatic points about Luther to analyze elements of Luther's thought that do not fit within this paradigm. This is important in particular because the methods dictated by the paradigm fail when applied to Luther's late christological disputations, and I suggest that this failure is important, pointing us to insights about Luther we otherwise miss.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Volker Leppin, *Martin Luther: A Late Medieval Life*, trans. Rhys Bezzant and Karen Roe (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> G. Sujin Pak, *The Reformation of Prophecy: Early Modern Interpretations of the Prophet & Old Testament Prophecy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Eric Leland Saak, *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Take, for instance, Luther's 1539 *The Disputation concerning the Passage "The Word Was Made Flesh."*<sup>7</sup> The paradigm calls for understanding the current challenge to which a reactionary Luther responds. But, as I argue below, no challenge presents itself as a likely occasion for the disputation. Instead of reacting, I suggest in this paper that Luther uses the disputation to focus on the person of Christ, and to put forth this doctrine as a central point and basis for theology. The disputation shows Luther's interest in doctrines (like the person of Christ) for their own sake, and with a particular importance given to understanding the person of Christ by using tools borrowed from nominalist philosophy. While I will only touch on it in this paper, Luther uses elements of late medieval nominalism in the disputation, so that Luther's Christology emerges from his engagement with late medieval scholastic theology,<sup>8</sup> rather than beginning with a complete rejection of the scholastics.

The third axiom is the one I wish to address, the claim that Luther is not a systematic theologian. I suggest that the 1539 disputation, given its use of scholastic thought and lack of immediate provocation, suggests that there is more order in Luther's thought than is typically granted, giving us insight into what Luther identifies as central to theology. My main argument is that in his late years Luther points to Christology as a basis for theology, laying out the skeleton for a systematic approach to theology. To make this argument, I will first place Luther's *Disputation concerning the Passage "The Word Was Made Flesh"* in the historical context of the discourse between the theology faculty of the University of Paris and Wittenberg. I will then show the points of Christology that Luther lays out as a productive starting point for theology, and argue that Luther's Christology outlines the skeleton for a systematic approach to theology.

### I. A Systematic Approach to Theology

Before laying out the historical context of the disputation, it is necessary to define what I mean by a systematic approach to theology. I do not wish to argue

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), vol. 39/2:3–30 (hereafter WA); Martin Luther, *The Disputation concerning the Passage "The Word Was Made Flesh"* (1539): vol. 38, pp. 235–277, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

<sup>8</sup> Here I use the term *scholastic* broadly to refer to the medieval approach to theology carried on in the universities via disputations, lectures, and commentaries on works like Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Broadly speaking, this kind of theology falls within a contemporary concept of systematic theology as it organizes itself around doctrines, doctrinal questions, and the relation of doctrines to one another.

that Luther wrote a systematic theology in the sense of a single work intending to cover every doctrine. Neither did Luther produce a work that begins with a first principle or two and then deduces all truth from these principles, nor did he resolve every theological tension. Clearly, Luther produced no such work. But to put Luther in context, very few of the scholastics (who are readily considered to be some kind of systematic theologians) produced such a work either. By the late Middle Ages, even the requisite commentaries on the *Sentences* were incomplete, focusing on topics of interest to the author rather than commenting on every one of Lombard's questions.<sup>9</sup> If the claim that Luther is not a systematic theologian means that he produced nothing like Aquinas's *Summae* or Calvin's *Institutes*, then the claim is accurate.

However, if the claim that Luther is not a systematic theologian means that there is no order or logic to Luther's theology, then this axiom occludes elements of Luther's thought. On the contrary, Luther outlines a systematic approach to theology, by which I mean three things. First, Luther identifies a doctrinal starting point for theology. Second, Luther offers a theological diagnostic useful for assessing doctrines. Third, Luther works to demonstrate the coherence of doctrinal points that appear to be paradoxical or contrary. Luther identifies and uses Christology in each of these three ways. In terms of doctrines, Luther puts forth Christology as a starting point. Of course, Luther uses Scripture as the normative authority for theology, and in the sense of a source for theology, Scripture is the starting point. But among doctrines and in theological debate, Luther points to Christology as the starting point and the center of his thought. Here I follow Johannes Zachhuber, who describes Christology as a kind of lynchpin that holds the various strands of Luther's thought together.<sup>10</sup> While agreeing with Zachhuber on the centrality of Christology in Luther's thought, I aim to clarify just how Christology stands at the center. By clarifying the role of Christology in Luther's thought, I hope to offer insights into the heart of Luther's theology, and suggest his systematic approach as a productive starting point for contemporary theological work.

