Ego etiam sum doctor scripturae: an historical and contemporary reflection on Luther’s life and work as ‘doctor of holy scripture’

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Introduction

‘Doctor’ was arguably Luther’s most significant self-identification. Variants of the Latin phrase in the title of this essay, ‘I am also a doctor of scripture’, appear many times in Luther’s sermons and other writings, right through his career. It is the one designation which most closely captures Luther’s role in the three interconnected worlds he inhabited: university, local church and wider Reformation movement. He routinely signed his name ‘Doctor Martin Luther’ on letters and other documents, and in most of the documented references to Luther from his own time, even some of the unfavourable ones, he is named in the same way. Today’s egalitarian world refers to him simply by his name, but in the highly role-structured society of sixteenth century Germany, Luther was definitely ‘Herr Doktor’, even to most of his close associates and friends.

It is a well-known part of the Luther story that he was awarded his doctoral degree at the University of Wittenberg in 1512. However, what is really known about this degree? How did Luther himself understand its value and importance? What did it mean in his world? How did Luther earn it? What role did it play in his reforming work? What insights from all this might be informative and even fruitful for us today, as Lutheran theological educators who stand on the threshold of the Reformation’s 500th anniversary and—at the same moment—look forward to a new millennium?

Doctoral degrees in the 16th century

In the early 16th century doctoral degrees were much rarer than they are today; they were a mark of high honour, and many important scholars were never awarded a doctoral degree. One of the main reasons for this was the considerable expense involved. Besides the fee charged by the Pope for the degree itself, there was the outlay for the


2 Luther was only addressed by his Christian name by his own family and Phillip Melanchthon. Even Katie addressed him as ‘Herr Doktor’ at least in public or in front of others (Treu).
gold doctoral ring and the obligatory conferral festivities, which were usually lavish (Harran: 121). While this expense limited the number of eligible candidates somewhat, doctorates were nevertheless becoming more common in the academic world, because of the flourishing of university higher education under the influence of Renaissance humanism all over Europe, particularly in France and Italy.

At the University of Wittenberg, as in many other 16th century universities, there were only three faculties in which one could be promoted to a doctorate: law, medicine and the ‘queen of the sciences’ (regina scientiarum), theology. The structure of degrees and awards varied somewhat from place to place, depending on the tradition of the faculty or institution. In Luther’s youth, higher education in Germany was still influenced greatly by the church, usually via the monastic orders, which provided the professors and teachers for theological faculties of universities, and sometimes for other faculties as well.

However, due to the influence of humanism and the growth of education during the Reformation, by the end of Luther’s life universities, as places of higher learning and research, had advanced and diversified. As a result they were becoming increasingly influential and popular. The University of Wittenberg itself is a prime example of this growth. In the decades following Luther’s death it became not only the largest and most prestigious university in Germany, and throughout Europe. While it majored in the higher faculties—law, medicine and theology—it also branched out to excel, due largely to Melanchthon’s influence, in teaching the natural sciences and philosophy. This growth is especially remarkable considering that at the time of the university’s foundation (1504) Wittenberg had been viewed as a remote location, ‘close to the edge of civilisation’ (Harran: 127).

At that time teachers with lower qualifications who lectured at the under-graduate level were restricted to using set texts, content and curricula. Doctors, however, were considered to have demonstrated themselves competent to teach at the postgraduate level, and to do so unsupervised. It is not surprising, then, that in the 16th century as academic life and culture grew throughout Europe the doctoral degree was increasingly seen as a mark of high and distinguished scholarship.

The historical roots of the doctoral degree are in the apostolic church’s three closely aligned ‘charismatic’ offices: apostle, prophet and teacher. All these three roles involved

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3 In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, set in Reformation Denmark, Wittenberg is mentioned as the university where Shakespeare’s fictional characters Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are students. Denmark had been an early ally of the Reformation, and many Danish students did in fact go to Wittenberg to study. By the late 1590s when Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, the University of Wittenberg was at the height of its fame and was well known in England and all over Europe.

4 Wittenberg boasted not only Luther and Melanchthon as theologians and reformers, but also scholars like Augustine Schurff, a leading medical researcher and educator of Europe in his day. In 1526 he carried out the first dissection of a human head at Wittenberg, in the presence of faculty and students (Nutton: 14).
speaking God’s Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. The designation ‘teacher’ was applied more particularly to those whose role was interpreting scripture (the Septuagint). In the second and third centuries this ‘scholarly’ role of teacher receded and was subsumed into the office of bishop (overseer). However, it was later revived in the Middle Ages in the form of the ecclesiastical-theological doctorate, as a recognition of those who exercised the particular charisma of scriptural teaching, as a function of the ordained office (Sasse: 95–101).

