

# Part One

## The Background

Luther as a Late Medieval  
Theologian, 1509–1514

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# The Dawn of the Reformation at Wittenberg

Our story concerns the intellectual and spiritual development of Martin Luther (1483–1546) during the years 1509–1519 – particularly 1512–1519, which many regard as being a decisive phase in this process. During these critical years, Luther began to inch his way toward his own distinctive understanding of how sinners are able to enter into the presence of a righteous God, classically expressed in the doctrine of justification by faith. While the relationship between the emergence of Luther’s theological distinctives and the historical origins of the Reformation as a whole is somewhat more complex than some popular accounts suggest,<sup>1</sup> there is little doubt that Luther’s theological breakthrough was one of a number of factors that proved to be of decisive importance in catalyzing the massive

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<sup>1</sup> For comments on German Luther scholarship’s occasional tendency to treat Luther as determinative for the Reformation, see J.M. Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2000).

social, economic, political, and religious transformations of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>2</sup>

This study sets out to analyze the emergence of Luther's understanding of the question of how humanity is justified in the sight of God, focusing especially on his shifting views concerning what it means to speak of God as "righteous." How can a sinner hope to find acceptance in the sight of a righteous God? *Wie kriege ich einen gnädigen Gott?* Luther's changing answers to that central question set the scene for the great upheavals of the Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

Yet a second distinctive feature of Luther's early thought emerges alongside these reflections on the nature of divine righteousness, and how a righteous God could accept and love sinful humanity. Luther's celebrated "theology of the cross" is the outcome of the same process of reflection that led Luther to his doctrine of justification. The two themes are intertwined in his early writings, and can in some ways be seen as two sides of a single, related question – namely, how humanity is to live by faith in the shadowlands of sin and doubt. We shall consider both these major theological themes in this study.

But theological reflection never takes place in a social or cultural vacuum. To tell the story of the development of Luther's ideas, we must explore the situation within which they emerged. We therefore turn immediately to consider the state of late medieval Europe on the eve of the Reformation – especially in Germany, which played a particularly significant role in shaping the contours of late medieval Christianity,<sup>4</sup> as well as laying the foundations for the Protestant

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<sup>2</sup> For some recent attempts by social historians to minimize the importance of religious issues, or even to marginalize Luther's significance to the Reformation, see M.P. Holt, "The Social History of the Reformation: Recent Trends and Future Agendas," *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003), pp. 133–144.

<sup>3</sup> The relation of the origins of Luther's theology and the origins of the Reformation itself remains imperfectly understood: for an introduction, see H.A. Oberman, "Headwaters of the Reformation: *Initia Lutheri – Initia Reformationis*," in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era. Papers for the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research*, ed. H.A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 40–88.

<sup>4</sup> For the evolution of German Christianity between 376 and 754, see J.C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 107–208.

Reformation. In what follows, we shall consider this context more closely.

## **The Late Medieval Context**

By the end of the Middle Ages, the need for reform and renewal within the Christian church within Germany and elsewhere was so obvious that it could no longer be ignored. The Middle Ages had seen the political power of the church, and particularly that of the papacy, reach previously unknown heights. While the spiritual authority of the pope within the church had long been recognized, the medieval period witnessed the extension of such claims to the secular sphere.<sup>5</sup> Even if the force of the claims made on behalf of the papacy to absolute spiritual and temporal authority was greatly diminished by the absence of effective executive powers by which they might have been enforced, the fact remains that such claims were made and recognized, at least in part.

The political success of the church during the Middle Ages was not, however, without its cost. To the faithful, the Christian church remained the visible embodiment of Christ upon earth; to an increasing number of skeptics, within its ranks as well as outside them, it appeared as a vast legal, judicial, financial, administrative, and diplomatic machine, whose spiritual concerns were frequently judged to be difficult to detect, even to the eye of faith. The secular interests of the clergy, the widespread absence of bishops from their dioceses, and the financial difficulties of the curia are further examples of factors which combined to compromise the moral and spiritual authority of the church at the time in so serious a manner.

There were many within the church at the time who were troubled by the soaring power and influence of the papacy, and sought to confine it within acceptable limits. The Conciliarist movement

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<sup>5</sup> For the development of papal authority in the medieval period, see J. Sayers, *Innocent III, Leader of Europe, 1198–1216* (New York: Longman, 1994); K. Cushing, *Papacy and Law in the Gregorian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

argued that ecclesiastical power should be decentralized. Instead of being concentrated in the hands of a single individual, it should be dispersed within the body of the church as a whole, and entrusted to more representative and accountable “general Councils.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet despite these concerns, there is every indication that the church remained deeply embedded in western European culture at this time, with popular piety experiencing a resurgence in the fifteenth century. The church was no abstract theological notion, no peripheral social institution; it stood at the heart of the social, spiritual, and intellectual life of western Europe throughout the Middle Ages, including the Renaissance. The older view, which tended to see the Renaissance as a secular interlude between the medieval “age of faith” and the unruly religious passions unleashed by the Reformation, never really made much sense, and is somewhat difficult to sustain on the basis of the historical evidence.<sup>7</sup> An individual’s hope of salvation rested on her being part of the community of saints, whose visible expression was the institution of the church. The church could not be bypassed or marginalized in any account of redemption: there was, as Cyprian of Carthage had so cogently argued in the third century, no salvation outside the church.

Although the fifteenth century was regarded as a period of religious degeneration and spiritual stagnation by an earlier generation of historians, more recent research has decisively overturned this verdict.<sup>8</sup> On the eve of the Reformation, religion was perhaps more firmly rooted in the experience and lives of ordinary people than at any time in the past.<sup>9</sup> Earlier medieval Christianity had been

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<sup>6</sup> J. Ballweg, *Konziliare oder päpstliche Ordensreform: Benedikt XII und die Reformsdiskussion im frühen 14. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2001), pp. 221–320. For its later development, see B.P. McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> D.S. Peterson, “Out of the Margins: Religion and the Church in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000), pp. 835–879.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Guy Lobrichon, *La religion des laïcs en Occident, XIe–XVe siècles* (Paris: Hachette, 1994); R.N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215–c. 1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> A. Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 3rd edn, 2005).

primarily monastic, focused on the life, worship, and writings of Europe's monasteries and convents. Church-building programs flourished in the later fifteenth century, as did pilgrimages and the vogue for collecting relics. The fifteenth century has been referred to as "the inflation-period of mystic literature," reflecting the growing popular interest in religion. The fifteenth century witnessed a widespread popular appropriation of religious beliefs and practices, not always in orthodox forms.

