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History and Heresy in the Lutheran Reformation

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Lutheran categorisations of heresy by considering definitions of heresy and depictions of heretics. It begins with a discussion of the historiography of the writing of Reformation history, and a survey of the historiography of heresy in the Early Church and in the medieval period. References in Luther's writings to 'heresy' and 'heretics' show how Luther responded to his own condemnation as a heretic and reveal his presentation of figures and groups categorised as heretics, illustrating his distinction between heresy and orthodoxy. As Lutheran historiography of the Reformation developed, it focused on genealogies of truth, and the witness of the *testes veritatis*: those included were generally not those who had been condemned as heretics. Although the emergence of Lutheran theology and self-understanding, combined with inner-Protestant conflicts, gave rise to new categories of orthodoxy and heresy, past heretics were not generally viewed as the forerunners of the Lutheran Reformation.

KEYWORDS

Heresy; reformation; Martin Luther; Lutheran historiography; Magdeburg Centuries; *testes veritatis*

Introduction

Reflecting on 'Church History in Early Modern Europe' in an article published in 2012, Anthony Grafton suggested:

Church historians sought continuity: if they were Catholic, they tried to show that the Church had never changed substantially since Jesus founded it; or if they were Protestant, that the alleged heretics whom the medieval church had persecuted had actually preserved true Christianity intact from the corruption of later centuries, believing and acting just like modern Lutherans or Anabaptists.¹

A library search on the keywords 'heresy – Reformation' in preparation for this paper buttressed this suggestion. The works found by such a search considered related to three key areas: firstly, discussions of Protestants condemned or burned as heretics; secondly, Reformers' discussions of heresy and of the treatment of figures viewed as heretical; and, thirdly, considerations of medieval heretical movements as forerunners of

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¹ Grafton, "Church History," 5

the Reformation. This latter approach is taken by a volume of essays edited by Günter Frank, Friedrich Niewöhner, and Sebastian Lalla, *Reformer als Ketzer* (*Reformers as heretics*) examines, as its subtitle notes, ‘heterodoxe Bewegungen von Vorreformatoren’ (‘heterodox movements of pre-Reformers’), including poverty movements, Joachim of Fiore, Johannes Tauler, John Wycliffe, the Hussites, the Waldensians, and a range of anti-Trinitarian movements.² In his essay in that volume, Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann argues that Flacius Illyricus’ *Catalogus* presents heretics as saints, Waldensians as Lutherans *ante literam*, and Wyclif and Hus as the forerunners of Luther.³ In striking contrast to this historiography, however, a depiction of the genealogy of true Lutheran believers found in the Brüdernkirche St Ulrici in Braunschweig includes amongst its forty-six images only two who had been condemned by their contemporaries as heretics, Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague.⁴ It is clear, therefore, that not all Lutherans saw themselves as the heirs of a long line of those judged by their contemporaries to be heterodox or heretical.

This article investigates the depiction of heretics – and particularly medieval heretics – in the emerging Lutheran historiography of the sixteenth century. It argues that the assessment offered by Grafton and works such as *Reformer als Ketzer* tends to oversimplify Protestant perceptions of heterodox figures and movements. In doing so, it also provides another perspective on the longstanding debate relating to forerunners of the Reformation. This has often centred on the place of justification by faith, as exemplified by Alister McGrath’s discussion in ‘Forerunners of the Reformation?’ McGrath took issue with Oberman’s understanding of forerunners, and his search for ‘context and antecedents for both the Protestant and the Tridentine Reformation.’⁵ Much more recently, Thomas Fudge has argued that Luther and Hus shared, not a theology, but ‘a similar ethos: neither was prepared to sacrifice conscience to maintain the unity of the faith as determined by the Latin church,’ an approach that, he concludes, ‘in practice, ... led to heresy.’⁶ The concept of heresy also relates to the question of innovation in the Reformation, not least because, as Berndt Hamm puts it, ‘in the Middle Ages and in the age of the Reformation novelty was considered the essence of heresy.’⁷ As will be discussed below, a consideration of how heretics were viewed in Lutheran history-writing reveals shifting perceptions amongst Reformers and later Lutheran authors regarding who their forerunners might be and their own relationship with the past.

To explore these questions, the article opens with a discussion of the recent historiography of early modern Lutheran church history,⁸ before turning to the historiography of

² See Frank, Niewöhner and Lalla (eds), *Reformer als Ketzer*, and particularly the articles: Selge, “Joachim von Fiore”; Hudson, “English Wycliffites”; Segl, “Auswirkungen der hussitischen Bewegung”; Balázs, “Mittelalterliche Häresie”; Lalla, “Antitrinitarismus im Mittelalter”; de Lange, “Die Ursprungsgeschichten der Waldenser”; Feuchter, “Albigenser und Hugenotten”.

³ Schmidt-Biggemann, “Flacius Illyricus” »Catalogus testium veritatis«.

⁴ For the Braunschweig portrait series, see Mack, *Bildzyklen in der Brüdernkirche zu Braunschweig*; Methuen, “Eine visuelle Kirchengeschichte”; Slenczka, “Städtische Repräsentation und Bekenntnisinszenierung.”

⁵ Oberman, *Forerunners*, 39, 41; McGrath, “Forerunners of the Reformation?”

⁶ Fudge, “In Praise of Heresy,” 43.

⁷ Hamm, *Reformation of Faith*, 255.

⁸ The focus in this article is on history written in what might be called the chronological or annals tradition. Another strand of history writing also emerged in the Lutheran context, strongly influenced by chiliastic historiography, which had a long history but which had taken particular shape in the writings of Joachim of Fiore. This represents a quite different approach to the relationship between history and heresy, driven by the sense that, as Robin Barnes has observed, “Both subjectively and objectively, the Reformation age was unrelentingly calamitous” (Barnes, “Varieties of Apocalyptic Experience,” 264). This tradition will not be considered in detail here. For discussions of it, and its

the emergence of orthodoxy and heresy in the early church and to medieval definitions of heresy. This provides useful analytical tool for an exploration of references in Luther's writings to 'heresy' and 'heretics' and, in particular, to his engagement with those who had earlier been condemned as heretics. In a third step it discusses the place of heretical figures and movements in Lutheran church histories history during the later sixteenth century, focusing on the development of the *catalogus testium veritatis*, that is, the 'catalogue of witnesses to the truth' (often referred to in the English-language literature as genealogies of truth), and on the associated discussions of heresy, many of which followed the model of Flacius Illyricus. It concludes with a brief discussion of what light might be shed by this discussion of heresy in Lutheran histories of the church on the long-standing debate about forerunners of the Reformation.