In 1298 Pope Boniface VIII honoured the church’s most influential teaching bishops throughout its history with the title ‘doctor of the church’ (doctor ecclesiae) and ordered that feasts be kept to commemorate them. Those who received this title were recognised to have made a significant contribution to the church’s teaching, not just at the local level but also on the wider ecumenical scene. Initially Jerome, Gregory, Ambrose and Augustine were honoured in this way. However, today the Roman Catholic Church recognises 35 such teaching theologians throughout the church’s history as doctores ecclesiae.

While this exclusive ‘honour role’ contained the names of the church’s most highly esteemed doctors, the title ‘doctor’ had, at this time, also been in use for those who were granted the licence to teach (licentia docendi) in universities. However, these more ‘ordinary’ doctoral degrees, awarded by theological faculties, were still seen as highly significant ecclesial positions, related to the authoritative ‘Spirit-led’ teaching of the Faith and were awarded under the papal seal, showing their strong connection to the doctores ecclesiae.

The title ‘doctor of the church’ was not an honour conferred in recognition of any particular academic achievement on the part of the bishop, but in recognition of the particular spiritual gift (charism) of theological, and more particularly biblical, teaching. In this respect, academic doctoral degrees conferred by theological faculties in Luther’s day were essentially the same in kind, though of a much lower order. Like the title ‘doctor of the church’, the university doctoral degree was awarded in recognition of an individual’s vocation as a teacher of the word of God.

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5 These roles are described as ‘charismatic’ not primarily in the sense of ‘ecstatic’, but because they operated through the Spirit’s special gifting of individuals to teach God’s Word. They cannot be transmitted by human beings; God alone calls people to them (Sasse: 95–101).

6 This recognition is, from an apostolic and biblical point of view, quite in accord with the injunction in Hebrews 13:7, ‘Remember your leaders who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith’. This practice serves to remind us that these ancient teachers can still speak to us very powerfully and relevantly today, and it shows why theologians would study the fathers of the church and other great teachers, like Luther.

7 The Pope’s exclusive right to grant doctoral licences was relaxed in some places after 1231, when Pope Gregory IX granted the University of Paris the right to award doctorates by its own authority (Verger: 1957).

8 See footnote 3. When we note that the doctorate was understood ostensibly as a revitalisation of the apostolic office of ‘teacher’, it becomes clear why the conferral of a doctorate was essentially seen as a recognition of God’s call and gift rather than an appointment made via some human agency.
The award ‘doctor of holy scripture’ (the title of the doctoral degree awarded by Augustinian theological faculties) was, therefore, both academic and ecclesial (canonical) in nature. It licenced the holder to teach unsupervised in the university, but also had certain theological functions in the church.

First, honouring and recognising the doctor’s teaching ministry was understood as an act of thanksgiving to God. God himself is the one who gives biblical teaching to the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The office of ‘doctor’ (teacher) was understood as a revitalisation of the Spirit-appointed office of teacher in the apostolic church. The doctor was an avowed servant of this divine in-Spirited Word. 9

Secondly, the awarding of the doctoral degree was a public and church-wide recognition of a person’s licence to teach (licentia ubique docendi), which served to promote his teaching for the benefit not only of the students in his university, but of the whole church (Verger: 1957, 58). 10

**Luther and the Augustinian Academy**

Becoming a doctor, especially in an Augustinian theological faculty, did not usually happen quickly, especially in the branch of the order to which Luther belonged. He was a member of a particularly serious wing of the Augustinian Eremite order, the Observant Augustinians. In this elite academic system, as in today’s universities, there was a well-defined threefold progression of degrees. Even though Luther already had a masters degree from his studies in arts and law at the University of Erfurt, he returned to being a novice undergraduate to study theology, and duly went up through the ranks again, ‘earning his stripes’ as he went.

An entry level student in this system worked first of all on his bachelor’s degree (baccalaureus biblicus) in which he studied the basics of theology and the Bible. This usually took around five years. Over the next two years, he then moved on to the next stage, to become a sentenariarius, one qualified to teach the Sentences of Peter Lombard, the standard theological textbook of the day. After another seven to ten or so years, a scholar may have become a magister (master), which qualified him to teach and

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9 It is not hard to adduce why the ring presented to doctoral graduates was wound of three strands of gold symbolising the Holy Trinity. The vocation of the doctor of holy scripture was understood as an expression of the Holy Trinity’s work in and through the church. The doctor was a Spirit-appointed servant-teacher of the Word of God the Father, the Word through which the Son, Jesus Christ is revealed, in and through the ministry of the church.