## II. The Sorbonne

Luther names the Sorbonne as the target of his *Disputation concerning the Passage "The Word Was Made Flesh"*, and particularly the claim of the Sorbonne that the same thing is true in philosophy and theology. The Sorbonne was arguably

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<sup>9</sup> Philipp W. Rosemann, *The Story of a Great Medieval Book: Peter Lombard's Sentences, Rethinking the Middle Ages* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Johannes Zachhuber, *Luther's Christological Legacy: Christocentrism and the Chalcedonian Tradition*, The Père Marquette Lectures in Theology 48 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2017), 18–29.

the preeminent theological faculty of the early sixteenth century. The Sorbonne, while only one of the Colleges of the University of Paris, became a common name for the theology faculty of the University of Paris. Both before and during the sixteenth century, the Roman church held the Sorbonne to be a divinely inspired source of doctrine and a mediator of God's truth to man.<sup>11</sup> Due to this esteem, there were at least seventy documented consultations of the Sorbonne between 1500 and 1542.<sup>12</sup> Included among these consultations and extending beyond them was the Sorbonne's role in heresy trials throughout the sixteenth century, as the Sorbonne and the French Parlement managed more heresy trials in France than the Inquisition during the sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

Given the high esteem awarded to the Sorbonne and its frequent role as consultant in dealings with heretics, it is unsurprising that the Sorbonne was asked to serve as a judge of the Leipzig Debate. While it never passed a pronouncement on the Leipzig Debate, the Sorbonne in 1521 and again in 1523 published judgments against Luther's doctrine based on his publications. The Sorbonne issued decrees against heretics and Melancthon in 1535. The Sorbonne's judgments against Wittenberg are in the background of Luther's 1539 *Disputation concerning the Passage "The Word Was Made Flesh"*. Yet a survey of their judgments raises questions about why Luther directs this disputation against the Sorbonne. The Sorbonne is an odd target for two reasons. First, there is no obvious interchange between Luther and the Sorbonne in 1538 or 1539, precluding the possibility that Luther is responding to a current attack of the Sorbonne. Second, Luther writes that the disputation is intended to counter the Sorbonne's claim that the same thing is true in both theology and philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Yet the Sorbonne's published decisions against Luther do not contain this claim. In fact, the decisions suggest that the Sorbonne recognizes that not everything true in philosophy is also true in theology. Given Luther's stated intention in the disputation, I focus on the relationship between philosophy and theology evident in the Sorbonne's judgments.

### III. The Sorbonne's Early Response to Luther

The Sorbonne's 1521 condemnation of Luther subordinates questions about philosophy to questions of ecclesial authority and the merit of human works. The 1521 *Determinatio Theologiae Facultatis Parisiensis* names Luther a heretic who

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<sup>11</sup> James K. Farge, *Orthodoxy and Reform in Early Reformation France: The Faculty of Paris, 1500–1543*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Farge, *Orthodoxy*, 115.

<sup>13</sup> William Monter, *Judging the French Reformation: Heresy Trials by Sixteenth-Century Parlements* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> WA 39/2:3.7–8; 7.8–12; AE 38:239 (Thesis 4) 243.

elevates his judgment above the judgment of the church.<sup>15</sup> Besides being a heretic who does not submit to church authority, Luther is also condemned for speaking against the clear institutes of philosophy. Yet little is said about how Luther violates philosophical principles.<sup>16</sup> As evidence for the charges against Luther, the *Determinatio* lists dozens of Luther's heretical statements. Two main themes emerge from the condemned statements. First, the question of authority is raised, as the Sorbonne's brief replies to Luther's statements assert the authority of church teachings, precepts, and official interpretations of Scripture. Second, the question of human works and their merits is present throughout the *Determinatio*. These two themes, the authority of the church and the merit of human works, are the starting point for the Sorbonne. The Parisian theologians work from these points to defend such acts of medieval piety as the distinction of works, contrition, confession, satisfaction, purgatory, evangelical counsels, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Briefly stated, the argument is that the church has established works by which Christians gain merit, and Luther is wrong to question the authority of the church or the meritorious character of human works. Questions of philosophy are occasionally touched on, but only as instances of the larger themes of Luther elevating himself above the authority of the church and speaking against the merit of human works.

The primary philosophical issue is Luther's dismissal of Aristotelean ethics. The Sorbonne condemns Luther for arguing that Aristotle's ethics are at odds with Christian doctrine and biblical morality. The Sorbonne replies that some points of Aristotle's philosophy agree with Christian theology and faith, so that Aristotle has some value in helping to understand Scripture and theology.<sup>18</sup> By claiming that only "some" points of Aristotle's philosophy agree with theology, the *Determinatio* implies that there are points in Aristotle that disagree with theology, a point readily conceded by scholastic theologians.<sup>19</sup>

While the 1521 *Determinatio* sees some correspondence between theology and philosophy, it does not assert that in every case the same thing is true in theology and philosophy. Rather than defend all of Aristotle, the *Determinatio* narrowly defends the kind of ethics that Aristotle taught. Broadly speaking, Aristotle's ethics

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<sup>15</sup> The full title of the judgment is *Determinatio Theologiae Facultatis Parisiensis super doctrina Lutherana hactenus per eam revisa*. Caroli du Plessis d'Argentré, *Collectio Iudiciorum de novis erroribus: qui ab initio duodecimi seculi post incarnationem Verbi, usque ad annum 1632 in Ecclesia proscripti sunt & notati* (Lutetiae Parisiorum: Coffin, 1728), 1:365–374. The Sorbonne wanted the *Determinatio* to spread quickly, especially to Francis I and Charles V. Farge, *Orthodoxy*, 127–129.

<sup>16</sup> D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 365–366.

<sup>17</sup> D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 367–374.