The historiography of early modern Lutheran church histories

Reformers were interested in history, not least because one of the key challenges thrown at them was the question 'Where was your Church fifty – or a thousand – years ago?' Bruce Gordon has observed, that in 'the desperate need to answer the accusation flourished with such devastating effect by their detractors ... the names of such men as Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hus and Savaronola were regularly invoked and emended versions of their writings cited to support the truth of the Protestant cause.'⁹ For the Reformers, in Gordon's view, looking back to historical figures was about 'finding the truth in earlier writers, no matter how greatly obscured, and excising the errors.'¹⁰ In this case, Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux were accepted by the medieval church as orthodox, while Hus and Savaronola were not, but Gordon does not distinguish between them. Similarly, Euan Cameron observes that reform was conceived as a return to the truth of the past: the Zürich theologian Heinrich Bullinger was typical in his conviction that 'the primitive form was invariably the best and the ideal,' so that 'to "reform" something was to restore it to its pristine character, before the deprivations produced by error and mischief.'¹¹ Grafton's observation that 'Church historians sought continuity'¹² emerges from their conviction that the true church was to be found in the past. He is certainly right in his suggestion that 'if they were Catholic, they tried to show that the Church had never changed substantially since Jesus founded it.'¹³ More problematic is his claim that Protestant church historians argued 'the alleged heretics whom the medieval church had persecuted had actually preserved true Christianity intact from the corruption of later centuries, believing and acting just like modern Lutherans or Anabaptists.'¹⁴ Cameron finds that for Bullinger the converse is the case: figures generally regarded by the medieval church as orthodox come to regarded by Protestant historians of the church as heretical: 'the later the Church Father ... the more likely it was that a reformed theologian ... would find error in his writings. The worst of all the Latin

reception in the Reformation, see Barnes, *Prophecy and gnosis*; Penman, *Hope and Heresy*; Reeves, *The prophetic sense of history*.

⁹ Gordon, "Changing face," 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cameron, "Primitivism, Patristics and Polemics," 37.

¹² Grafton, "Church History," 5.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

fathers, on most issues, was Gregory the Great.¹⁵ However, Irena Backus suggests that in reality it was Catholics who associated medieval heretics with Protestants: 'Whereas Protestants preferred to catalogue witnesses to the true doctrine thus in effect giving themselves a legitimate past, Roman Catholic theologians preferred to compile catalogues of heresies thus making sure that Luther and his followers were safely relegated to that category.'¹⁶

Increasingly, Protestant historians came to understand that which 'determined [the church's] unity and universality' to be 'not location but doctrine', as Backus affirms of the *Magdeburg Centuries*.¹⁷ Pohlig concurs that 'Luther and Melanchthon assume an unbroken "historic succession" of biblical teachings down the ages,' and that the continuity of the church's teachings is 'guaranteed not by ecclesiastical institutions, but by teachers sent by God.'¹⁸ These teachers, or witnesses to the truth, were by definition understood to have taught what was coming to be defined as Protestant orthodoxy, but neither Backus nor Pohlig comments on whether they included those deemed heretical by heretical authorities of the medieval church. Gregory B. Lyon observes that Flacius' historical projects, both the *Catalogus* and the *Magdeburg Centuries*, set out primarily 'to compile as many sources as possible that testified to the continuous resistance of the true church throughout the ages against that of Antichrist, who had undoubtedly usurped the throne of St. Peter.'¹⁹ The *Catalogus*, he suggests, has 'no discernible topical organization, and the authors selected are, to put it mildly, diverse'; its underlying principle is to reveal 'the spirit of the "true church".'²⁰ In this work, Flacius develops the idea that there is throughout the history of the church 'a hitherto unseen, true tradition' constituted by 'a hard core of seven thousand true believers,' whose identities need to be excavated from the historical record and presented, a particular challenge in the medieval period.²¹ The *Centuries* represent an attempt to undertake this task, that seeks, as Völkel suggests, 'to reformulate orthodox Lutheran theology in historical terms.'²² In order to do this, the *Centuries* presented 'a double movement ... : the outward continuity of the visible Church had to be broken, while the inner continuity of true dogma and its tradition had to be upheld by the strongest historical proofs.'²³ As will be seen below, a study of the depiction of heretics suggests that Völkel may overestimate the extent to which the *Centuries* challenge the historical continuity of the visible church: Lyon finds that the *Centuries* proceed from the assumption that 'the true church is visible at all times and must be revealed.'²⁴ Either way, the approach to history taken in the *Centuries* provides, as Lyon puts it, 'the rebuttal to the papist claims that Lutheran theology was novel and lacking tradition.'²⁵

Recognising the importance to early modern Lutheran historians of the testament of true witnesses, and the consequent development of a *catalogus testium veritatis* leaves

¹⁵ Cameron, "Primitivism, Patristics and Polemic," 37.

¹⁶ Backus, *Historical Method*, 382.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 374.

¹⁸ Pohlig, *Gelehrsamkeit und Identitätsstiftung*, 294, 296.

¹⁹ Lyon, "Plan for the *Magdeburg Centuries*," 257.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 257-258.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 264.

²² Völkel, "German Historical Writing," 331.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Lyon, "Plan for the *Magdeburg Centuries*," 264.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

open the question of who those witnesses were and how their teachings were judged by their own contemporaries. As indicated above, Schmidt-Biggemann observes that Flacius's *Catalogus* depicted heretics as well as saints as forerunners of the Reformation. In the *Catalogus*, different categories of forerunner are juxtaposed with one another, as Lyon points out: within a few pages, 'one finds Savonarola, the prophetic doggerel of an anonymous monk, and even a quote from Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* that reveals the ambition and cruelty of the popes.'²⁶ Similarly, the *Centuries* identify both true believers and heretics, or heresies, in every age, although here they are strictly separated according to the scheme of topics to be addressed in each volume, which includes 'Doctrine of the church and its changes' and 'Heresies and manifest errors' as well as 'Illustrious people in the church' and 'Heretics or false teachers.'²⁷ However, it is striking that, as will be discussed further below, in most cases the *Magdeburg Centuries* replicate the definitions of orthodoxy and heresy assigned by Western tradition. It seems then that by the late sixteenth century Lutheran church histories were no longer coherent with the argument that German protestants – or more specifically German Lutherans – were appealing to a genealogy of heretics. Moreover, it will be shown below that Luther's references to heresy are also more complex than has sometimes been suggested. In this Luther reflects what recent historiographical considerations of medieval heresy have found to be its defining factor: heresy had come in practice to reflect not so much doctrinal deviance but disobedience. These historiographical developments will now be considered briefly as a background to exploring Luther's approach to heresy and accounts of heresy and heretics in the Lutheran histories.