10 The tradition of the ‘honorary doctorate of divinity’ today still functions in substantially the same way in some theological schools. The practice at ALC has been to honour retrospectively those who have already exercised a particular charism of teaching in the church which has been highly significant and of lasting value. Of course, in the wider academic world, honorary doctorates are used in many institutions today to recognise and promote political and popular agendas and have been emptied of much of their deep historical meaning and substance, particularly in regard to excellence in scholarship and teaching. In many universities politicians, actors and even models can be awarded honorary doctorates!
sometimes supervise the undergraduate program of a faculty.\textsuperscript{11} The highest degree in the Augustinian system was the degree, doctor of holy scripture, one of the forerunners of today’s doctor of theology. This degree was usually conferred only after twenty or more years of theological study and teaching, and only to those who had attained a high level of respect as teachers. It was sometimes also simply referred to as the magisterium (the authority to teach). The key feature of the doctoral degree in Augustinian faculties was its alignment specifically with scripture, as the spiritual authority and source to which the theologian deferred and owed his ultimate loyalty.\textsuperscript{12}

The holder of a doctoral degree was recognised as one who could teach Scripture without the directing oversight of other teachers. While this degree placed him in a position of considerable personal authority, it was tempered by the demands of the solemn vow he had to take at his graduation ceremony: to teach in accord with Holy Scripture, and to defend it and the church against false doctrines.\textsuperscript{13}

Such a doctor was much more than a fully qualified academic as we would understand it today. He was a papally authorised teacher of the faith, one entrusted with the church’s doctrina. He was free to interpret Scripture and independently hold a theological position on the basis of scripture—as Luther indeed did from at least 1515 onwards. In the university setting, a doctor was a member of the university senate who governed the program of studies and the awarding of degrees, and was expected to take his turn at conferring degrees, including doctoral degrees.\textsuperscript{14}

A doctor gave lectures on self-nominated subjects, unlike sub-magisterial teachers whose curriculum was set for them. He was also entitled to call, conduct and adjudicate disputations and debates concerning matters of biblical and theological teaching. This disputational method of formal scholarly debate was well in use by Luther’s time, and

\textsuperscript{11} In early modern universities masters degrees were seen as a level down from the doctoral degree; however, in earlier medieval universities, masters and doctoral degrees were seen as equal, both granting the licentia docendi.

\textsuperscript{12} Luther’s famous teacher at Erfurt, Jodocus Trutvetter, along with other Observant Augustinian scholars, stressed the centrality of scripture very strongly. This was possibly one of the reasons that Luther chose this particular order and monastery—he had been reading the Bible already during his studies in law, to find comfort for his depressive moods, and was deeply attracted to it. Joining the monastery at Erfurt gave him the opportunity to continue with this biblical study (Posset: 90. See also WA TR IV.647, No.5082). Luther first saw a Bible—the Latin Vulgate—at the age of 20 in the library in Erfurt. He sat down and opened it up and read the story of Samuel (1 Samuel 1–3). So began a life-long relationship with scripture, which changed not only Luther but the whole of western history (Brecht: 85).

\textsuperscript{13} This twofold vow ‘closed the loop’ somewhat on a doctor’s academic freedom. His commitment not only to teach scripture but also to defend it claimed his academic loyalty and limited his freedom to indulge in novel speculative and philosophical pursuits.

\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, the doctor who conferred Luther’s doctoral degree in 1512 was Andreas Karlstadt who was later opposed by Luther for his radical views and resigned from the university to become a farmer.
was an important pedagogical tool.\textsuperscript{15} It was the means through which students took what was presented to them in lectures and resynthesised it, in order to use it in the context of debate. In this process they were challenged to demonstrate that they had a proper grasp of scripture and theology and were not only able to regurgitate information but also restructure it, ‘joining the dots’ in a different way to create a new thesis or argument. The highly responsible role of doctors was to supervise and guide this potentially volatile methodology, and shape the learning that happened through it, in a manner which was faithful to scripture and beneficial to the learning of the participants.

Working at the doctoral level in a university was, therefore, no small responsibility. Comparatively few people were equal to it. For monastic academics, there was, of course, no personal income involved, but in a culture where the church was a powerful institution it did grant considerable influence and status. What made the role so significant for Luther’s reformatory work was that a doctor’s authority to teach the faith was not limited to his own university, diocese or monastic province, but was, as we have noted, church wide. It is not widely understood that this is why Luther’s 95 theses caused such a stir not only in Wittenberg and Saxony, but much further afield. The popular story of Luther the ‘insignificant monk standing up against the might of Rome’ is historically a little wide of the mark. Had Luther been an insignificant person, he would never have been in a position to post his ninety five theses, and his questions could never have gained a wider hearing. Luther’s theses and their impact were a result of his exercising his vocation and considerable influence as a doctor of holy scripture in the church.