<sup>18</sup> D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 373–374.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, medieval scholastics had long rejected Aristotle's claims about the eternal existence of the world. The *Determinatio* does not list or name such claims, but seeks to establish only that some of Aristotle's work agrees with theology.



hold that a person becomes good by doing good. Holding to this notion, the Sorbonne rejects Luther's claim that the quality of a person determines the quality of a work.<sup>20</sup> The *Determinatio*'s criticisms of Luther's stance toward philosophy is one approach among others in the document to argue against Luther's doctrine of justification by faith resulting in a person who is then capable of doing good works. The philosophical points raised are secondary and narrow in scope, focusing only on philosophical ethics and implying that philosophy and theology disagree on other points.

Two years later, the Sorbonne issued another *Determinatio* against Luther and his theology. This second *Determinatio* against Luther shows ongoing interest in the Luther question among the Parisian theologians.<sup>21</sup> The 1523 *Determinatio* is concerned to defend church practice against Luther's attacks. This *Determinatio*, even more than the 1521 document, condemns statements that denigrate practices such as the veneration of the virgin, the invocation of saints, the canon of the mass, and offices for the dead.<sup>22</sup> The same central themes emerge as in the 1521 judgment: ecclesial authority and the merit of human works gained through church practice.

The Sorbonne's initial determinations on the Luther question set a pattern of asserting church authority to defend an array of practices that afforded people the opportunity to gain merit through obedience to church practice. Furthermore, it established the pattern that only through the lens of ecclesial authority supporting church practice would practical issues such as indulgences, fasting, or offices for the dead be addressed. This pattern continued throughout the Sorbonne's works on Lutheran and Protestant theology through the 1540s, including the next major engagement of the Sorbonne and Wittenberg in the 1530s.

#### IV. The Sorbonne and Melanchthon

The middle of the 1530s saw the Sorbonne engage with Protestant theology in response to the Affair of the Placards and a proposed convocation with Philipp Melanchthon. The Affair of the Placards was the posting of anti-Catholic posters

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<sup>20</sup> The christological critique is against a kind of compositional Christology: Luther is wrong to assert that the two natures are Christ. Presumably, the Sorbonne would hold that the divine nature is the person of Christ. D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 373.

<sup>21</sup> The full title of this judgment is *Determinatio facultatis Theologiae Parisiensis, super aliquibus Propositionibus certis è locis nuper ad eam delatis, de veneratione Sanctorum, de Canone Missae, deque sustentatione Ministrorum Altaris, & caeteris quibusdam*. D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 374–379. For instance, in 1523 eighty doctors (an unusually high number) attended as the Parisian theologian Pierre Lizet expounded on the dangers of Lutheranism. Farge, *Orthodoxy*, 38–39; Larissa Juliet Taylor, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in Sixteenth-Century Paris: François Le Picart and the Beginnings of the Catholic Reformation*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 77 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 33–43.

<sup>22</sup> D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 374–379.

throughout Paris and other French cities in October 1534. The official response in Paris to the Affair of the Placards was a hardening against Protestant theology. Yet at the same time, Francis I of France was exploring a possible political alliance with the Smalcald League. Part of exploring the alliance was an invitation to Philipp Melanchthon to discuss the religious differences between Paris and the Smalcald League. While this meeting never happened, Melanchthon did send twelve articles to Paris as a starting point for the conversation, and the Sorbonne published a reply to the articles in 1535.<sup>23</sup>

The Sorbonne's 1535 decrees assert church authority against heretics. In July 1535, the Sorbonne published a document aptly named *Little Book Showing That One Must Not Debate Heretics* that cut off any future disputations with heretics by asserting the authority of Roman tradition.<sup>24</sup> In the *Little Book* the Sorbonne likens heretics to gangrenous limbs that need to be amputated so that they do not poison the entire body. The ecclesial equivalent of amputation is to cut off any negotiations or discourse with heretics. Such discourse is impossible, the Sorbonne cautions, with those who deny first principles, as both ecclesiastic authorities and Aristotle assert. Since heretics deny the first principles of church councils, papal decrees, apostolic tradition, customs of the Catholic Church, and the holy doctors' expositions of Scripture, no discourse is possible with them.<sup>25</sup> By requiring acceptance of these first principles before dialogue can take place, the Sorbonne frames the starting point for potential disputations with Protestants as ecclesial authority. Again, while Aristotle is invoked, there is no claim that everything that Aristotle holds to is true in theology; here he is invoked simply to defend a general notion of first principles—and in this case, first principles of theology to which Aristotle did not hold.

In August 1535, one month after issuing this *Little Book*, the Sorbonne took up Melanchthon's articles. While the *Little Book* warned about the grave dangers of conversation with heretics, it did not prevent the Sorbonne from meeting in order to consider Melanchthon's twelve articles, presumably because this was a conversation about a heretic rather than with a heretic. Unsurprisingly, the Sorbonne replies to Melanchthon's articles by appealing to ecclesial authority to uphold practices of the medieval Roman church. The Sorbonne appeals to ecclesial authority to defend traditional practices such as fasting, invocation of the saints, and masses for the dead. The Sorbonne also asserts ecclesial authority

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<sup>23</sup> Monter, *Judging the French Reformation*, 69–72; Farge, *Orthodoxy*, 150–155; Taylor, *Heresy and Orthodoxy*, 60–63; Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church*, 59–60.