The historiography of heresy in the early church and the medieval period

The relationship – and the boundary – between orthodoxy and heresy in the early church have been a contentious historiographical question since the 1930s. In a useful summary of the debates, David W. Jorgensen observes: 'By the fourth century, the model of original unity, purity, and truth derived directly from the teachings of Jesus and handed down to the apostles, only to be contaminated by later human and demonic doctrines, had become foundational to the metanarrative of Christian history.'²⁸ This narrative dominated approaches to heresy from the fourth century onwards, until the 1930s, when Walter Bauer 'initiated a paradigm shift away from the ecclesiastical historiographic model of early unity, purity, and truth contaminated by later deviance, heresy, and error.' Bauer proposed an understanding of the early church shaped by 'early diversity followed by subsequent consolidation and conformity.'²⁹ As a consequence, it has come to be accepted by historians of the early church that that terms such as 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' 'do not constitute neutral, historical descriptors, but doctrinally informed labels,' and that 'the twinned notions of heresy and orthodoxy are themselves historically contingent.'³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., 258.

²⁷ Ibid., 261, and compare figure 1 below and the table of contents in any volume of the *Centuries*. The topic "Heretics or false teachers" is omitted in volume 13.

²⁸ Jorgensen, "Approaches to orthodoxy and heresy," 2.

²⁹ Jorgensen, "Approaches to orthodoxy and heresy," 2-3, referring to Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr 1934).

³⁰ Jorgensen, "Approaches to orthodoxy and heresy," 1, 6.

Early modern approaches to history assumed that the *Urkirche* had been the purveyor of true doctrine until later developments had contaminated its understanding; indeed, this view of heresy was foundational to Protestant theology. At the same time, however, the very nature of the Reformation movements and the growing conflicts with the Roman authorities meant that the contingency of definitions of heresy was apparent at the time. The Reformation produced multiple understandings of orthodoxy and in consequence also spawned multiple definitions of heresy or false teaching.

Studies of heresy in Late Antiquity and the medieval church offer useful insights with which to approach early modern understandings of heresy. An early and persistent understanding drew a parallel between heresy and infectious illness.³¹ Averil Cameron points to the way in which heretical labels such as Montanism, Manichaeism, or Arianism could be applied to new groups which were deemed to be heretical; a case of condemning heretics through ‘guilt by association.’³² In her study of medieval concepts of heresy, Lucy Bosworth explores the use of catalogues of heresies, relating to older definitions of heretics, with which newer movements were associated.³³ Bosworth finds that between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, ‘the polemical concept of heresy’ underwent several changes:

The first was the decline in the importance of the initial doctrinal error and the corresponding increase in emphasis on the individual’s attitude to the institutional Church. At the same time there was a gradual merging of the concepts of schism and heresy. ... These two changes contributed to the third change: the shift away from the consideration of the theological subtleties of particular doctrines and towards the person of the heretic.³⁴

In particular, Bosworth argues, the heretic came to be understood as ‘a traitor not only to the Church and faith into which he had been baptised, but also to the society into which he had been born.’³⁵ Similarly, Alexander Patschovsky suggests that by the late middle ages, ‘everyone who was on bad terms with ecclesiastical authorities could be charged with heresy.’³⁶ The definition of heresy was no longer focused on doctrinal error, but could also reflect a (perceived) lack of obedience to and respect for church hierarchy. As will be seen in the next section, Luther’s personal experience made him all too aware of the power dynamics which underlay definitions of heresy. This aspect too is important in considering how former heretics were categorised by the Reformers.

Luther and heresy

An early reflection by Luther on the definition of heresy is found in the *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, published in 1518. Written at a time when Luther’s orthodoxy was being called into question, and in which Luther’s opponents were ‘tracing [his] thought ... to heretical Forerunners,’³⁷ his own situation is reflected in his formulation of his own

³¹ Flower, “Genealogies of Unbelief”; compare also Barry, “Diagnosing Heresy”.

³² Cameron, “How to read heresiology,” 480, compare also Jorgensen, “Approaches to orthodoxy and heresy,” 9.

³³ Bosworth, “The Medieval Concept of Heresy,” 164–166, 185–188. Something similar happened in sixteenth-century Spain when all who were accused of heresy started to become associated with the term “Lutheran”, whether or not their theology was directly inspired by Luther: see Coleman, “Spain,” 299–301.

³⁴ Bosworth, “The Medieval Concept of Heresy,” 221–222.

³⁵ Bosworth, “The Medieval Concept of Heresy,” 222.

³⁶ Patschovsky, “Heresy and Society,” 26.

³⁷ Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 27.

defence: Luther asserts, 'In our time the inquisitors of heretical depravity are so zealous that they attempt by force to drive the most orthodox Christians to heresy,'³⁸ a heartfelt observation which is underpinned by an awareness of the intrinsically positional challenge of defining orthodoxy and heresy. Luther's initial response was to reflect on the church's acceptance of the teachings of Jean Gerson, who, like Luther himself (at least according to Luther), had 'dared to condemn indulgences which were bestowed as being valid for many thousands of years,'³⁹ but had not been condemned. Luther asked, why not?

I cannot help wondering what happened to the inquisitors of heresy that they have not burned this heretic even after his death, for he condemned indulgences which entitled recipients to many thousand years and he spoke out so confidently against the custom of every pilgrimage station in [Rome]. He spoke out also against the practice of that squanderer of indulgences, Sixtus IV, as a result of which the latter warned his prelates that it was their duty to correct and give careful attention to these indulgence practices. He referred to the claims of these indulgences as foolish and superstitious, etc.⁴⁰

Alongside Gerson, Luther also listed a series of theologians and humanists whom he suspected had been mistakenly condemned for teachings which he tended to think might be orthodox: 'It is not very clear to me what else Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Lorenzo Valla, Peter of Ravenna, John of Wesel, and very recently Johann Reuchlin and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples did ... unless it is that they failed to explain every single syllable.'⁴¹ It is not apparent from this list what Luther saw as uniting these rather disparate figures, and he makes no claims that they shared a particular theology, and certainly not that they had taught justification by faith; perhaps what connected them in his mind was simply the fact that all had found themselves or their theology under investigation. It is apparent at least that Luther was already uncertain of the validity of papal decisions about orthodoxy and heresy. However, he averred: 'If it were true that [the Pope] does not err, it is still not a sin, nor is it heresy, to take the opposite position, especially in something which is not necessary for salvation, until the one position has been rejected by a general council and the other approved.'⁴² At this stage, Luther still believed that orthodoxy might be defined, not by the pope, but by a General Council