Luther’s understanding of his doctoral vocation also sheds some light, I suggest, on his words at that other defining moment in the Reformation’s early development, before the Diet of Worms in 1521. He said there (in part), ‘I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither right not safe to go against conscience’ (Brecht: 460). Luther, as a doctor of holy scripture called to teach in the church, was sworn to teach according to scripture; his conscience was bound by this vow. It seems clear that in his words before the Diet, quoted above, he was not only claiming the authority of scripture in a general sense, but also referring to the specific obligations of his doctoral vows and to his responsibility as a public teacher of the faith to remain loyal to scripture above all else.

**How did Luther ‘earn’ his degree?**

So what did it take to be awarded a doctoral degree in Luther’s world? While there was

\textsuperscript{15} The scholarly disputation was a method of enquiry using a highly formalised structure of debate, following a rigid order of argument. It dealt with theses or propositions which were examined through argument and counter-argument, in order to either prove or disprove them. It was first developed in line with Aristotelian principles by scholastic theologians in the eleventh century and later became very important in humanistic education, where theological and philosophical questions were being explored. Luther innovated and elevated this method of debate to an art form in the Reformation. His early disputations with other Augustinian theologians, at Heidelberg in 1518 and Leipzig in 1519, laid the groundwork for much of his later Reformation theology.
no particular milestone of scholarly achievement attached to the degree, it would be incorrect to assume that it was, therefore, a straight-forward process, or one in which the candidate did not have to fulfil formal requirements and qualifications.

First of all, in the Augustinian academy one did not self-select for doctoral promotion in order to pursue an academic career. The role of doctor was viewed, at least in practice, as an external call. Monastic hierarchy and seniority played a role here. Junior lecturers were nominated by mentors. Once a candidate had been identified, the mentor then recommended him to the chapter of the order, at a regular meeting, to receive the degree. If this was confirmed, he was then approved as a candidate. However, this was just the opening stage in his candidature. The subsequent process of application was convoluted, requiring the candidate to apply for his licentia docendi through the dean of the theology faculty, who then petitioned the university chancellor. The request was then carefully weighed by the chancellor, whose job it was to establish that the candidate was of good character and maturity and had adequate academic knowledge and gifts as a teacher (Brecht: 126).

Candidates were not expected to write a thesis or dissertation showing original research, at least not in the way that they do today. While this might sound easier than meeting the requirements for a doctorate today, it was not. In Luther’s day candidates had to demonstrate their all-round biblical and theological proficiency, not just mastery of one narrow specialist area. The candidate was assessed not chiefly by means of written work (though this sometimes played a role), but by means of oral discourse. This included participating in disputations, defending a theological position against opponents, thereby showing superior ability to think on one’s feet, to ‘do theology in the moment’. A doctoral candidate had to show his skill at using rhetoric, dialectic and logic together with theological and biblical knowledge in public discourse and debate. He had to demonstrate that he could use these pedagogical tools effectively, consistently and maturely.\(^\text{16}\)

In this intensive educational environment, once a teacher became a doctor the demands of the position required him to go on showing that he was ‘up to it’. This meant participating in disputations, giving lectures and producing written works. He had to demonstrate that he ‘had the edge’ in debate, that he had superior biblical knowledge and theological judgement which could hold the respect of peers and students.

However, academic competency was only part of it. The Observant Augustinians were not just interested in the intellectual aspects of theology. They were an order that had long been concerned with theology as the ‘powerhouse’ for pastoral reform in the church, and were known widely and regarded highly as a ‘preaching order’.\(^\text{17}\) Showing that you were good at the academic side of theology was one thing. A doctoral candidate who

\(^{16}\) Melanchthon reports in his brief biography of Luther that Luther’s doctoral degree was conferred on him for his ‘maturity of judgement’ (Posset 2011: 76).

\(^{17}\) Staupitz was a prime example of this. He was not only a highly regarded professor but a loved preacher, who saw good scriptural preaching as an important part of the theologian’s work. He passed this way of thinking on to Luther.
was often an appointed preacher as well (as Luther had been since 1512), had also to demonstrate excellence in the pulpit, applying scripture to the lives of people in the local worshipping community, communicating to all classes and kinds of hearers—nobles, artisans, merchants and peasants. In this way, academic theology was, as a matter of course, done in, with and around the realities of ordinary everyday life and work. The scholarly and the pastoral functioned as an integrated and organic whole.