The phenomenon of "folk religion" often bore a tangential relationship to the more precise yet abstract statements of Christian doctrine that the church preferred – but that many found unintelligible or unattractive.<sup>10</sup> In parts of Europe, popular religious beliefs echoing the notions of classical "fertility cults" emerged, connected and enmeshed with the patterns and concerns of agrarian rural communities.<sup>11</sup> Much popular religion was shaped by a fear of death and hell, often linked with more popular beliefs of fiends and devils lurking in woods and dark places, awaiting their opportunity to snatch unwary souls and take them straight to hell. At times, hints of these popular concerns can be found in Luther's early writings, particularly as he agonized over the implications of his own inability to achieve the holiness that his age regarded as a guarantee of salvation.<sup>12</sup>

It is now clear that there was considerable confusion within the late medieval church, undoubtedly exacerbated by a largely uneducated clergy,<sup>13</sup> on matters of doctrine, and the doctrine of justification in

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<sup>10</sup> As noted by J.C. Schmitt, "Religion populaire et culture folklorique," *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 31 (1976), pp. 785–796.

<sup>11</sup> For a fascinating analysis of peasant beliefs, see C. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> A point emphasized by H.A. Oberman, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1982); J.B. Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> For the late medieval context, and the Lutheran pedagogical response, see P. Dykema, "Handbooks for Pastors: Late Medieval Manuals for Parish Priests and Conrad Porta's *Pastorale Lutheri*," in *Continuity and Change*, ed. R.J. Bast and A.C. Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 143–162.

particular. It is precisely this widespread confusion at the beginning of the sixteenth century that appeared to have occasioned and catalyzed Luther's theological reflections during the years 1509–1519, with which we are here concerned. As these focus on the concept of "justification," we may pause to consider this idea in more detail.

## **The Concept of "Justification" in Christian Thought**

The importance of the doctrine of justification is best appreciated when the nature of Christianity itself is considered.<sup>14</sup> The central teaching of the Christian faith is that reconciliation has been effected between God and sinful humanity through Jesus Christ, and that this reconciliation is a present actuality for those within the church, and a present possibility for those outside it. The essence of the Christian faith is thus located in the saving action of God toward humanity in Jesus Christ. The Christian doctrine of justification is primarily concerned with the question of how this saving action may be appropriated by the individual – in other words, with the question of what is required of human beings if they are to enter into fellowship with God. The hope of salvation in Christ is a leading characteristic of the faith of the Christian church throughout its entire history, which lends particular urgency to the question posed by the doctrine of justification: what must an individual *do* in order to be saved? The practical importance of this question may be illustrated with reference to the fate of a small group of Italian noblemen, sometimes known as the "Murano Circle," at the beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For full discussion of the development of the Christian doctrine of justification within the western theological tradition, from the earliest times to the present day, see A.E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd edn, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> The evidence for the existence and composition of this group is not as clear as might be hoped: see, for example, the critical comments of E. Massa, *L'eremo, la Bibbia e il medioevo in umanisti Veneti del primo cinquecento* (Naples: Liguori, 1992), pp. 15–23.



In 1510 Paolo Giustiniani, the leader of a small group of Paduan-educated humanists, entered the hermitage of Camaldoli, near Arezzo, soon to be followed by most of the remainder of this circle of humanists.<sup>16</sup> The circle had shared a common concern for personal holiness and ultimate salvation, in common with many of their contemporaries. After intense personal anguish, Giustiniani decided that his only hope for salvation lay in the ascetic monastic life as a means of expiating his sins. Our interest here, however, concerns Gasparo Contarini, one of the members of the circle who chose to remain in the world. In 1957 Hubert Jedin, searching through the archives of the hermitage at Camaldoli, discovered the correspondence between Contarini and Giustiniani during the years 1511–1523,<sup>17</sup> thus enabling us to enter to some extent into the mind of a man who was passionately concerned for his own salvation, and yet unwilling to enter a monastery. It is clear from this correspondence that Contarini went through a period of deep depression after his friends entered the hermitage. The question which appears to have caused Contarini particular anguish was the following: if his friends doubted whether *they* could ever atone for their sins by leading lives of austere piety, what hope could there be for Contarini, who had chosen to avoid such a life by remaining in the world?

On Easter Eve 1511, in near despair, Contarini happened to fall into conversation with a priest, and as a result began to rethink his dilemma. We do not know who this priest was, and cannot be entirely certain of the exact substance of his advice to Contarini. Nevertheless, it is clear that Contarini had now resolved his dilemma.

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<sup>16</sup> On Giustiniani, see S. dall'Aglio, *L'eremita e il sinodo: Paolo Giustiniani e l'offensiva medicaia contro Girolamo Savonarola (1516–1517)* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> H. Jedin, "Contarini und Camaldoli," *Archivio per la storia della pietà* 2 (1959), pp. 51–117. Unfortunately, Giustiniani's replies to Contarini have never been traced, if they survive. For comment on this correspondence in its contemporary religious context, see E. Massa, "Paolo Giustiniani e Gasparo Contarini: la vocazione al bivio del neoplatonismo e della teologica biblica," *Benedictina* 35 (1988), pp. 429–474; E.G. Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini: Venice, Rome, and Reform* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 3–18.