His suspicions of ecclesiastical authority increased as his own views became more widely condemned, and came to a head with the threat of excommunication contained in the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*.⁴³ The bull, he complained in his response to it, 'makes faith a heresy and blasphemy a Christian truth.'⁴⁴ In Luther's view, the pope was behaving in a manner that aligned him with earlier heresy, specifically Donatism:

In ancient times, there used to be heretics called Donatists, who taught that nobody could receive baptism or the sacrament that was valid unless the priest or bishop who administered it was holy. St. Augustine vanquished them and showed that the sacraments belong not to man but to God only, who can administer them through good and bad servants. Now that this heresy has been suppressed, the pope's heresy takes its place. He teaches that, though he

³⁸ Luther, *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, WA 1, 574; LW 31, 157.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, WA 1, 545; LW 31, 108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, WA 1, 545-546; LW 31, 108-109.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, WA 1, 574; LW 31, 157-158.

⁴² *Ibid.*, WA 1, 583; LW 31, 172-173.

⁴³ For condemnations of Luther as a heretic, see Bagchi, *Luther's earliest opponents* and the texts collected and translated in Graham and Bagchi (eds), *Luther as Heretic*.

⁴⁴ Luther, *Defense and Explanation*, WA 7, 322 and 323; LW 32, 16.

who administers the sacraments need not be godly, he must be high and mighty. What those heretics ascribed to human holiness, the pope ascribes to human might and greatness.⁴⁵

Not only did Luther now associate the papacy with a heresy he knew to have been condemned by Augustine, but he also saw himself and the theology he was teaching as coherent with the position of several of those who had been condemned as heretics. These included Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague, whom he saw as ‘good Christians who were burned by heretics and apostates and antichristians, namely, the papists, for the sake of the holy gospel,’ but also ‘that godly man of Florence, the Dominican Girolamo Savonarola and his brethren,’ and ‘other good Christians in other places.’⁴⁶ Moreover, Luther was increasingly convinced that it was not necessarily the content of what he was teaching which had led him to be condemned, but also – or particularly – the fact that he was the one teaching it: ‘I think, if I said that there is a God and then confessed all the articles of the faith, all of it would immediately be heresy, merely because I said it.’⁴⁷ It is apparent that Luther’s unease about the definition of orthodoxy, already triggered by responses to his Ninety-five Theses, had been compounded and complicated by finding himself under threat of excommunication. It is here, in his response to *Exsurge Domine*, that Luther most explicitly identified his views with those of previously condemned heretics.

Later in 1521, whilst he was in seclusion in the Wartburg, Luther wrote *Against Latomus*, in response to the condemnation – and later the burning – of his works by theologians at the university of Louvain and the defence of that condemnation by Jacobus Masson, also known as Latomus. Here Luther reflected on the educational structures that had given rise to the form of scholastic theology. ‘Scholastic philosophy and theology,’ he asserted, ‘are known from their fruits,’ and in his view the orthodoxy of at least some of those fruits was suspect:

I have the strongest doubts as to whether Thomas Aquinas is among the damned or the blessed, and would sooner believe that Bonaventure is blessed. Thomas wrote a great deal of heresy, and is responsible for the reign of Aristotle, the destroyer of godly doctrine.⁴⁸

Moreover, if martyrdom were to be viewed as a test of orthodoxy, then the universities were in Luther’s view manifestly failing to produce true believers:

In all these hundreds of years up to the present, the courses at the universities have not produced, out of so many students, a single martyr or saint to prove that their instruction is right and pleasing to God while [the ancients from their] private schools have sent out swarms of saints.⁴⁹

Luther, himself a university professor, even argued that the universities were unnecessary when it came to defining orthodoxy, for, he asserted, ‘the Gospels aren’t so difficult that children are not ready to hear them.’⁵⁰ The saints Agnes, Lucia and Anastasia had shown

⁴⁵ Ibid., WA 7, 364 and 365; LW 32, 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid., WA 7, 438 and 439; LW 32, 87–88. This is the only mention of Savonarola in a text by Luther in *Luther’s Works*, although Savonarola is twice mentioned by the editors. A prayer by Savonarola was included in some later editions of Luther’s “Personal Prayer Book” attributed to “Brother Jerome” (see the introduction to the English translation, LW 43, 9). Savonarola is identified as a seminal influence on Ambrosius Catharinus of Siena, referred to in a letter written by Luther to Georg Spalatin, from the Wartburg on August 6, 1521 (LW 48, 291 n.10).

⁴⁷ Luther, *Defense and Explanation*, WA 7, 366 and 367; LW 32, 4.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther, *Against Latomus*, WA 8, 127; LW 32, 258.

⁴⁹ Ibid., WA 8, 127; LW 32, 258.

⁵⁰ Ibid., WA 8, 127; LW 32, 258.

their theological ability as young girls without any knowledge of philosophy or theology.⁵¹ Indeed, Luther's advice was 'that a young man avoid scholastic philosophy and theology like the very death of his soul.'⁵² The universities, he complained, were not teaching the Bible:

Who does not see how the universities read the Bible? Compare what is read and written in the Sentences and on philosophy with what they write and teach about the Bible — which ought to flourish and reign as the most important of all — and you will see what place the Word of God has in these seats of higher learning.⁵³

Luther had implied in the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), and had explicitly stated in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), that the evangelical theology would require a completely new university curriculum which would support the Bible-based theology which he believed to be the truth.⁵⁴ In 1521, in the face of his own excommunication, Luther's focus was on finding affinity with those theologians whom he believed also to have been unjustly condemned by the Catholic hierarchy, which now included the councils. It was in this phase of his writings, as he grappled with his excommunication and its consequences, that he was most consistent in arguing that what had been viewed by the church theologians of his time as orthodoxy was actually heresy, and *vice versa*.