<sup>24</sup> In Latin, the title of the work is *Codicillus quo ostenditur non esse disputandum cum Haereticis*. D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 384–386.

<sup>25</sup> D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 384–386.

to uphold the theological points undergirding these practices, such as the necessity of good works for salvation and the freedom of the will.<sup>26</sup> At a deep level, these instructions view morality in the same light as Aristotle: one becomes good by doing good, whether the discussion is of earthly or heavenly matters. Yet, as in previous works, the Sorbonne does not focus the conversation on the question of philosophy and theology; it asserts ecclesial authority to defend traditional church practices as aids to doing good toward one's salvation. This would be the Sorbonne's final word in response to Wittenberg and Protestant theology before Luther named them as the target of a christological disputation four years later.

### V. Luther's Systematic Interest in Christology

Following the Sorbonne's response to Melanchthon's articles, the published records of the Sorbonne include no further documents against Luther or the Lutherans prior to Luther's 1539 disputation. Why then does Luther target the Sorbonne in 1539, four years after the Sorbonne's response to Melanchthon? And why frame the disputation as a rejection of the Sorbonne's assertion that the same thing is true in philosophy and theology when it seems that the Sorbonne never published such an assertion at the time of Luther? And why does Luther focus on Christology, an issue that rarely appears in the Sorbonne's publications against Luther? The Sorbonne frames the Luther question as a question of church authority upholding church practices such as fasting, invocation of the saints, and the like; but Luther wants to talk about Christology and philosophy in relation to theology.

Scholars reach various conclusions about why Luther names the Sorbonne. Stefan Streiff demonstrates that Luther uses the term "Sorbonne" to indicate various schools of scholastic thought in different works, pointing to a historical difficulty in identifying Luther's precise target in the christological disputation. Streiff concludes that Luther does not mean to pick out one particular scholastic school in this instance. Instead, Streiff concludes that by "Sorbonne" Luther means the theological perspective that argues for consonance between philosophy and theology, a move Streiff associates primarily with Thomism.<sup>27</sup> Streiff thinks that Luther's formulation "the same thing is true in theology and philosophy" captures the intention of theologians working in Paris between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>28</sup> Graham White finds the closest formula to the one that Luther cites in an Oxford condemnation of 1277, and argues that Luther conflates that judgment with writings of Parisian theologians in the sixteenth century. Moreover, White

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<sup>26</sup> D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 397–400.

<sup>27</sup> Stefan Streiff, "Novis linguis loqui": *Martin Luthers Disputation über Joh 1, 14 "verbum caro factum est" aus dem Jahr 1539* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 86–92.

<sup>28</sup> Streiff, *Novis Linguis Loqui*, 80–82.

argues that Luther conflates the Oxford condemnation with a Paris condemnation of 1277, assigning the position to the Sorbonne.<sup>29</sup> In light of the publications of the Sorbonne against Luther and Protestants, it seems that White and Streiff are correct that in some way the Sorbonne is a reference to scholastic theology as a whole, or a predominant approach to theology among scholastic theologians typified by the Sorbonne faculty. Yet, even assuming Luther conflates the 1277 condemnations, this does not account for why Luther, in 1539, chooses to take up questions of philosophy, theology, and Christology in light of scholastic thought.

Streiff theorizes that the occasion for the disputation is an internal controversy among the faculty of the University of Wittenberg. As Melanchthon reintroduced the study of Aristotle at Wittenberg in the late 1530s, controversy arose over the doctrine of justification. In 1536 the Cordatus controversy broke out, in which Caspar Cruciger (aligned with Melanchthon) opposed Conrad Cordatus. The controversy centered on questions of repentance and good works.<sup>30</sup> Streiff focuses on the part of the controversy in which Cordatus objected to Melanchthon's application of philosophy in theology. The relationship between theology and philosophy had been debated at the University of Wittenberg since the beginning of the Reformation, and the Cordatus controversy saw the question newly raised in 1538. Streiff reads the disputation as Luther commenting on the philosophical question in an effort to clarify how the university faculty should understand the relationship between theology and philosophy.<sup>31</sup> Streiff's theory is one possibility of why Luther engages with philosophy and theology, but leaves open the question of why Luther engages with Christology. Whether or not the Cordatus controversy plays into Luther's choice of Christology as the topic for this disputation, what is clear is that Luther thinks that the doctrine of the person of Christ deserves careful attention. And, whatever was going on internally in the university, it seems clear that Luther wanted to address Roman theology in some way by directing the disputation against the Sorbonne.

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<sup>29</sup> Graham White, *Luther as Nominalist: A Study of the Logical Methods Used in Martin Luther's Disputations in Light of Their Medieval Background* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1994), 367–376.

<sup>30</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church*, 148–152.

<sup>31</sup> Streiff concludes that Luther argues against Melanchthon and Cruciger, asserting that philosophy has no role to play in theology. Melanchthon holds that Aristotle's philosophy, particularly his thought on grammar, is useful for theology. While Luther and Melanchthon agree that philosophy and theology are each their own distinct art and ought to be distinguished, the point of contention is whether philosophy is an aid to theology. Melanchthon thinks it is; Luther thinks it is not. However, the disputation makes use of philosophical tools to explicate Christ's person, calling into question that Luther's goal is to eliminate philosophy from theology. Streiff, *Novis Linguis Loqui*, 35–40.