In his mercy, God had permitted his only son, Jesus Christ, to make satisfaction for the sins of the world, so that in Contarini's words:

Even if I did all the penances possible, and many more besides, they would not be enough to atone for my past sins, let alone to merit my salvation . . . [Christ's] passion is sufficient, and more than sufficient, as a satisfaction for sins committed, to which human weakness is prone. Through this thought, I changed from great fear and anguish to happiness. I began to turn with my whole heart to this greatest good which I saw, for love of me, on the cross, his arms open and his breast opened right up to his heart. Thus I – the wretch who lacked the courage to leave the world and do penance for the satisfaction of my sins! – turned to him, and asked him to allow me to share in the satisfaction which he, the sinless one, had performed for us. He was quick to accept me and to permit his Father to totally cancel the debt which I had contracted, and which I was incapable of satisfying by myself.

Now, since I have such a one to pay my debt, shall I not sleep securely in the midst of the city, even though I have not satisfied the debt which I had contracted? Yes! I shall sleep and wake as securely as if I had spent my entire life in the hermitage!<sup>18</sup>

The question with which Contarini and his circle had wrestled, with such a variety of results, lies at the heart of the Christian doctrine of justification: what must I *do* to be saved? Contarini and Giustiniani came to very different conclusions – *but which corresponded to the teaching of the church on the matter?* The simple fact is that there was such confusion at the time that this vital question could not be answered by anyone with any degree of conviction. The Contarini–Giustiniani correspondence is of considerable interest, as it bears witness to a spiritual dilemma which is remarkably similar to that faced by the young Luther,<sup>19</sup> also occasioned at least in part by confusion within the church over the doctrine of justification.

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<sup>18</sup> Jedin, "Contarini und Camaldoli," p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> Jedin elsewhere compares Contarini's experience with the young Luther's "Turmerlebnis": H. Jedin, "Ein Turmerlebnis des jungen Contarinis," in *Kirche des Glaubens – Kirche der Geschichte: Ausgewählte Aufsätze und Vorträge*, 2 vols (Freiburg: Herder, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 167–180.

The doctrine of justification had been the subject of considerable debate within the early western church during the course of the Pelagian controversy.<sup>20</sup> In 418 the Council of Carthage undertook a preliminary clarification of the church's teaching on justification in response to this controversy.<sup>21</sup> Its pronouncements were, however, vague at several points which were to prove of significance, and these were revised at what is generally regarded as being the most important council of the early church to deal with the doctrine of justification – the Second Council of Orange, convened in 529.<sup>22</sup> No other council was convened to discuss the doctrine of justification between that date and 1545, when the Council of Trent assembled to debate that doctrine, among many others. There was thus a period of over a millennium during which the teaching office of the church remained silent on the issue of justification.<sup>23</sup>

This silence serves to further enhance the importance of the pronouncements of the Second Council of Orange on the matter, as these thus come to represent the definitive teaching of the Christian church on the doctrine of justification during the medieval period, before the Council of Trent was convened. Recent scholarship has established that no theologian of the Middle Ages ever cites the decisions of the Second Council of Orange, or shows the slightest awareness of the existence of such decisions. For reasons which we simply do not understand, from the tenth century until the assembly of the Council of Trent in 1545, the theologians of the western church appear to be unaware of the existence of

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed account of the historical development and theological substance of the Pelagian controversy, see Alister E. McGrath, *Heresy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), pp. 159–170.

<sup>21</sup> H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1991), D. 101–108.

<sup>22</sup> D. 174–200. For the problems raised by the fact that this was a *local*, rather than an *ecumenical*, council, see *Problems of Authority: An Anglo-French Symposium*, ed. J.M. Todd (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), pp. 63–64.

<sup>23</sup> While no council was ever convened over the specific issue of justification, it may be pointed out that questions relating to the doctrine were occasionally touched upon by other magisterial pronouncements – e.g., in the profession of faith sent by Leo IX to the Bishop of Antioch in 1053 (D. 680–686).

such a council, let alone of its pronouncements.<sup>24</sup> The theologians of the Middle Ages were thus obliged to base their teaching on justification on the canons of the Council of Carthage, which were simply incapable of bearing the strain which came to be placed upon them.<sup>25</sup> The increasing precision of the technical terms employed within the theological schools inevitably led to the somewhat loose terms used by the Council of Carthage being interpreted in a manner quite alien to that intended by those who originally employed them.

For reasons such as these, there was considerable confusion within the later medieval church concerning the doctrine of justification. This confusion undoubtedly did much to prepare the way for the Reformation, in that the church was simply not prepared for a major debate on justification, and was unable to respond to Luther's challenge when it finally came.<sup>26</sup> How can a sinner enter into fellowship with a holy and righteous God? How can the troubled conscience find peace by discovering a gracious God? Luther was not the only one to ask such questions, and was not the only one to find himself confused by the variety of answers given. If not clarity, then at least clarification, was clearly required.

## **The Reform of the Church and the Renewal of Spirituality**

The Catholic system of church order is such that its emphasis upon the *institution* of the church, with its associated ecclesiastical apparatus, means that a prolonged period of spiritual mediocrity or even decline can be sustained without undue damage, to await spiritual renewal and regeneration at a future date. If the lifeblood of the

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<sup>24</sup> This was first pointed out by H. Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce chez Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), pp. 99–123. See further M. Seckler, *Instinkt und Glaubenswille nach Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Grünewald Verlag, 1961), pp. 90–133.

<sup>25</sup> For example as illustrated by Gabriel Biel's use of Canon 5: A.E. McGrath, "The Anti-Pelagian Structure of 'Nominalist' Doctrines of Justification," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 57 (1981), pp. 107–119.

<sup>26</sup> This point is particularly emphasized by Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, 2 vols (Freiburg: Herder, 4th edn, 1962) vol. 1, pp. 137–138.

Christian faith appeared to cease to flow through her veins, at least the church was able to retain her outward structures for the day when renewed spiritual fervor would revitalize her, raising her from her knees and propelling her forward to meet the challenges and opportunities of a new age. It was this hope that sustained those working for reform and renewal within the late medieval church.