Luther's experience of condemnation by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but also the growing differences amongst evangelicals, continued to drive him to ponder how heresy was defined. In his Genesis Lectures, begun in 1535, he concluded: 'the greatest wrongs are associated with the designation of holiness, church, true religions, etc. If anyone should express disapproval, he is immediately clubbed with the curse of excommunication and is condemned as a heretic and an enemy of God and the church.'⁵⁵ He found many examples in Genesis to buttress his argument that 'it is always a case of the worst coming from the best. Angels become devils, the people of God become crucifiers of God's Son, the prophets become false prophets, and our hearers and disciples become authors of sects and heretics.'⁵⁶ Commenting on the story of Cain and Abel, he concluded:

We today are not the first to whom it happens that we are deprived of the name 'church,' that we are called heretics, and that those who kill us pride themselves on being the true and only church and maintain their claim to this name with the sword and with every sort of cruelty.⁵⁷

The same thing, he said, had 'happened to righteous Abel and also to our Lord Christ.' In this way, 'the true church is hidden; it is banned; it is regarded as heretical; it is slain,'⁵⁸ while 'the false church arrogates to itself the title of church of God.'⁵⁹

⁵¹ Ibid., WA 8, 127; LW 32, 258.

⁵² Ibid., WA 8, 127; LW 32, 258.

⁵³ Ibid., WA 8, 127; LW 32, 259.

⁵⁴ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, especially theses 36 and 37; WA 1, 355; LW 31, 42; *To the Christian Nobility*, article 25; WA 6, 457-462; LW 44, 200-207.

⁵⁵ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, WA 42, 304; LW 2, 60.

⁵⁶ Ibid., WA 44, 217-218; LW 6, 293.

⁵⁷ Ibid., WA 42, 187; LW 1, 253.

⁵⁸ Ibid., WA 42, 187; LW 1, 253.

⁵⁹ Ibid., WA 43, 213; LW 4, 108-109.

Introducing the story of Noah, he reiterated the way that ungodly, heretical ways might come to be seen as piety:

After men begin to be ungodly, that is, do not fear God and do not believe God, but despise God, His Word, and His ministers, the result is that they fall from the true doctrine into heretical ideas, which they teach, defend, and adorn. Moreover, the world regards such sins as the height of piety; those who perpetrate them are praised as the only religious, godly, and righteous men, as the church and the children of God.⁶⁰

Luther identified such attitudes as underlying his own experience of having his theology condemned:

the pope with his cardinals and bishops [...] not only are addressed as princes and wield authority, but also lay such claim to the name 'church' that they can put us under a curse as heretics and condemn us with the utmost smugness. They do not allow themselves to be called tyrants, ungodly, and irreligious; they want to be called most gracious, most holy, and most honorable.⁶¹

In condemning Luther and his followers, 'the heretics and the pope want to be the church.'⁶² This reflected the experience of Noah, Luther argued, who, 'together with his people, was condemned as a rebel, a heretic, and an enemy of the sovereignty of both the state and the church. We who affirm our faith in the Gospel are regarded similarly today by the popes and the bishops.'⁶³ Luther and his followers had to endure being called 'heretics, the seed of Satan, apostates, and rebels,'⁶⁴ and 'regarded as sacrilegious and as disturbers of religion and civil governments, and indeed, the greatest sinners of all men alive.'⁶⁵ However, they were able 'to say with Noah, ... "I know that I am righteous before God, even though the entire world forsakes me and condemns me as a heretic and an unrighteous man",'⁶⁶ and could be confident that they would 'conquer because of our Leader and Lord, the Son of God, who Himself bore the same reproaches and conquers in all His saints.'⁶⁷ Therefore, in the face of the 'perils' they faced, Luther argued, he and his followers 'must not despair ... but ... courageously hold fast to the sound doctrine, no matter how much the world condemns and curses it.'⁶⁸ Luther recognised that when he responded to the accusations of 'heresy, blasphemy, arrogance, and sedition,' by affirming "I am not a heretic; I am not seditious," as Christ clearly and expressly replies to the Jews (John 8:49): "I have not a demon" ... then, in my brief refutation, I am charging the pope himself with all the crimes and reproaches of which he has accused us.'⁶⁹ For Luther, it was those who condemned him and his followers as heretics who were actually the false believers.

Consequently, whilst he acknowledged that 'it is saddening to hear the papists lie and say that we are reprobate and dead members of the church,'⁷⁰ Luther argued that those who claimed to be the true church must demonstrate their fidelity to the gospel:

⁶⁰ Ibid., WA 42, 266; LW 2, 6.

⁶¹ Ibid., WA 42, 288; LW 2, 38.

⁶² Ibid., WA 43, 213; LW 4, 108.

⁶³ Ibid., WA 42, 289; LW 2, 38.

⁶⁴ Ibid., WA 42, 412; LW 2, 213.

⁶⁵ Ibid., WA 44, 38; LW 6, 52.

⁶⁶ Ibid., WA 42, 324; LW 2, 88.

⁶⁷ Ibid., WA 44, 38; LW 6, 52.

⁶⁸ Ibid., WA 42, 324; LW 2, 88.

⁶⁹ Ibid., WA 44, 41; LW 6, 56.

⁷⁰ Ibid., WA 43, 157; LW 4, 31.

the papists call themselves the church; but if it is true — as cannot be denied, not even by Satan — that the church is made up of those who have the promise and believe it, it follows that the pope with his followers is not the church, but that he misuses the name ‘church,’ because he is an enemy of the promise and persecutes those who believe the promise. Therefore it is certain that the name ‘church’ is very often grossly misused, for not only heretics but even Turks and Jews call themselves the church. Therefore he who simply says that he is the church says nothing at all. He must prove this.⁷¹

Therefore, and congruent with his argument that heretics ‘are the originators of offenses and [...] subvert sound doctrine,’⁷² Luther pronounced condemnation on those who did not maintain what he understood to be “purity of doctrine.” These included those who in his view were contaminating the evangelical cause, such as Müntzer and Karlstadt, who, he said, ‘at the beginning of the restoration of the Gospel... abandoned the Gospel, which had been given through the Holy Spirit from heaven, and were on the lookout for extraordinary illuminations.’⁷³ Amongst other problematic groups, Luther named ‘sacramentarians, Anabaptists, antinomians, followers of Servetus and Campanus, and other heretics, who now are in hiding after being routed for the moment by the purity of the Word and the diligence of godly teachers, but who are eagerly waiting for any opportunity to establish their doctrines.’⁷⁴ Also included were Schwenkfeld and other Sacramentarians who ‘— either because they have no knowledge of it or disregard it — fall into ugly errors.’⁷⁵ Such believers were for Luther comparable with ‘the enthusiasts, likewise the Manichaeans and all the heretics.’⁷⁶ Here Luther associates contemporary heretics with the heresies condemned by the early church. However, not only those condemned as heretics by the early church provided models of false belief: Luther categorised Jerome too as a heretic on account of his views on second marriages.⁷⁷ He recognised that ‘the men in Paris and Louvain ... would cry out that I am teaching things that are heretical and in conflict with the accepted view of the fathers, which has now been handed down and propagated in the church for 1,000 years.’⁷⁸ These, he said were ‘sophists’, who ‘condemn as heretics those who teach that the promises of Christ should be believed.’⁷⁹ Instead, Luther taught, ‘you should reject what is evil and choose what is good.’⁸⁰

