Summary and Keywords

Academic disputations were a fixture of university life throughout Martin Luther’s lifetime. Luther participated regularly in various sorts of disputations, first as a student at the University of Erfurt and then as a professor at the University of Wittenberg. Although the disputation represents an important aspect of Luther’s indebtedness to late medieval scholasticism, the disputational form was not simply a matter of convention to Luther. It became one of the major communicative vehicles through which he developed and expressed his theological ideas. The 95 theses are a well-known case in point, but Luther’s prolific career as a disputator had already begun prior to the eruption of public controversy in October of 1517, and would continue at regular intervals (with the exception of one conspicuous hiatus) for several decades afterwards.

Although several of Luther’s most influential sets of theses were explicitly intended for the consideration of his academic and ecclesiastical colleagues (e.g., the “Heidelberg Disputation”), the majority of his disputations took place as a curricular exercise within the University of Wittenberg. As such, most serve a purpose, which is simultaneously pedagogical and polemical. Luther viewed the disputation as a crucial opportunity for students both to observe and to practice the utilization of logic and dialectic for the refutation of theological error. He deployed and recommended those same tools for the defense of proper doctrine in the face of objections. In many cases, the specific topic under consideration was furnished by contextual stimuli and accordingly reflects particular sites of disagreement between Luther and his variegated array of theological opponents. This naturally includes many of the neuralgic points, which stand at the center of the Protestant reformation (e.g., original sin, the doctrine of justification, free choice, church authority, etc), but it also includes a range of contested topics between Luther and other reformers (e.g., disputations against the antinomians, against the Christology of Caspar Schwenckfeld, and in response to anti-trinitarianism, etc). Several of Luther’s disputations also treat the relationship between theology and philosophy, and reflect at some length upon what he refers to somewhat provocatively as the “new language” of theology. Taken cumulatively, Luther’s disputations encompass a broad and diverse theological terrain. Indeed, there is hardly an aspect of the reformer’s theology,
which fails to appear within this extensive corpus. As such, the disputations provide an essential resource for the study of Luther’s thought and its development over time.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Christology, dialectic, disputation, justification, logic, pedagogy, scholasticism, theses, new language

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