Although earlier popes had occasionally imposed and supervised programs of reform within the church,<sup>27</sup> the dawn of the sixteenth century saw this initiative in the process of passing to numerous small groups and individuals, usually working independently of each other, although with similar objectives. It is becoming increasingly clear that the final decade of the fifteenth century witnessed a remarkable upsurge in reforming and renewing activity within the church, frequently with the approval of, and occasionally even at the instigation of, the institutional church itself. This upsurge in activity gained ground throughout Europe during the first two decades of the sixteenth century, before the specter of a new heresy – Lutheranism – caused a frightened church to begin the systematic suppression of these groups and their ideals during the third and fourth decades of that century. Whatever positive impact Luther's stand at Wittenberg may have had upon the Catholic Church as a whole, it had the universally negative effect of bringing practically all of those working for reform and renewal under suspicion of heresy. Such was the odium which came to be attached to the name of Martin Luther that similarities, however slight, between Luther and contemporary Catholic writers tended to be regarded as evidence of heresy on the part of the latter, rather than orthodoxy on the part of the former.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> C. Schmitt, *Un pape réformateur et un défenseur de l'unité de l'église: Benoit XII et l'Ordre des Frères Mineurs* (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1959).

<sup>28</sup> This was particularly the case in Spain and Italy. See A. Selke de Sánchez, "Algunos datos nuevos los primeros alumbrados: el edicto de 1525 y su relación con el proceso de Alcaraz," *Bulletin Hispanique* 54 (1952), pp. 125–152; O. Ortolani, *Pietro Carnesecchi: Son Estratti dagli Atti del Processo del Santo Officio* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1963); E.L. Gleason, "Sixteenth Century Italian Interpretations of Luther," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 60 (1969), pp. 160–173; J. Wicks, "Roman Reactions to Luther: The First Year (1518)," *Catholic Historical Review* 59 (1983), pp. 521–562.

The revival within the late fifteenth century is particularly associated with Spain, then newly won back from the Moor. The sudden development of Spanish mysticism during the final decade of the century remains unexplained, although the unique character of the Spanish cultural context, enriched by Christian, Muslim, and Jew alike, unquestionably did much to promote and sustain it. The vitality of this movement was harnessed through the Cisnerian reform of the Spanish church, leading to a revival of religious vocations and a new concern for religious education, which found its most concrete and enduring expression in the establishment of the University of Alcalá de Henares.<sup>29</sup> Through Europe, a new interest developed in the writings of St Paul, apparently due at least in part to the considerable influence of the Italian humanism of the *Quattrocento*, with its celebrated intention to return *ad fontes*, to base itself upon the title deeds of Christendom, rather than its later medieval expressions.<sup>30</sup> In England, John Colet drew attention to the Pauline emphasis upon the necessity of a personal encounter of the soul with Christ;<sup>31</sup> in Paris, Lefèvre d'Étaples contemplated Paul's teaching on the supremacy of faith in the spiritual life;<sup>32</sup> in the Lowlands, Erasmus of Rotterdam propounded his *philosophia Christi* as the basis for collective renewal within the church, capturing the hearts as well as the minds of the intellectual élite of Europe as he did so.<sup>33</sup> In Italy itself, the movement usually known as "Evangelism," characterized by its preoccupation

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<sup>29</sup> See S.T. Nalle, *God in La Mancha: Religious Reform and the People of Cuenca, 1500–1650* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 3–31; E. Rummel, *Jiménez de Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain's Golden Age* (Tempe, AZ: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> For an excellent introduction, see R. Cessi, "Paolinismo preluterano," *Renconditi dell' Accademia nazionale dei Lincei*, Series 8, 12 (1957), pp. 3–30. See further the following chapter of the present study.

<sup>31</sup> J.B. Gleason, *John Colet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 67–185.

<sup>32</sup> R.M. Cameron, "The Charges of Lutheranism brought against Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples," *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1970), pp. 119–149.

<sup>33</sup> For Erasmus's *Enchiridion*, see R. Stupperich, "Das Enchiridion Militis Christiani des Erasmus von Rotterdam nach seiner Entstehung, seinem Sinn und Charakter," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 69 (1978), pp. 5–23.

with the question of personal salvation, became highly influential in certain circles: if its allegedly aristocratic bias hindered its progress among the population as a whole, it certainly assisted its progress within the higher echelons of the church.<sup>34</sup> This preoccupation with personal salvation is well illustrated by Contarini's spiritual experience of 1511, noted above. While Luther was still a prisoner within the matrix of late medieval theology, others had already broken free from it, anticipating in many respects his own spiritual breakthrough.

The reform of the church and the renewal of spirituality: these two themes lay at the heart of the rising tide of dissatisfaction on the part of laity and clergy alike over the state of the church of their day. The demands for reform and renewal took many forms, with an equally great variation in the results they achieved. A seemingly insignificant addition to these demands was a list of theses for academic disputation nailed to the main north door of the castle church at Wittenberg at about noon on October 31, 1517.<sup>35</sup> Wittenberg was not

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<sup>34</sup> The original study is that of E.M. Jung, "On the Nature of Evangelism in Sixteenth Century Italy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14 (1953) pp. 511–527. For more recent studies, see R. Belladonna and A. del Col, "Per una sistemazione critica dell'evangelismo italiano e di un'opera recente," *Critica storica* 17 (1980), pp. 266–276; M. Firpo, *Tra alumbados e "spirituali": studi su Juan de Valdés e il valdesianesimo nella crisi religiosa del '500 italiano* (Florence: Olschki, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> For the background to this event, see H. Bornkamm, *Luthers geistige Welt* (Gütersloh: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3rd edn, 1959), pp. 41–57. On the content of the theses, see E. Kähler, "Die 95 Thesen: Inhalt und Bedeutung," *Luther. Zeitschrift der Luther-Gesellschaft* 38 (1967), pp. 114–124. Recently, there has been intensive debate concerning the date on which the theses were posted – and, indeed, whether they were posted at all. Although the majority opinion is that the theses definitely were posted, and that they were posted on October 31, 1517, three important minority opinions must be noted: (1) The theses were posted on November 1, 1517: H. Volz, *Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag und dessen Vorgeschichte* (Weimar: Herman Bohlau, 1959). (2) The theses date from as late as December 1517: K. Honselmann, *Urfassung und Drucke der Ablassthesen Martin Luthers und ihre Veröffentlichung* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1966). (3) The theses were not posted at all: E. Iserloh, *Luther zwischen Reform und Reformation. Der Thesenanschlag fand nicht statt* (Münster: Aschendorff, 3rd edn, 1968). This opinion is by far the least probable, and does not appear to follow logically from the evidence assembled in its support. For a reliable discussion of these opinions in the light of the best evidence, see H. Bornkamm, "Thesen und Thesenanschlag Luthers," in *Geist und Geschichte der Reformation*, ed. H. Liebing and K. Scholder (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1966), pp. 179–218.

an important university, and Martin Luther was hardly known outside the somewhat restricted university circles of Erfurt and Wittenberg. So why did these Theses have such an impact?