It is apparent that in the Genesis Lectures, Luther was grappling with the experience of having his own views condemned as heresy, from which he concluded that it was those who claimed to be orthodox who in reality were themselves heretics. However, he also condemned those evangelicals whose views deviated from his own as heretics in their turn. Luther’s understanding of true faith stood in contrast to that of ‘the pope and the sects, who establish forms of worship outside, and contrary to, the Word of God, [and] ... condemn the true religion and doctrine and call it heretical.’⁸¹ Luther also expanded on the idea that the true church must undergo persecution:

⁷¹ Ibid., WA 43, 157; LW 4, 31.

⁷² Ibid., WA 42, 558; LW 3, 14.

⁷³ Ibid., WA 43, 225; LW 4, 125.

⁷⁴ Ibid., WA 42, 274; LW 2, 18.

⁷⁵ Ibid., WA 43, 70; LW 3, 273.

⁷⁶ Ibid., WA 43, 225; LW 4, 125.

⁷⁷ Ibid., WA 43, 354; LW 4, 304.

⁷⁸ Ibid., WA 44, 787; LW 8, 284.

⁷⁹ Ibid., WA 44, 808; LW 8, 311.

⁸⁰ Ibid., WA 44, 787; LW 8, 284.

⁸¹ Ibid., WA 43, 232; LW 4, 135.

in the world it is necessary for her to put up with being called seditious, error-ridden, heretical, the off-scourings of the very worst men who have ever lived. These reproaches she endures; they are her beautiful precious stones which she wears on earth, her jewels and golden chain.⁸²

The Genesis Lectures therefore show Luther first subverting the categories of heresy and right belief in the light of his own experience, but then confirming these categories in a way that turned back the accusations of his detractors on themselves, by defining heresy as any belief that deviated from his own understanding of the gospel.

By the time Luther came to write *On the Councils and the Church* in 1539, his focus had shifted from those past theologians with whom he felt a theological affinity but who had been condemned for heresy, to those with whom he felt a theological affinity but whose orthodoxy had not been condemned. Whereas in 1518 he had named Jean Gerson, he now referred to Nicholas Lyra:

Lyra, too, writes that the church is not to be assessed by the high or spiritual vocations in it, but by the people who truly believe. I am surprised that he was not burned at the stake for these words, for denying that popes, cardinals, bishops, and prelates compose the church; this amounts to abominable heresy, intolerable and offensive to the holy Roman church.⁸³

Moreover, in keeping with the position he had articulated in the Leipzig disputation of 1519, Luther had come to believe not only that ‘no good results come from the councils,’ but also that councils had played a role in helping heretical groups to define themselves more clearly:

before the Council of Nicaea the heresy of Arius was a jest compared with the misery evoked after the council, as was said above. The same applies to the other councils, as in the cases of Macedonius and Nestorius; for the faction that was condemned held together all the more firmly, trying to justify itself and to be exonerated. They fanned the flames more vigorously than before against the councils that had not understood them rightly.⁸⁴

However, Luther did not identify himself or his theology with any of these ancient heretics. Arius was, he had in his lectures on Titus (1527), ‘not simply to be adjudged a heretic, but he was a stubborn man ... inflexible and unconvincible.’⁸⁵ In his lectures on Genesis he had described Arius’ view that Christ that ‘was created before all things and later on created all things and was the most perfect creature, but that He had not always been in existence,’ as ‘this insane and wicked opinion.’⁸⁶ His discussion of the Council of Nicaea in *On the Councils and the Church* left no doubt as to Luther’s disapproval of Arius’s views: the Arian bishops at Nicaea, he said, were ‘like mouse-droppings in the pepper’; the teachings of Arius were a ‘blasphemy’ which was ‘openly condemned by the furious council.’⁸⁷ Luther’s main point was that in putting forward the creed against ‘the new heresy of Arius,’ the council of Nicaea ‘did not invent this doctrine or establish it as something new as though it had not previously existed in the churches,’ it was not the teaching of the council, but Arius’ views

⁸² Ibid., WA 44, 110; LW 6, 147.

⁸³ Luther, *On the Councils and the Church*, WA 50, 644; LW 41, 167.

⁸⁴ Ibid., WA 50, 604; LW 41, 120.

⁸⁵ Luther, *Lectures on Titus*, WA 25, 30; LW 29, 35.

⁸⁶ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, WA 42, 11; LW 1, 13.

⁸⁷ Luther, *On the Councils and the Church*, WA 50, 548–551, quotations 550 and 550–551; LW 41, 54–58; quotations at 56 and 57.

which were the innovation.⁸⁸ Similarly, Luther consistently decried the views of both Nestorius and Macedonius as heretical.⁸⁹

It is apparent from this survey of Luther's writings on heretical movements that Grafton's claim that for Protestants 'the alleged heretics whom the medieval church had persecuted had actually preserved true Christianity intact from the corruption of later centuries' is too simplistic. Luther's writings show considerable awareness of the role of power and authority in defining orthodoxy and heterodoxy, particularly when it comes to his own condemnation, whilst exhibiting a more simplistic approach when it comes to his condemnation of those with whom Luther disagreed. However, it can also be seen that Luther accepted the verdicts passed on many figures and groups condemned as heretical by the Western tradition. The final section of this article will consider the treatment of heretical figures in early Protestant histories.

Heresy, Protestant history, and 'witnesses to the truth'

As observed above, Protestant historiography quickly came to centre on 'genealogies of truth'. Bollbuck observes:

In his funeral sermon for Luther on 22 February 1546 Melancthon presents an interrupted succession which culminated in the Reformer. The history of the church was the history of those who preached the gospel, and Luther was placed in a line of ancestors from Isaiah through John the Baptist, Paul and Augustine as renewers of the Gospel.⁹⁰

This approach of viewing the history of the church as a 'genealogy of truth' is found also in the work of Georg Major, *De origine et auctoritate verbi dei* (Wittenberg 1560) in which he presents a *Catalogus doctorum ecclesiae Dei*. This begins with Adam, lists patriarchs, apostles, and church fathers (including Polycarp, Irenaeus, Basil, Augustine), with medieval witnesses including Isidor of Seville, Bede, Hrabanus Maurus, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Ockham, Jean Gerson, Iohann Geiler von Kaisersberg, Johannes Tauler and Johannes Wesel, all of whom he views as teachers of divine truth, but with the final two being seen as Luther's direct forerunners.⁹¹ Major raises the question 'An Patres et Concilia possint errare' ('Whether the fathers and the councils could err'), and concludes that they could, listing as evidence figures including Marcion, Montanus, Valentinus, whom he identifies as heretics.⁹² No medieval theologian who had been condemned for heresy is listed in Major's *Catalogus* of teachers of right doctrine.