The question of why Luther identifies the Sorbonne as the target of this disputation raises a significant challenge to the paradigm of the reactionary Luther. There is no obvious, immediate controversy with the Sorbonne to which Luther is responding. He does not, as he often does, go point by point through an opponent's document.<sup>32</sup> But if we set aside the paradigm that Luther is reactionary and unsystematic for a moment, perhaps we may see a different side to Luther's thought and work—one that shows evidence of a systematic approach to theology. Like White and Streiff, I suggest that Luther names the Sorbonne as a kind of stand-in for Roman theologians, much like the scholastics name Aristotle (to their mind, the premier philosopher) to refer to philosophy in general. Luther, I wish to suggest, uses the disputation to point to the important doctrine of the person of Christ, and that importance suggests a systematic approach to theology.

After diagnosing the problem, Luther turns to Christology to establish the proper basis for theology, both to work from the doctrine of Christ to other theological questions and to establish the proper relationship between theology and philosophy through engagement with Christology. According to this interpretation, the disputation shows that Luther, even the late Luther, was capable of doing more than reacting to opponents with increasingly bitter polemics. The disputation shows evidence of a theological mind probing underneath surface issues to work out a useful order to addressing theological questions. Luther's strategy is to establish a proper Christology that illustrates and utilizes the correct relationship between theology and philosophy, and from the resulting christological foundation address the proper understanding of justification. Luther's understanding of Christ's person and work, in turn, provides the theological background to assess practices like fasting, the invocation of the saints, and other debated ecclesial practices. That strategy is apparent as Luther produces works as background studies for a church council in the late 1530s.

Luther was engaged in preparations for a proposed council when he organized the 1539 christological disputation. Luther adopted a certain ambivalence toward the council, as evident in his preface to the Smalcald Articles. While doubtful that a council would convene, and convinced that any council would be biased and condemn the Lutherans, Luther did make preparations in case one should convene and give the Lutherans opportunity to confess their faith. One instance of this preparation is the Smalcald Articles; another is *On the Councils and the Church*. Luther published the latter work in March 1539, two months after the disputation against the Sorbonne. Like the January 1539 disputation, Christology is a central

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<sup>32</sup> For instance, he takes this reactionary approach against the theology faculty at Louvain in 1545. *Against the Thirty-Five Articles of the Louvain Theologians* (1545), WA 54:415–443; AE 34:339–360.

focus of *On the Councils and the Church*.<sup>33</sup> In all likelihood Luther was drafting *On the Councils and the Church* at the time of the disputation, and both works place Christology as a central question for theological discourse as Rome made halting progress toward a council.

Since there is no obvious occasion for Luther to address Christology and the Sorbonne in 1539, the 1539 disputation demonstrates that the late Luther is capable of and interested in a systematic approach to theology. Luther is not just reacting to and rejecting opposing positions in the terms laid out by his opponents, but focuses on a doctrine of his choosing. Luther works to build up future theologians as he organizes the disputation in a way to advance the education of the theology students at Wittenberg.<sup>34</sup> Without immediate provocation, and without responding to a position taken against him, Luther frames a theological debate in a way that places Christology at the center of the theological conversation. As he thinks of what the students in Wittenberg will need in their theological careers, Luther turns to Christology as an essential point of their training and preparations, particularly in this case the person of Christ. The disputation rounds out the character of the late Luther by displaying a dimension to his personality and work extending beyond reaction and polemics. While Luther is heavily engaged in reactionary polemics during the later years of his life, he is also engaged in doctrinal theological work in the expectation that future generations will continue the work of theology.

By the later years of Luther's life, the theological conversations in Wittenberg and in Paris were largely internal. Curiously, the theology faculty in both cities discussed the other in January 1539. While Luther held a disputation with Wittenberg professors and students about the theology of the Sorbonne, the Sorbonne held a disputation on the works of Melancthon.<sup>35</sup> Yet the two sides were not talking to each other, and their internal conversations began with different doctrinal points. Luther identified Christology as a central and critical point of doctrine for future theologians. The Sorbonne persisted in starting with ecclesial authority, as again in 1542 the Sorbonne put ecclesial authority forward as the starting point of theology. From that starting point, they (again) oriented essential articles of belief to center around church practices designed to assist the Christian to gain merit through confession, invocation of the saints, fasting, and other practices.<sup>36</sup> That is, in 1542 the Sorbonne identified the central issues of theology as the very ones they had asserted in response to Luther and Protestant theology

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<sup>33</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church*, 188–198.

<sup>34</sup> *Disputation on "The Word Was Made Flesh"* (1539), WA 39/2:6.5–8.8, relation A; AE 38:242–244.

<sup>35</sup> D'Argentré, *Collectio*, Index X.