## **The Ninety-Five Theses**

History suggests that great upheavals in human affairs arise out of relatively small matters, even if their ultimate roots lie much deeper. The fuel for the Reformation had been piled up for many years: it happened to be Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses on indulgences that eventually sparked off the conflagration which proved to be the greatest intellectual and spiritual upheaval yet known in Europe. Whereas a reforming ecumenical council could have defused the situation by imposing reform where it was so obviously needed, the absence of any such eventuality led to Luther's protest against the theology of indulgences developing into a serious and a still unresolved schism within the church.

The posting of theses for academic disputation, even where these related to theological matters, was a commonplace in German university life at the time. In October 1514 Johannes Eck – later to be Luther's antagonist at the Leipzig disputation of 1519 – posted a series of theses at Ingolstadt for public academic disputation.<sup>36</sup> These theses related to the vexed question of usury,<sup>37</sup> an issue in many respects more contentious than that of indulgences, and one which certainly aroused passions in ecclesiastical financial circles. It was probably on account of this latter consideration that Gabriel von Eyb,

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<sup>36</sup> H.A. Oberman, *Werden und Wertung der Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), p. 177.

<sup>37</sup> M. Schulze, "Johannes Eck im Kampf gegen Martin Luther," *Luther-Jahrbuch* 63 (1996), pp. 39–68. On the usury issue, see G.F. von Pölnitz, "Die Beziehungen des Johannes Eck zum Augsburger Kapital," *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görresgesellschaft* 60 (1940), pp. 685–706. For useful historical background to the issues involved, see J.T. Noonan, *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957); O. Langholm, *Economics in the Medieval Schools: Wealth, Exchange, Value, Money and Usury according to the Paris Theological Tradition 1200–1350* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).



who then held simultaneously the offices of bishop of Eichstätt and chancellor of the university of Ingolstadt, intervened to prevent the proposed disputation from taking place.<sup>38</sup> Not to be deprived of his disputation, however, Eck referred his theses to the universities of Cologne, Heidelberg, Freiburg, Tübingen, and Mainz, as well as to Ingolstadt,<sup>39</sup> in order that they might receive further consideration.

Such disputations were not unknown at Wittenberg, nor was Luther's without its precedents. On April 26, 1517, less than six months before Luther posted his theses, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, then dean of the theology faculty at Wittenberg, posted 151 theses for disputation. These theses were of a highly controversial nature, reflecting Karlstadt's own discovery of the *vera theologia* of St Augustine earlier the same year, and chiefly concern the doctrine of justification.<sup>40</sup> In terms of their theological substance, particularly when seen in the light of the then prevailing theology of the *via moderna*, they appear to be of far greater weight than Luther's theses on indulgences. Furthermore, Karlstadt's high standing in the

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<sup>38</sup> Oberman, *Werden und Wertung der Reformation*, p. 184.

<sup>39</sup> von Pölnitz, *Beziehungen des Johannes Eck*, p. 694. Oberman has published the submission to Tübingen, along with other pertinent material: Oberman, *Werden und Wertung der Reformation*, pp. 426–430.

<sup>40</sup> On these theses, see E. Kähler, *Karlstadt und Augustin: Der Kommentar des Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt zu Augustins Schrift De Spiritu et Litera* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1952), pp. 4\*–7\*. Luther was delighted with these theses, as he made clear in a letter of May 6, 1517 to Christoph Scheurl in Nuremberg: WABr 1.94.16–19. It is clear, however, that Karlstadt's theology of justification is far closer to that of St Augustine than was Luther's. In particular, the following points of difference between the two reformers should be noted: (1) Luther's Christocentrism is absent from Karlstadt's theses: Karlstadt is primarily concerned with a theology of *grace*, not a theology of *Christ*; (2) it is clear that faith does not have the significance for Karlstadt which it so obviously has for Luther; (3) Luther's dialectic between Law and Gospel is absent, being replaced by a dialectic between Letter and Spirit. In every respect, these differences between Karlstadt and Luther reflect identical differences between Augustine and Luther, and indicate Karlstadt's faithfulness to the theology of the great African bishop. These differences, however, do not appear to have been noticed or commented upon at the time – which is hardly surprising, considering the pace at which events began to move that year.

faculty and the university as a whole lent added weight to the challenge directed against the *Gabrielistae*.

What is of particular interest, however, is the occasion on which Karlstadt chose to publish his theses, and the place where they were posted. The castle church at Wittenberg possessed an imposing collection of sacred relics, which were publicly displayed several times during the course of the year. Like many churches at the time, the castle church had been granted the right to bestow a partial or plenary indulgence upon those present at the exhibition of the relics, with the inevitable result that such exhibitions were well attended and the subject of considerable local interest.

It was on the eve of one such display of relics that Karlstadt posted his theses in April 1517. As the main north door of the castle church served as a university notice board, Karlstadt could be sure that his proposed disputation would not pass unnoticed by those who thronged the area that evening and the following morning. Contemporary records, however, indicate that the Feast of All Saints (November 1) was regarded as the most important occasion upon which the Wittenberg relics were displayed.<sup>41</sup> It was on this occasion that Luther posted his theses, in precisely the same manner already employed by Karlstadt, to direct attention to his proposed public disputation on indulgences.