Luther continued this emphasis in the theology faculty at Wittenberg during the Reformation. For him theology was deeply embedded in all of life, and to be a theologian was to be concerned with how faith transformed every aspect of life, in home, church and society.

Between 1533 and 1535, when one of his students, Jerome Weller, was a candidate for promotion to the doctoral degree, Weller was required—in addition to his teaching duties at the university—to preach a series of sermons on Matthew's gospel in the Wittenberg city church (Bricht 1993: 12,13,129). Because of Weller's problems with self-confidence in this area, Luther had to help him considerably, providing sermon outlines for Weller to use. However, he put in the extra effort gladly in order to help Weller develop his skills in teaching and preaching theology in practical, life-related terms, for the people of the local congregation. Under Luther's influence, therefore, a doctor of holy scripture was seen as one qualified and competent to teach scripture to all—not just his peers at the university but to whoever came to public worship. He therefore had to really know theology, not just intellectually but experientially, in order to be able to explain it to anybody, to his most erudite academic colleague or to the merchant in the market place.

**Luther as Staupitz’s protégé at Wittenberg**

It is clear that Luther stood out early on as an exceptionally gifted student in the cloister at Erfurt. He was already an experienced academic by the time he entered the monastery, holding a masters degree in arts and law, and he quickly picked up the habits and disciplines of studying theology. He not only showed intellectual promise but also a deep spiritual sensibility and awareness. With such gifts and experience, Luther advanced quickly, helped along also by the sponsorship of his mentor, confessor and friend, Staupitz. It seems that Staupitz had, quite early in Luther's studies, hand-picked the young friar as a candidate for the doctorate and as his possible successor to the professorial chair (Lehrstuhl) of scripture in Wittenberg, which he wished to vacate.

There is, in fact, significant evidence that the doctoral degree was all but forced on Luther by Staupitz. Luther himself was not interested in it. At the tender age of 28 he felt unready for such a huge step-up. Around this time, he had also begun to emerge as a key leader in the Augustinian order in Saxony, and was given an increasing number

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18 The biblical chair at Wittenberg and the post of city preacher were historically closely linked and usually filled by the same person, as in the case of Staupitz, whom Luther succeeded (Posset, 2011: 76).
19 In his letter to Staupitz of September 1512 Luther expresses his feelings of inadequacy for the task (WA BR I.18; No.6).
of leadership responsibilities. In 1511 he was appointed sub-prior of the community in Wittenberg, a role which involved him in a lot of supervisory and administrative work. He was, therefore, put off by the demands of yet another demanding role, and he did not believe his physical and mental health—which were poor at that time—could sustain the rigours of the position. Struggling with his spiritual life, he knew that promotion to a doctoral degree would place added pressures on him, not only academically, but also spiritually. To a highly scrupulous individual like Luther, the responsibilities attached to the doctoral vocation represented yet another burden for his already strained conscience. His objections and concerns were serious. Some sources claim that he advanced no fewer than fifteen separate reasons that he could not do it. His opposition to the decision pushed him right to the edge of his vow of obedience as an Augustinian friar (Gritsch: 223).

However, Staupitz was resolute. In the face of Luther’s objection that taking on such a challenge would kill him, he replied, ‘That’s quite all right—God has plenty of work for clever men like you in heaven’ (Bainton: 45). Staupitz’s handling of the situation strongly suggests that he believed the root of many of Luther’s health problems, depressive moods and spiritual anxieties at this time was not having enough outward stimulation for his active mind, which left him open to brooding and anxiety. Some have reflected that Staupitz’s proposal was reckless—entrusting to a man apparently close to nervous collapse the teaching and spiritual formation of others. However, Bainton (45) suggests, perhaps quite insightfully, that Staupitz foresaw in Luther’s doctoral promotion something that Luther himself could not, that in studying scripture and teaching the truth of God’s mercy for others as a doctor and professor of scripture—instead of remaining chained to his own inner scruples and fears—Luther might be led to find his own peace of conscience.

According to Luther, Staupitz told him that he would be promoted as a doctoral candidate as the two men sat together under the pear tree in the garden of the monastery in Wittenberg, in September 1511 (Brecht, 1985: 125). Luther later viewed this moment as one of the major turning points in his adult life since it had determined his future direction as a reformer. Once committed to the role of doctor, that is, a teacher in the church, he had to speak against false teaching and practice in the church and not remain silent, as he may otherwise have been able to do.