There is some evidence of historians in the latter half of the sixteenth century following Luther's lead by treating Savonarola sympathetically. Thus, in 1556, Cyriacus Spangenberg published the *Historia Vom Leben und Tode Hieronymi Sauonarole anno 1498, zu Florenz verbrand History of the life and death of Girolamo [or Jerome] Savonarola, burned in Florence in 1498*, in which he presented Savonarola as a 'martyr ... killed by

⁸⁸ Ibid., WA 50, 551; LW 41, 58.

⁸⁹ For Luther's condemnation of the teachings of Nestorius and Eutyches, see ibid., WA 50, 592-603; LW 41, 106-118; compare also Luther, *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), WA 54, 89-91; LW 15, 339-342; for the heretical nature of the teachings of Nestorius, Macedonius and Arius, see Luther, *Brief Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament* (1544), WA 54, 158-160; LW 38, 307-311.

⁹⁰ Bollbuck, *Wahrheitszeugnis, Gottes Auftrag und Zeitkritik*, 85.

⁹¹ Major, *De origine et auctoritate verbi dei*, and compare Bollbuck, *Wahrheitszeugnis, Gottes Auftrag und Zeitkritik*, 86.

⁹² Major, *De origine et auctoritate verbi dei*.

the pope for the sake of truth.⁹³ However, Spangenberg's history of those who had taught a true understanding of the body and blood of Christ, published the same year, makes no mention of Savonarola, listing Irenaeus, Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hilary, Chrysostom, Cyril, Theodosius, John the Damascene, Theophylact, Theodoret, Duns Scotus, Johannes Trithemius, Gabriel Biel, Wycliff and Hus, and contrasting them with Berengar, Carlstadt, Zwingli, Calvin, and Oecolampadius.⁹⁴ For modern interpreters, Spangenberg's list of precursors to a Lutheran doctrine of the Eucharist appears to misread the theology of several of those included in it, but it is certainly not a genealogy of heresy.

Similarly, Schmidt-Biggemann concludes that Flacius Illyricus' *Catalogus testium veritatis* assumes an uncorrupted *Urkirche*, which from the fourth or fifth century, under the influence of the ecumenical councils, began to develop in problematic ways, but which still produced good theologians who could be regarded as teaching according to the central Lutheran – or Flacian – principles of *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*.⁹⁵ Flacius' *Catalogus* too is notable for the orthodoxy of the figures it includes.⁹⁶ The Magdeburg centuries, also conceived by Flacius Illyricus, took a schematic approach to each century of church history (see Figure 1), with chapter 5 exploring 'heresies and manifest errors', chapter 8 considering schism and chapter 11 presenting heretics.

I. Caput. Primum caput propositionem & argumentum Centuriae continet: ut sciat lector, quorum annorum historiam expectare debeat
 II. Caput. De loco & propagatione Ecclesiae
 III. Caput. De persecutione & tranquillitate Ecclesiae
 IIII. Caput. De doctrina Ecclesiae
 Caput V. De haeresibus, & erroribus manifestis
 VI. Caput. De ceremoniis seu ritibus Ecclesiae
 Caput VII. De politia seu gubernatione Ecclesiae
 Caput VIII. De schismatibus ac certaminibus leuioribus
 Caput IX. De concilijs
 Caput X. De vitis episcoporum, seu Methodus personalis
 Caput XI. De haereticis seu seductoribus
 Caput XII. De martyribus.
 Caput XIII. De miraculis et prodigijs.
 Caput XIII. De rebus iudaicis externis seu politicis
 Caput XV. De alijs religionibus extra ecclesiam Christi, ut Iudaismo & Gentilismo.
 Caput XVI. De mutationibus politicis Imperijs.

Figure 1. *Historici operis methodus* of the Magdeburg Centuries.¹¹⁷

A survey of the contents of chapters 5 and 11 in each volume of the *Magdeburg Centuries* reveals that the heretics and heresies named are those which were condemned by the church of that time. Thus, amongst others, the first century names the Pharisees and Sadducees,⁹⁷ and Simon Magus;⁹⁸ the second century lists gnostics including Valentinian

⁹³ Spangenberg, *Vom Leben und Tode Hieronymi Sauonarole*, title page: "Von dem trewen und weren Mertyrer Hieronymo Sauanarola / was sein Lere und Leben gewesen / und wie er umb der Warheit willen / sampt anderen zweien / vom Bapst / mit dem strange / Fewer / unnd Wasser / ist umbbracht / und hingericht worden / warhafftige Historia / durch M. Cyriacum Spangenberg zusammen bracht / 1555."

⁹⁴ Spangenberg, *Historia Quando Primum in Ecclesia Orta Sit opinio illa*.

⁹⁵ Schmidt-Biggemann, "Flacius Illyricus" »Catalogus testium veritatis«, 275, 276, 277.

⁹⁶ A list of the churchmen and topics covered is given by Backus, *Historical Method*, 347.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, cols 227-232.

⁹⁸ *Primae centuriae liber Secundus*, cols 644-646.