The circumstances which surrounded Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses are, in many respects, comparable to those attending Eck's attempt to provoke a disputation on usury, or Karlstadt's attempt to provoke one on Augustine's doctrine of justification. The revised statutes of the theology faculty at Wittenberg (1508) make it clear that such disputations were a normal part of university life at the time. Such disputations were not restricted to those held on Friday mornings during university terms (*disputationes ordinariae*), intended primarily as a means of theological education, or those stipulated as a necessary ordeal for those intending to proceed to higher degrees. The

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<sup>41</sup> The most important of these is Andreas Meinhardi's *Dialogus illustratus ac augustissime urbis Albiorenae vulgo Vittenberg dicte* (Leipzig, 1508), which describes the events of All Saints' Day at the Castle Church.

*exercitia disputationum* appears to have been regarded as of such importance as to justify occasional *disputationes quodlibeticae*,<sup>42</sup> which fitted into neither of these categories. In calling for public university disputations upon subjects of their choosing, Luther – and, before him, Eck and Karlstadt – did nothing more than arrange for a perfectly legitimate university disputation, following a well-established procedure. Far from defying the church of his day, Luther merely posted a legitimate university notice in its appropriate place. Those who see the death knell of the medieval church in the hammer blows which resounded on the door of the castle church as Luther posted his theses are, regrettably, substituting romance for history.

Like Eck, Luther failed to provoke a public disputation: all the evidence suggests, however, that this failure reflected an absence of interest in the subject in university circles, rather than any serious attempt on the part of the church authorities to suppress what might have proved to be an embarrassing debate. Indeed, had Luther succeeded in provoking a public disputation on the matter, it would almost certainly have been seen as little more than a local dispute between the Augustinian and Dominican orders over a relatively minor issue, in which both parties had a vested interest.

Luther's theses are actually rather less radical than is frequently imagined. He did not question the authority of the pope or the existence of purgatory, and actually *affirmed* his belief in the notion of apostolic pardons. In a matter surrounded by much theological confusion and considerable popular feeling, most of Luther's theses were quite unexceptionable. Furthermore, a critique of the theology

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<sup>42</sup> See the important study of Ernst Wolf, "Zur wissenschaftsgeschichtlichen Bedeutung der Disputationen an der Wittenberger Universität im 16. Jahrhundert," in *Peregrinatio II: Studien zur reformatorischen Theologie, zum Kirchenrecht und zur Sozialethik* (Munich: Kaiser, 1965), pp. 38–51. Further light has been cast upon the role and nature of disputations at Wittenberg at the time by the discovery in 1976 of the protocol to the disputations at Wittenberg between members of the Wittenberg theological faculty and a group of Saxon Franciscans, which took place October 3–4, 1519: G. Hammer, "Militia franciscana seu militia Christi: Das neugefundene Protokoll einer Disputation des sächsischen Franziskaner mit Vertretern der Wittenberger theologischen Fakultät am 3. und 4. Oktober 1519," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 69 (1978), pp. 51–81; 70 (1979), pp. 59–105.

of indulgences which parallels that of Luther in several respects was drawn up by the theology faculty at Paris in May of the following year, without occasioning any serious charge of impropriety, let alone heresy.<sup>43</sup> It may also be pointed out that Luther himself later stated that the whole question of indulgences was quite insignificant in comparison with the greater question of humanity's justification before God,<sup>44</sup> thus suggesting that the posting of the theses on indulgences was *not* the beginning of the Reformation, viewed in terms of the *theological* issues at stake. Nevertheless, the *historical* fact remains that it was out of the aftermath of the posting of these theses that the movement known as the Reformation began, with Martin Luther being widely recognized as its leading figure.

Once the Reformation had begun in earnest, a third demand was added to those already widely in circulation throughout Europe. For Luther, the reformation of morals and the renewal of spirituality, although of importance in themselves, were of secondary significance in relation to the *reformation of Christian doctrine*. Well aware of the frailty of human nature, Luther criticized both Wycliffe and Huss for confining their attacks on the papacy to its moral shortcomings, where they should have attacked the theology on which the papacy was ultimately based. For Luther, a reformation of morals was secondary to a reformation of doctrine.<sup>45</sup> It was clear, of course, that once irreversible schism with the Catholic Church had taken place, the reformers would be obliged to revise the accepted ecclesiologies if they were to avoid the stigma of being branded as schismatics.

Luther himself entertained a profound distaste for schism in the period between the posting of the theses and the Leipzig disputation

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<sup>43</sup> As pointed out, with useful documentation, by Oberman, *Werden und Wertung der Reformation*, p. 192, n. 90.

<sup>44</sup> WA 18.786.28–29. Luther here praises Erasmus for locating the real theological issue at stake (the bondage of the will, a fundamental aspect of Luther's teaching on justification), instead of concentrating upon peripheral matters, such as indulgences.

<sup>45</sup> WATr 1.624: "Doctrina et vita sunt distinguenda. Vita est mala apud nos sicut apud papistas; non igitur dimicamus et damnamus eos. Hoc nesciverunt Wickleff et Hus, qui vitam impugnarunt." WATr 4.4338: "Sed doctrina non reformata frustra fit reformatio morum."

of mid-1519. In early 1519, Luther wrote thus of schism: "If, unfortunately, there are things in Rome which cannot be improved, there is not – nor can there be! – any reason for tearing oneself away from the church in schism. Rather, the worse things become, the more one should help her and stand by her, for by schism and contempt nothing can be mended."<sup>46</sup> Even though the Leipzig disputation would do much to alter Luther's views on the relative demerits of schism, it may be noted that the assumption underlying both the *Confessio Augustana* (1530) and the Colloquy of Regensburg (1541) was that the estrangement of the evangelical faction from the Catholic Church was still to be regarded as temporary.

It was only after the failure of Regensburg that the possibility of a permanent schism within the church became increasingly a probability, so that ecclesiological questions began to come to the fore within the evangelical faction.<sup>47</sup> It is therefore necessary to emphasize that the essential factor which led to this schism in the first place, and thus to the rethinking of the accepted ecclesiologies, was Luther's fundamental conviction that the church of his day had lapsed into some form of Pelagianism, thus compromising the gospel, and that the church itself was not prepared to extricate itself from this situation.