<sup>36</sup> D'Argentré, *Collectio*, 413–415.

for the previous twenty years. The Roman insistence of beginning with ecclesial authority at a discussion between Lutheran and Roman theologians at Hagenau in 1540 turned the meeting down a blind alley. Subsequent meetings in Worms and Regensburg likewise proved fruitless.<sup>37</sup>

## VI. Christology as Basis of Theology

Once Luther's *Disputation concerning the Passage "The Word Was Made Flesh"* is freed from the paradigm of a reactionary work responding to immediate provocation, it opens a window to the positive work of Luther's late efforts to make Christology a central point of theology. While not writing a full-fledged systematic theology, Luther locates Christology as the key beginning point to address theological questions, outlining the framework for a systematic approach to theology. Luther uses Christology in a variety of writings to reframe questions with Christology as a basis of theology. Besides his christological disputations in 1539 and 1540,<sup>38</sup> Luther makes Christology a central component of the Smalcald Articles in 1537, *On the Councils and the Church* in 1539,<sup>39</sup> an *Enarratio* of Isaiah 52–53 in 1544,<sup>40</sup> and other late works.<sup>41</sup> Setting aside the paradigm of Luther as reactionary, it quickly becomes apparent that these works are not limited to reaction. When Luther does react to opponents in these works, he frequently advances theological arguments beyond harsh polemics to the explication of a Christology fit to undergird his understanding of justification, faith, and Christian life. That is, Luther outlines a certain strand of systematic thought. Luther's christological works offer a glimpse into Luther's mind when he is not engaged in questions raised by others, but free to frame the conversation himself. Read in this light, these late works allow us to see the groundwork for a systematic approach to theology in the late Luther.

In his late writings, Luther puts forth Christology as a basis of theology. By basis, I mean first that Christology is a foundational point of doctrine from which other questions are framed and answered, so that the proper definition of Christ and his work leads to a proper understanding of justification, faith, and other doctrines. Second, Christology functions as a diagnostic tool for theological positions,

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<sup>37</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church*, 215–228.

<sup>38</sup> Luther in 1540 organizes a *Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ*, WA 39/2:97–121.

<sup>39</sup> WA 50:509–653; AE 41:3–178.

<sup>40</sup> WA 40/3:683–746.

<sup>41</sup> Mark Edwards comments that Luther's *On the Councils and the Church* is limited in polemics, and instead builds a historical and logical argument in its main section. I am interested in examining how Christology forms a foundational part of that argument. Mark Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–1546* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 93.

upholding those that are in agreement with Christ's person and work and rejecting those that go against the articles of Christology. Further, Christology is a basis in that it demonstrates the proper relationship between theology and philosophy. That relationship and the tools useful for describing the person of Christ function to show how Luther gives an account of paradoxical theological doctrines. By charting a distinction between theology and philosophy, Luther insists that theology must have room for truths that are not found in the natural world. In particular, Luther sees in Christ's person an example of a unique type of union, a kind of union that Luther uses as a model to articulate Christian life and the relationship between faith and works.<sup>42</sup> The person of Christ in this way demonstrates the kind of linguistic and logical tools needed to articulate theological truths correctly. By bringing the christological question to the forefront, Luther seeks to begin theological conversations with Christ and then work from his person and work to other theological questions and doctrines.

Luther frequently identifies Christology as the chief article of the Christian faith, pointing to Christology as a basis and doctrinal starting point for theology. He points to three components essential to Christology: one must hold that Christ is God, that Christ is man, and that Christ died and rose for us. Luther writes that one who holds these points correctly remains in the Christian faith, while one who misses any one of these points loses all of them.<sup>43</sup> As Luther develops the logic, he works out how and why this is so. If one denies that Christ is either God or man, then he holds only to a partial, counterfeit Jesus, and not the true, whole, incarnate Son of God. If one holds that Christ is God and man but denies that he has died for us, then there is no profit in seeing Christ as God and man, and one loses the whole point of the faith.<sup>44</sup>

A Christian must hold that Christ is both God and man, for only as man could Christ give himself for our sins, while only as God could Christ grant victory

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<sup>42</sup> Johann Anselm Steiger, "Die *communicatio idiomatum* als Achse und Motor der Theologie Luthers. Der ›fröhliche Wechsel‹ als hermeneutischer Schlüssel zu Abendmahlslehre, Anthropologie, Seelsorge, Naturtheologie, Rhetorik und Humor," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 38.1 (1996): 1–28.

<sup>43</sup> *The Three Symbols* (1538), WA 50:266.32–269.20; AE 34:207–210.

<sup>44</sup> In this way, Luther can say, on the one hand, that he agrees with the Roman Catholics on the articles of the divine majesty (SA I), and yet assert that they have lost Christ by incorrectly describing his work. The christological disputation thus sets to correct the record by working out the proper definition of theology and philosophy that gives space for Christ to make a person "good" by his death and resurrection. Without this work of Christ, there is no gain to be had from correctly identifying Christ as God and man. Scholastic construals of Christ that join theology and philosophy err on that point, by so joining philosophy and theology that there is no room for a person to be counted good apart from doing good.



over sin, death, the devil, and hell, or give peace and forgiveness.<sup>45</sup> This Christ (God and man united in one person) died for us, Luther says, drawing the distinction that Christ gave himself for our sins, not for our merits or works, and concluding that since Christ died for our sins there is no room for human works to merit salvation.<sup>46</sup> That is, the Christ who gives himself for human sin does not die to enable Christians to merit heaven by their works. Instead, Christ by his work has merited and won heaven for Christians by taking away their sin. This Christ is the entry point into theology for Luther.