Luther’s promotion was proposed by Staupitz to the chapter of the Augustinian order at its meeting in Cologne in May 1512, and it was conferred on October 19 the same year. This was an occasion of great joy and considerable prestige, not only for Luther, but for the fledgling University at Wittenberg. The conferral of a doctoral degree was a two day affair. It was no mere formality—as academic graduations today are so often considered to be—but designed to enact the candidate’s transition from one state to another, as his involvement in the proceedings moved from the role of student to the role of doctor (teacher). It involved debates and orations, including some ‘stand-
up comedy',\(^{21}\) disputations and a solemn ceremony at which Luther took his doctoral vows (Brecht 1985: 126,27). There were no colourful gowns or hoods. A doctor of holy scripture instead was presented with three insignia: a doctoral hat or ‘biretta’, the kind of ‘loose beret’ you see him wearing in many of Cranach’s portraits,\(^{22}\) a closed and an open Bible,\(^{23}\) and a doctoral ring, made of three interwoven strands of gold, symbolising the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The ceremony was completed with another disputation at which Luther, as the new doctor, adjudicated and determined the outcome. The festivities were concluded with a faculty banquet, traditionally a lavish affair. In university towns like Wittenberg and Erfurt the awarding of doctoral degrees was regarded as much as a civic event as an academic occasion. Accordingly, for Luther’s doctoral celebrations, a traditional doctoral procession was held through the town of Wittenberg, while the church bells were rung.

Luther’s rapid promotion was not without controversy. For one thing he was very young to receive the degree. He was almost certainly envied by others—the academic world was in many ways just as ‘bitchy’ then as it is now. Luther had ascended quickly, earning his baccalaureate and sentenarius degrees within a few years. For him to be promoted to a doctoral degree at the tender age of 28, when this honour was usually only conferred on older and much more experienced teachers, raised some eye-brows. It was all the more controversial because this rapid promotion to the doctoral degree had also happened with two other professors at Wittenberg—Andreas Karlstadt and Wenzeslas Link. Staupitz had arranged these promotions too, as part of the drive to find suitably gifted professors for the theology faculty of the new university (Augnet, Staupitz: 3).

In addition, there was political tension between the Augustinian houses at Wittenberg and Erfurt. The leaders at Erfurt, where Luther had received his early theological education, were rather put out when Luther was first sent for a posting, then permanently removed, to the new academy at Wittenberg. Accusations were made against Luther by the lecturers at Erfurt that he had made, but then broken, vows to stay at Erfurt, and that he had improperly pursued advancement. Luther, however, successfully refuted these claims and was not damaged by them, chiefly because his manifest lack of academic ambition was well-known (Brecht 1985: 128).

In 1512 the Elector Frederick was still devoting considerable resources to establishing Wittenberg as a modern university city, to become the spiritual, political and cultural centre of Electoral Saxony. By attracting students he would in turn enrich the city’s

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21 The Professor conferring the doctorate (in this case Andreas Karlstadt) was by tradition obliged to make a humourous speech during the conferral festivities (Brecht, 1985: 126,27).
22 The kind of headgear one wore in the early Renaissance was very significant. It showed not only your class, but often your profession, qualifications and seniority. Cranach’s depiction of Luther wearing his hat is, therefore, more than incidental. Cranach is showing Luther as ‘doctor’ and academic.
23 This was powerfully symbolic of the Augustinian understanding of biblical scholarship. The Bible must always be open because the doctor of scripture is not only a teacher but a life-long student of the word, and yet the Bible is ‘closed’ in the sense that it is complete; in reading and interpreting it, nothing may be added to it or taken from it.
economy and cultural life. Frederick and Luther’s mentor, Staupitz, were childhood friends at the school for children of local nobility at Grimma in Saxony. In 1504 Frederick, then a young prince, called on his old school mate, at that time the Augustinian prior in Tübingen, to help him establish the theology faculty of his new university at Wittenberg (Posset 2003: 71). Accordingly Staupitz was, on Frederick’s behalf, recruiting the best young academics and teachers he could find, men who could advance quickly and become influential and spread the reputation of the university (Posset 2003: 73,74).