For Luther, the entire gospel could be encapsulated in the Christian article of justification<sup>48</sup> – the affirmation that human beings really can enter into a gracious relationship with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The sacerdotal and sacramental systems of the church have their proper and legitimate place,

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<sup>46</sup> WA 2.72.35–37. Luther's attitudes to the papacy and schism over the years 1517–1520 are somewhat difficult to follow, apparently being responses to a shifting political context: see S.H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

<sup>47</sup> Ecclesiological developments are particularly associated with Martin Bucer: J. Courvoisier, *La notion d'église chez Bucer dans son développement historique* (Paris: Alcan, 1933). For evangelical ecclesiologies in general, see H. Strohl, "La notion d'église chez les réformateurs," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 9 (1936), pp. 265–319.

<sup>48</sup> For a brief introduction to Luther's doctrine of justification and its theological significance, see B. Hägglund, *Was ist mit Luthers "Rechtfertigungs"-Lehre gemeint?* (Ratzeburg: Luther-Akademie-Ratzeburg, 1982).

but cannot be allowed to interpose between believers and the living God who calls them to faith through the Word. For Luther, Jesus Christ is the righteousness of God, revealing at one and the same time God's condemnation of sin and remedy for it. Through the creative power of the Holy Spirit and the hearing of the Word of the gospel, the sinner shares in the divine righteousness through faith.

In comparison with this weighty matter, matters such as the authority of the pope, the nature of purgatory, and the propriety of indulgences were seen by Luther as being quite insignificant and irrelevant. Even as late as 1535, Luther stated unequivocally that he was still prepared to acknowledge the authority of the pope on condition that he acknowledge in turn that the sinner had free forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and not through the observance of the traditions of the church.<sup>49</sup>

Was Luther really stating anything other than the common Christian gospel? Was not the extent of theological diversity within late medieval Catholicism already so great that such opinions could be accommodated without difficulty? Need this have led to irreversible schism? Was the Reformation actually the consequence of a fundamental misunderstanding of Luther's frequently intemperate and occasionally obscure pronouncements?<sup>50</sup> Such questions cannot be answered with any degree of confidence. The fact remains, however, that Luther himself regarded the Reformation as having begun over, and to have chiefly concerned, the correct understanding of the Christian doctrine of justification. This concern is evident in his writings throughout his later career, including

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<sup>49</sup> WA 40 I.357.18–22: "Papa, ego voli tibi osculari pedes teque agnoscere summum pontificem, si adoraveris Christum meum et permiseris, quod per ipsius mortem et resurrectionem habeamus remissionem peccatorum et vitam aeternam, non per observationem tuarum traditionum. Si hoc cesseris, non adimam tibi coronam et potentiam tuam."

<sup>50</sup> The current ecumenical dialogue is obliged to proceed upon this assumption, in one form or another: H. Küng, *Rechtfertigung. Die Lehre Karl Barths und eine katholische Besinnung* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1957). For a critique of Küng's thesis, see A.E. McGrath, "Justification: Barth, Trent and Küng," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981), pp. 517–529.

some of the confessional material of the Lutheran church. The Smalkald Articles of 1537 assert that everything in the evangelical struggle against the papacy, the world, and the devil hangs upon the Christian article of justification.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in that same year Luther prefaced an academic disputation with the assertion that the article of justification was not merely supreme among other Christian doctrines, but that it also upheld and controlled them.<sup>52</sup> In the struggle for the reformation of Christian doctrine, the evangelical case was held to rest entirely upon this single article.

## **The Importance of the Present Study**

It will therefore be clear that a study of the development of Luther's doctrine of justification over the crucial years 1509–1519, culminating in the statement of the *theologia crucis*, is of enormous interest to historians and theologians alike. The importance of the matter to historians will be evident. Given that Luther's understanding of the doctrine of justification is clearly of such fundamental importance in relation to so significant an historical movement as the Reformation, it is obviously of considerable interest to establish how this particular understanding emerged, what factors appear to have been instrumental in effecting it, and how it relates to previous understandings of the same matter. It has always been important for intellectual historians to establish the sources of an author's thought. The character, distinctiveness, and ultimate significance of an intellectual achievement such as that of Luther are invariably better understood when those who have influenced his ideas, either positively or negatively, are identified. Luther cannot be regarded merely as a

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<sup>51</sup> *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952), 416.22–23: "Et in hoc articulo sita sunt et consistunt omnia, quae contra papam, diabolum et mundum in vita nostra docemus, testamur et agimus."

<sup>52</sup> WA 39 I.205.2–5: "Articulus iustificationis est magister et princeps, dominus, rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum, qui conservat et gubernat omnem doctrinam ecclesiasticam et erigit conscientiam nostram coram Deo." On this, see E. Wolf, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre als Mitte und Grenze reformatorischer Theologie," *Evangelische Theologie* 9 (1949–50), pp. 298–308.

protagonist in German and European history: the ideas which led him to assume this role, their origins and significance, must be taken into account if a proper understanding and evaluation of Luther's historical significance is to emerge.<sup>53</sup> It is understandably difficult for a liberal historian, with a distaste for dogma and theology, and who would much have preferred a reformation of the church along humanist lines, to come to terms with the theological issues at stake in Luther's revolt. Nevertheless, Luther the man cannot be isolated from Luther the theologian, nor can his actions be isolated from the ideas which ultimately inspired them.

The importance of the matter to the theologian is equally clear. It is important to establish precisely what Luther's teaching on justification actually is, and how the various strands of this teaching are woven together in the *theologia crucis*. Furthermore, the historical origins of Luther's views raise a fundamentally theological question. Can the distinctive teachings of the Reformation, and supremely their chief article, that of justification, be considered to be truly Catholic? If it can be shown that the chief teaching of the Reformation, the "article by which the church stands or falls,"<sup>54</sup> was a

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<sup>53</sup> If this is not done, the Reformation will appear as merely one episode in the essentially continuous development of intellectual history in the period 1300–1600, without proper appreciation of its genuinely radical and innovatory character. For an excellent discussion of this important point, see H.A. Oberman, "Reformation: Epoche oder Episode," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977), pp. 56–111.