Luther argues that the right Christology will bring with it all other doctrines. He claims that when one holds that Christ is God and man and has died and risen for us, all the other articles of faith fall into place.<sup>47</sup> Luther follows this order as he works from Christology to other doctrines. For instance, the definition of Christ as God and man united in one person who gave himself for our sins frames the doctrine of justification.<sup>48</sup> Justification, as Luther defines it in the 1535 Galatians lectures, is Christ saving a person. In this way, Luther works from the definition of Christ's person and work to define what justification is. Christology is also foundational for the proper understanding of faith, which justifies because it lays hold of the entire person of Christ, who gave himself for us.<sup>49</sup> In this way, Luther uses Christology to determine what gives faith its saving power. Luther also ties the person of Christ to the correct understanding of the bread consecrated in the Sacrament. As the fullness of divinity is one with the finite body of Christ, so the body of Christ is in the finite bread. That is, Christology undergirds Luther's understanding of the presence of Christ's body in the Sacrament of the Altar.<sup>50</sup> These examples show how Luther works from a correct understanding of Christ to other doctrines such as justification, faith, and sacramental presence. The examples illustrate how Christology functions as the chief article of the faith, an entry point

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<sup>45</sup> For the latter, see the beginning of the Galatians lectures, where Luther sees such things as signs of divinity and argues that it would be sacrilegious to ascribe them to Christ were he not God. *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:80.25–81.13; AE 26:31.

<sup>46</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:78.14–94.12; AE 26:29–39. Luther begins the Galatians lectures with this kind of definition of Christ and derives justification from it. Early in the lectures, Luther puts forth Christ as the starting point of religion. If one is to have assurance of salvation, he must begin with Christ: God and man who gave himself for our sins. From this definition of Christ follows justification.

<sup>47</sup> *Three Symbols* (1538), WA 50:266.32–269.20; AE 34:207–210.

<sup>48</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:232.21–242.14; AE 26:132–138. See also the *Disputation on Justification* (1536), WA 39/1:82–126; AE 34:147–196.

<sup>49</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:163.28–164.30; AE 26:88.

<sup>50</sup> *Letter to Graf Franz Réway* (October 1, 1538), WA Br 8:296–298. Luther uses the classic christological illustration of the fire and the iron, but applies it to the body and the bread in the Sacrament of the Altar rather than the person of Christ.

for the theologian to do his work. Identifying Christology as the entry point suggests an outline for a systematic approach to theology.

Luther also uses Christology to diagnose and refute opposing theologies. For instance, he identifies a deficient Christology as a fundamental error in Roman theology. Luther argues that theologians under the papacy, while holding that Christ is God and man, deny that he died and rose for us.<sup>51</sup> What Luther means by denying that Christ died and rose for us is that Roman theologians do not think Christ's death and resurrection was sufficient for man's salvation. As Roman theologians hold that people must contribute to their own salvation by their works, their soteriology reveals a deficient Christology that fails to capture the fullness of Christ's death and resurrection for us. Similarly, Luther uses Christology to criticize the scholastic notion of faith informed by love. The object of faith is Christ, God and man in one person, and this Christ gives his righteousness to the believer through faith.<sup>52</sup> Christ understood in this sense leaves no space for a love that forms faith and then brings righteousness. Such a construal of informed faith displaces Christ in favor of love, ascribing merit to the work of people and taking that merit away from Christ and his work.

At this precise point, one of the reasons for Luther's diagnosis about philosophy becomes clear. The Sorbonne held that Aristotle's ethics were fundamentally correct: a person becomes good by doing good. Luther disagrees. In theology, a person is counted as good through faith in Christ, and only then is able to do good works. In order to make that case for justification by faith, Luther needs to carve out space for theology to have a different view than Aristotle about how a person becomes good.

Luther's use of Christology to reject contrary theological views is typically expressed by Luther's claim that his opponent has lost Christ. Luther writes that one who holds to works in justification loses Christ, as Peter did when he reverted to the observation of ceremonial laws.<sup>53</sup> Like Peter, the papacy's problem is contempt of Christ. By despising the idea that Christ gave himself for our sins, the papacy opened the door to justification by the law. Not only does this falsely represent justification, it also robs Christ of his glory as that glory is ascribed to human works.<sup>54</sup> Where human works are glorified at the expense of Christ's glory, theologians make Christ useless and even abolish him.<sup>55</sup> In Luther's thought, this denial of Christ continues in forms of worship designed to gain merit for the

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<sup>51</sup> *Three Symbols* (1538), WA 50:266.32–269.20; AE 34:207–210.

<sup>52</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:225.15–229.35; AE 26:127–130.

<sup>53</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:202.12–30; AE 26:112.

<sup>54</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:244.29–253.21; AE 26:140–145.

<sup>55</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:436.24–437.17; AE 26:279–280.

worshiper to apply to his own salvation.<sup>56</sup> Note then that Luther approaches questions of church practice through Christology rather than beginning with an ecclesial authority that has authorized such practices. These arguments against opponents demonstrate the centrality of Christology in Luther's theology. Not only do christological errors lead to other theological mistakes, but theological mistakes also result in the loss of Christ. When Luther issues this kind of diagnostic, he argues that theologians go wrong when they posit doctrines without regard to Christ's person and work—again, suggesting a systematic approach to theology.