The plan to promote Luther as a doctoral candidate was part of ‘cementing him in place’ as a professor in the new theology faculty at Wittenberg (Posset, 2003: 120,21). Frederick was, therefore, happy to pay the 50 gilder academic fee\(^{25}\) for Luther’s doctorate, which Luther had no hope of paying himself, since Staupitz had indicated to Frederick that Luther would be a life-long professor at the university. According to records, Staupitz received the money from the electoral treasury in Leipzig when he and Luther travelled there together in October 1512.\(^{26}\)

**Doctor of holy scripture**

The title ‘doctor’ was the only title or qualification which Luther ever claimed for himself as a basis for his authority to teach in the church. In 1523 he is reported to have said, ‘I would not exchange my doctor’s degree for all the world’s gold’ (Gritsch: 2), and one can see why. It was an extremely formative and valuable element in Luther’s work as a teacher and reformer. It both anchored him in his university chair in Wittenberg, grounding his reformatory teaching in the life of the university and the local church, and connected him to the wider German Reformation movement and its progress. He used his doctoral degree to establish his ecumenical authority and legitimacy as a theologian, and to gain the ears of other academics, civic leaders and the nobility.\(^{27}\)

He also persistently referred to his doctoral identity, almost always using the exact title of his degree, ‘doctor of holy scripture’, even though it was common practice in academic circles to use other terminology and designations like ‘doctor of theology’. As always, Luther was making a statement here, emphasising scripture as the prior source and authority for theology, ahead of other writings that were considered authoritative by the Roman theologians, notably those of the scholastics, Peter Lombard or Thomas Aquinas. As the doctor of the Reformation, Luther wanted to show that the Bible alone was the foundation of Reformation faith and teaching (Köpf: 83).

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24 Philipp Melanchthon was another such ‘coup’ for Frederick. He arrived in Wittenberg in 1518 as a young but already much admired academic prodigy. Frederick also had to work hard to keep Melanchthon in Wittenberg—he much preferred the climate, food and wine in the south of Germany—at one point building him a rather luxurious house to get him to stay.

25 50 gilders was a sizeable sum in 1512, roughly a year’s salary for a normal junior academic.

26 Gritsch observes that the receipt for these fifty gilders from the electoral treasury is the oldest existing sample of Luther’s hand-writing.

27 See Luther’s preface to his 1520 Address to the Christian nobility of the German nation (WA VI.404:17 – 405:6).
Luther remained firmly devoted through his career to what he had always considered his primary vocation, that of professor at his university of Wittenberg. Not counting the interruptions to this role at various points, he occupied the Lehrstuhl of holy scripture at Wittenberg for 33 years, giving his first lecture in the summer of 1513 and his last in November, 1545 (Kopf: 71). Through the turmoil of 1517–1521 he continued to teach, and in 1521 and 1522 during the months he was absent from the university, he continued his biblical translation work, writing and research.

Yet, despite his insistence on the authority of his doctoral degree, and his apparent pride in it, Luther did not see the degree primarily as a personal honour, based on his own abilities. It was much deeper than that. He placed such a high value on the degree because of its vocational and functional significance.

For I would surely in the long run lose courage and fall into despair if I had undertaken these great and serious matters without call or commission. But God and the whole world bears testimony that I entered into this work publicly and by virtue of my office as a teacher and preacher, and have carried it on hitherto by the grace and help of God.\(^{28}\)

It signified a high ecclesial calling which could only be undertaken on the basis of God's grace. As we observed in regard to Luther's theological formation, his doctoral vow did not centre on obedience to his superiors, nor to the pope, but to holy scripture itself. Brecht notes, ‘The doctor's degree and the professorship were a binding commission and a sworn obligation for Luther’ (127). His doctorate was, therefore, a significant source of confidence, which enabled him to see his role as teacher clearly, even in the midst of confusion and crisis.\(^{29}\)

**Humility, suffering and foolishness**

At the same time, the doctoral vocation also placed Luther in the role of humble servant, binding him to the word of scripture, not only outwardly in what he taught but inwardly as he studied and meditated on it. His approach to the text, as he prepared his first lectures on the Psalms in 1513, show that he discovered radically different dynamics at work in scripture itself than those he had learned in his academic training. He began to realise that scripture was not the object of his study, but rather the active agent which confronted him. This living, acting word could therefore not be subjected but rather subjected the reader, making him its servant and disciple, as he entered deeper into study, meditation and prayer (Brecht 1985: 130,131).

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28 Luther is contrasting his own public and accountable teaching to that of preachers who hold secret meetings in private, in his tract, Infiltrating and clandestine preachers, 1532 (WA XXXiii.522:2–8/LW 40: 387,88).