<sup>54</sup> See F. Loofs, "Der articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 90 (1917), pp. 323–400. In this study, Loofs argues that the phrase, "the article by which the church stands or falls" – referring to the article of justification – only came into use in the eighteenth century. In fact, as we have shown on the basis of an exhaustive analysis of the dogmatic works of the period, the phrase appears to have come into circulation at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and is used by *Reformed*, as well as by *Lutheran*, theologians: McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, p. vii, n. 1. Thus the Reformed theologian J.H. Alsted begins his discussion of the justification of humanity before God with the following statement: "Articulus iustificationis dicitur articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae" (*Theologia scholastica didacta* [Hanover, 1618], p. 711). There is thus every reason to suggest that the phrase represents a common *modus loquendi theologicus* by the beginning of the seventeenth century. Precursors of the phrase can, of course, be found in the writings of Luther himself – e.g., WA 40 III.352.3: "... quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia."



theological novelty, unknown to the Christian church throughout the first 1500 years of her existence, it will be clear that the Protestant claim to have *reformed* the church is open to challenge. This point was made with particular force by the theologians of the Counter-Reformation, such as Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704):

The Church's doctrine is always the same ... the Gospel is never different from what it was before. Hence, if at any time someone says that the faith includes something which yesterday was not said to be of the faith, it is always *heterodoxy*, which is any doctrine different from *orthodoxy*. There is no difficulty about recognising false doctrine: there is no argument about it: it is recognised at once, whenever it appears, merely because it is new.<sup>55</sup>

If, on the other hand, it can be shown that Luther restored or recovered an authentically Catholic understanding of justification from the distortions of the later medieval period, the reform of doctrine which he initiated and sustained on the basis of this understanding of justification must be taken with the utmost seriousness. It is therefore of considerable theological importance to establish precisely not only what Luther's developing views on justification, culminating in the theology of the cross, actually were, but also the precise nature of that development, and what factors were instrumental in effecting that development.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Première instruction pastorale* xxvii; cited by O. Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 17. For the general point at issue, see Alister E. McGrath, "Forerunners of the Reformation? A Critical Examination of the Evidence for Precursors of the Reformation Doctrines of Justification," *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (1982), pp. 219–242.

<sup>56</sup> It is important in this respect to appreciate that by late 1517 Luther was a member of a theological faculty which was dedicated to theological reform, and that Luther insisted not only that other members of that faculty held views on grace and works identical to his own, but that in some cases they had actually held these views before he himself arrived at them: WABr 1.170.20–29 (May 1518). The importance of Karlstadt's conversion to Augustinianism in early 1517, resulting in the posting of the 151 theses of April 1517, is often overlooked, but was actually vital to the initiation of the Reformation, given Karlstadt's position as dean of the faculty at the time.

The present study argues that the genuinely creative and innovative aspects of Luther's *theologia crucis* can only be properly appreciated if Luther is regarded as having begun to teach theology at the University of Wittenberg on October 22, 1512 as a *typical theologian of the later Middle Ages*, and as having begun to break away from this theological matrix over a number of years.<sup>57</sup> There is still a disturbing tendency on the part of some Luther scholars to approach the later medieval period from the standpoint of the later Luther, either projecting Luther's perceived theological concerns and prejudices onto this earlier period, or insisting that Luther provides some kind of hermeneutical key to the controversies and theological preoccupations of an earlier age. Not only does this impede a proper understanding of the theology of the later medieval period; it also prevents a reliable understanding of Luther's own theological development, which can only be properly evaluated in the light of the theological currents prevalent in the later Middle Ages. The tendency to regard the study of the theology of the later medieval period as serving as little more than a prologue to that of the Reformation has recently been reversed, with increasing emphasis being placed upon the importance of the later medieval period as a field of study in its own right. As a consequence, we now possess a far greater understanding of the complexities of the theology of the later medieval period than has ever been possible before, and are thus in a favorable position to attempt an informed evaluation of Luther's initial relationship to this theology, and also the nature of his subsequent break with it.

Luther was not a man without beginnings, a mysterious and lonely figure of destiny who arrived at Wittenberg already in possession of the *vera theologia* which would take the church by storm, and usher in a new era in its history. Although it is tempting to believe that Luther suffered a devastating moment of illumination, in which he

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<sup>57</sup> This assumption is supported by many considerations, as will become clear during the course of this study. For the time being, it is sufficient to recall Luther's celebrated statement: "When I became a doctor [i.e., October 19, 1512], I did not yet know that we cannot expiate our sins" (WA 45.86.18–19).

suddenly became conscious both of the *vera theologia* and of his own divine mission to reform the church on its basis, all the evidence which we possess points to Luther's theological insights arising over a prolonged period at Wittenberg, under the influence of three main currents of thought: local forms of Renaissance humanism, the "nominalism" of the *via moderna*, and the theology of his own Augustinian Order. It is these three currents of thought, in the specific forms which they assumed at Erfurt, and particularly at Wittenberg, that appear to define the confluence from which Luther's *theologia crucis* would emerge.

Although Luther's early theology can be shown to reflect well-established thought patterns of the later medieval period, this serves to emphasize, rather than to detract from, his theological genius. There comes a point at which Luther can no longer be explained on the basis of his origins and his environment, and when he began to pursue a course significantly different from the thought-world of his contemporaries, as the cruciality of the cross of Christ embedded itself more and more deeply in Luther's theological reflections. Whether for good or for ill, the consequences of this break with the past are still with us. The present study is an attempt to gather together the developing strands of the theology of the cross as they make their appearance, setting them in their context, as established by the best recent scholarship, and assessing their historical and theological significance. It is an attempt, not to praise or damn Luther, but simply to understand him.