A third way in which Christology serves as a basis of theology is by showing the kind of logic and language needed to understand complex, paradoxical unities that define Christian life and justification. The person of Christ shows that a union of two natures in one person is possible, and that by this union a single person can bear opposing attributes. Among other attributes, Luther argues that in one person Christ bears the sin of the world and yet eternal righteousness is also in him.<sup>57</sup> As Christ bears these seemingly contradictory attributes by virtue of his two natures, so also the Christian bears them through faith in Christ. Faith unites the believer to Christ so that the believer and Christ are, Luther says, one person. In this person, opposing attributes stand: sinner and saint at the same time. Furthermore, Luther argues, Christ works in the believer by virtue of this union.<sup>58</sup> Luther's language and illustrations show that Christology is the model for this construal of faith and life. Luther aligns the sinner and Christ with the two natures of Christ. As Christ's natures each bear attributes communicated to the person of Christ by virtue of the personal union, so also the believer and Christ, united as a single person by faith, communicate attributes to a single person. And, as the person of Christ works according to his two natures, so the Christian acts according to Christ, who works in him, to do good works. I take this to mean that Christology serves as a model for Luther to describe the joyful exchange of sin and righteousness between Christ and the sinner and to account for Christ's work in the believer to do good works.

The person of Christ also serves as the logical basis for the proper relationship between faith and works. Luther argues that Scripture speaks sometimes of Christ as God, and at other times of the incarnate Christ. In the same way, Scripture speaks sometimes of faith by itself, and sometimes of an "incarnate" faith, by which Luther means faith joined to works that the believer does and made evident by those works. Luther's concept of an "incarnate faith" allows him to interpret passages that promise rewards to the one who does the law as promises to reward the believer,

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<sup>56</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:263.33–265.28; AE 26:153–154.

<sup>57</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:438.32–439.15; AE 26:280–281.

<sup>58</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:283.18–288.16; AE 26:167–170.

for faith is required for anyone to do the law.<sup>59</sup> In Luther's analysis following a christological model, promises made to reward works are really God's gracious promises to bless the one whose faith is made evident in the works he does—in the end, it is the believer's faith rather than his deeds that is being rewarded. While faith is not the law, the one with faith does the law, so that there is a concrete unity to doing and believing grounded in the single person doing both. The unity of faith and works does not erase distinctions between them, even as the personal union of Christ does not erase the distinctions between Christ's two natures.<sup>60</sup> But the unity does enable Luther to claim that promises to reward the one who works are promises to reward the one who believes, and ascribe the cause of the reward to faith rather than works. What interests me here is not so much the question of good works and rewards, but how Luther turns to Christology and specifically the incarnation as a model for a complex unity in which different things are inseparably united yet retain critical distinctions. He applies that model to the relationship between faith and works, holding them to be inseparable and yet retain their own distinctive characteristics even as the two natures of Christ do.

Holding this kind of unity with distinction requires suitable linguistic, logical, and metaphysical tools. Luther uses the christological disputations to explicate the kind of linguistic and logical tools necessary to hold all three of the central claims of Christology Luther identifies as essential: Christ is God, Christ is man, Christ died and rose for us. In his analysis of the kind of language and logic underlying these claims, Luther sees the need for a distinction between theology and philosophy. Luther works in his christological disputations with nominalist sources and using nominalist tools, so that his argument is a selective rejection of certain points of scholastic theology constructed using other tools derived from scholastic theology. The disputations, read as exercises in systematic theology, work out the details of how Christ's person can best be described in theology.

## VII. Conclusion

Setting aside basic axioms that guide Luther studies can offer fresh insights into Luther's thought. Luther places Christology as the basis of theology, and by doing this suggests the outline for a systematic approach to theology. A "systematic approach" here means a proper order to theological questions that begins with Christ's person and work, a christological diagnosis of theological problems, and a consistency in that Luther uses the language and logic arising out of Christology to hold paradoxical doctrines together. Christology illustrates the

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<sup>59</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:414.13–416.17; AE 26:264–265.

<sup>60</sup> *Galatians* (1531/1535), WA 40/1:426.22–427.24; AE 26:272–273.

correct relation between philosophy and theology that allows the theologian to assert all that Scripture does of Christ without producing absurd or heretical claims. And working out the proper relation of theology and philosophy gives the theologian tools to articulate other doctrines like the relationship of the believer to Christ, good works and their place in the Christian life, and the Christian as saint and sinner. While Luther's Christology and its relation to other doctrines is not a fully developed systematic text, there is enough order in Luther's thought to suggest the outline for a systematic approach to theology.

By the later years of Luther's life, much had transpired since the Leipzig Debate. Luther in his later years explicated the person of Christ more fully than he had in his youth. That attention to the person of Christ shows an interest in doctrinal theology in Luther, an interest that comes to light especially when Luther is not responding directly to opponents, but working to train young theologians. Luther's suggestion that Christology is a good doctrinal starting point for theology is one that we can take up in diverse theological contexts. Christology can function as the basis of our theology, offering us a solid starting point for pastoral care and for addressing theological questions of all kinds, a diagnostic tool for assessing theological positions, and an illustration of the kinds of distinctions and nuances that allow for a proper construal of good works, the Christian life, and other doctrines.