29 Standing on his role as a doctor of holy scripture in the midst of the crisis of 1520, Luther made the decision to teach prophetically on the basis of scripture, instructing the nobility about the priesthood of the baptised and what it meant in the context of Rome’s spiritual and temporal domination of Germany.
Luther’s preface to the 1539 edition of his German works shows that this biblical dynamic had, over his career, become a key emphasis in his theology and teaching. His words near the beginning of the preface lead us into the heart of his understanding of his doctoral vocation: ‘For as soon as God’s word shoots up and spreads through you, the devil persecutes you. He makes you a true doctor; through his temptations he teaches you to seek and love God’s word’ (WA L.660: 9,10). As Oswald Bayer has shown (33–64), in these words Luther is getting at something profound and essential, not only about his own calling as a biblical teacher, but about every Christian’s spiritual experience with God’s word. One can only learn the true depth and beauty of Scripture through tentation—the devil’s ‘hard testing’. One does not become a true doctor by becoming strong but by experiencing one’s own utter weakness and need. It is only as we gain this experiential knowledge of Scripture through suffering and fleeing to Christ’s word and promises that we truly begin to become real theologians and teachers. This struggle is not born of an inner intellectual turmoil but confronts the Christian living with the word of God in daily life with all its outward conflicts and tensions. Tentatio is, therefore, an indispensable part of the making of a teacher of theology (Kleinig: 7,8).

He understood only too well that his role as a doctor of holy scripture often placed him not in a seat of honour among his peers, but in the role of the court jester, the Hofnarr, the ‘fool’ who spoke the truth, despised and unpopular though it may be. In 1520 he quipped in his preface to The Christian nobility of the German nation, ‘Paul says that “he who wishes to be wise must become a fool”. Moreover, since I am not only a fool, but a sworn doctor of holy scripture, I am glad for the opportunity to fulfil my doctor’s oath, even in the guise of a fool’ (WA VI.404:17 – 405:6).

Luther comments often in his sermons that though he is a doctor, he is weak in faith and just as dependent on God’s help as any other Christian. Though he was a doctor, he comments in his sermon for Advent 1, 1533, God still kept him a student (Schüler) who had only just begun to learn the Gospel (WA XXXIV.ii.167: 11–15). This may sound like rhetorical hyperbole, but a deeper acquaintance with Luther’s personal reflections in his Table Talk reveals that it was often literally true. Luther, for all his scholarship, often had trouble hearing and receiving the gospel, and was frequently tempted to trust in—and then despair of—his own knowledge and achievements. For him, to be a doctor was to embrace one’s life-long status as a ‘beginner’ who must go on learning the basics of the faith and learning them again (WA Tr I, 47–52 & WA Tr I. 199–201).

Luther’s doctoral vocation, therefore, did not just require ongoing research, teaching and writing, but it called him to grow personally and spiritually, as a mature all-round theologian and teacher. While it led into deeper scholarship and learning, at the same time it led him into ever deeper receptive humility and servant-hood.

Some reflections for today

Those who are Lutheran theological educators are stewards of this tradition of theological
education and carry it forward in their own teaching, not just in regard to doctoral studies, but in how they educate all pastors and church workers today.

Not every student can be a high level academic; that is not the point. Nor is it about maintaining high standards as part of an elitist educational program. It is about equipping students to be able to do theology in the ministry context. A theologian is not one who just repeats somebody else’s well-worn programs or formulae, but one who reads and reflects on scripture in each new context, in order to enact faithfully the gospel afresh for the needs of that place, people and time. This requires much more than ‘the common touch’ with people, or the ability to be down to earth, highly prized as these qualities are. It also requires deep and thorough theological education—especially focussing on scripture and its proper interpretation, in which case thorough biblical training, including the biblical languages, is surely indispensable, as it was to Luther and the reformers. We ought not to shy away from this hard academic work because of its lack of perceived ‘relevance’. Nor should theological educators apologise for the commitment they ask students to make in order to grow as theologians.

The false separation between academic theology and practical ministry, which still hangs over us from modernity, needs to be left behind once and for all. Pastors need to be theologians and theologians need to be pastoral. We have nothing else! The study of theology and the practice of ministry are reliant on one another. A theologian in the tradition of Luther needs to seriously commit to study, yet this study is no end in itself. The theologian is not called to theological speculations or academic pursuits for their own sake, but to academic theological study for the gospel’s sake, the church’s sake, and for the world’s sake.

While this inheritance belongs to all of us, I would suggest that those who are doctors and teachers in higher theological education are heirs of the tradition in a special sense. While it may be tenuous to argue that today’s doctors of theology are bearers of the apostolic church’s charismatic office of teacher, teachers of scripture do still fulfil a crucial and holy vocation. They are responsible for teaching the teachers and preachers who go into the church. To be sure, theological lecturers do not carry the awesome mantle of honour that Luther did in his time, nor in today’s culture should they. However, they still form and influence those who will in turn be preachers and teachers themselves. They still shape the environment and set up the framework inside which students learn Lutheran theology. They still model how to enact theology through their attitudes and relationships. And most importantly they show, by example, confidence in and commitment to the word of God.

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