and Marcion, Montanists and encratites;⁹⁹ the third names the Manichees,¹⁰⁰ the fourth lists Donatism, Arianism, Apollinarianism, Novatianism, and other anti-Trinitarian teachings,¹⁰¹ and the fifth cites Pelagianism and Nestorianism.¹⁰² There is a genealogy of heresy, in the sense that Ariens, Donatists, Manichees and Nestorians continue to appear in subsequent centuries, but these are identified as heretical groups and not as precursors to Lutheranism.¹⁰³ In the eleventh century transubstantiation is listed as ‘a very grave error’ (*grauissimus error*) and Berengar is listed as a heretic, along with the Bogomils.¹⁰⁴ The chief heresy of the twelfth century is identified as ‘Antichristus’, defined as the usurping of power by the papacy and the ceding of this power by secular rulers.¹⁰⁵ Abelard is named as a heretic along with unspecified sacramentarians and the Cathars.¹⁰⁶ The latter reappear in the thirteenth century, the final printed volume, now labelled Albigensians; the flagellant movements are defined as heretical, along with the Beghards and Beguines, the teachings of Raymund Lull, and the ‘Errores Parisiis damnati (Stephanus Parisiensis),’ a reference to the condemnation of 219 philosophical and theological theses in March 1277 under the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier.¹⁰⁷ Thomas Aquinas, ‘alias Doctor Angelicis appellatus’ (‘otherwise known as the angelic doctor’), is listed in the chapter headed ‘De Episcopis et Doctoribus’ (‘On bishops and doctors’), and not dismissed as an author of heresy, as Luther had described him.¹⁰⁸ In the absence of volumes relating to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there is no evidence of how the Magdeburg Centuries would have dealt with figures such as Wycliff, Hus and Savonarola.¹⁰⁹ A more detailed study of the presentation of these heresies would reveal the terms in which they are described, but it is apparent from this brief account that with the notable exceptions of the doctrine of transubstantiation and the theology of the papacy, Flacius and the other the authors of the Magdeburg Centuries largely accepted the categorisations of heresy and orthodoxy proposed by the medieval church, including some of the genealogies of heresy identified by Bosworth.¹¹⁰ There is no sense in which the Magdeburg Centuries and other church histories of this period regard those condemned as heretics, whether in the early church or during the medieval period, as automatic precursors of evangelical theology.

This impression is strengthened by the visual representation of the *testes veritatis* found the Brüderkirche in Braunschweig. The figures depicted begin with Ignatius of Antioch and other apologists, run through a number of church fathers, a selection of mediaeval theologians, and the Bohemians Jan Hus and Hieronymus (Jerome) of Prague, to the Wittenberg Reformers, Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, and Johannes Bugenhagen, who, from the pulpit of the Brüderkirche, had first preached

⁹⁹ *Secunda centuria*, cols. 72-103.

¹⁰⁰ *Tertia centuria*, cols. 110-118.

¹⁰¹ *Quarta centuria*, cols 375-406, 1382-1388.

¹⁰² *Quinta centuria*, cols 575-615, 1453-1455.

¹⁰³ See the volumes *Sexta centuria* to *Decima centuria*.

¹⁰⁴ *Undecima Centuria*, cols 238-239, 246-247, 656-658.

¹⁰⁵ *Duodecima Centuria*, cols 846-847.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, cols 848, 853.

¹⁰⁷ *Decimatertia Centuria*, cols 554-558, 560, 564, 571, 572-584. For the Paris condemnations, see Thijssen, “Condemnation of 1277.”

¹⁰⁸ *Decimatertia Centuria*, col. 1193.

¹⁰⁹ Some preparatory work was done on the final volumes, and further research will be needed to ascertain whether this included the chapters on heresies.

¹¹⁰ Bosworth, “The Medieval Concept of Heresy,” 164-166, 185-188.

the Reformation in Braunschweig in 1528.¹¹¹ The final five portraits show three of Braunschweig's first seven sixteenth-century superintendents – Joachim Mörlin (Superintendent 1553-67), Martin Chemnitz (Superintendent 1567-84) and Polycarp Leyser (Superintendent 1589-94) – and two Lutheran professors of theology – Ägidius Hunnius of Marburg and Georg Mylius of Wittenberg, who had been the Braunschweigers' preferred choice as Leyser's successor.¹¹² Whilst the early modern figures can be shown to have defended a particular view of Lutheran theology against the threat of crypto-Calvinism (thus engaging in the suppression of a position which had come to be condemned, effectively as heretical, by Gnesio-Lutherans),¹¹³ of greatest interest to this discussion are the medieval theologians presented, who, with the exceptions of Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague, had not been accused of heresy: Gregory the Great, John of Damascus, the Venerable Bede, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, the somewhat obscure eleventh-century bishop and biblical commentator Theophylact of Ochrida/Achrida, Hugh of St Victor, Bonaventure, and Jean Gerson. The Braunschweig images, like the Lutheran histories, trace the witness of the Lutheran church through those recognised by their contemporaries as orthodox, and not those condemned as heretics.

Conclusion

This study has shown that, while early Lutheran self-understanding is shaped by the condemnation of Luther as a heretic, and by Luther's sense that his case showed that 'everyone who was on bad terms with ecclesiastical authorities could be charged with heresy',¹¹⁴ Luther's own interest in, and sympathy for, those who had been condemned as heretics, did not persist in the on-going definition of Lutheran identity. Rather, this draws primarily on figures judged by their contemporaries to be orthodox. Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague prove exceptions to this rule. In particular, early church categorisations of heretics stand, although some, such as Chrysostom, are – at least for a while – added to their number. It is notable that some of the categorisations and judgements made in the early Reformation, including Luther's approval of Savonarola and Melancthon's questions about the condemnation of Chrysostom, do not persist in the Lutheran writing of church

¹¹¹ The figures represented, in the order they now appear, are: Ignatius (d. before 117), Polycarp (c. 69-155), Justin (c. 100-165), Irenaeus (c. 135- c. 200), Clemens (c. 50-97/101), Origen (c. 185-254), Tertullian (c. 160- after 220), Laurence (225-258), Cyprian (c. 200-258), Lactantius (c. 250-325), Eusebius (c. 263-339/40), Athanasius (c. 295-373), Gregory of Nissa (c. 335- after 394), Hilary (c. 315-368), Basilus (330-379), Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330-390), Ambrose (337-397), Epiphanius (310/320-404), Jerome (c. 347-419/420), Theophylact (c. 1055-after 1107), John Chrysostom (c. 349-407), Cyril (c. 378-444), Theodoret (393-458), Leo (c. 400-461), Fulgentius (c. 467-533), Augustine (354-430), Gelasius (d. 496), Vigilius (d. c. 484), John of Damascus (c. 640- c. 754), Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), Anselm (1033-1109), Bernard (1090-1153), Bonaventure (c. 1217-1275), Hugh of St Victor (c. 1097-1141), Jean Gerson (1363-1429), Bede (672-735), Johannes Huss (c. 1369-1415), Jerome of Prague (1379-1416), Luther (1483-1546), Philippus [Melancthon] (1496-1560), Pomeranus [Bugenhagen] (1485-1558), Joachim Mörlin (1514-1571), Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), Ägidius Hunnius (1550-1603), Polycarp Leyser (1552-1610), Georg Mylius (1548-1607). The images of Cyril, Theodoret, Leo and Fulgentius were removed in the restoration of the Brüdernkirche which was carried out 1861-65: see Mack, *Bildzyklen in der Brüdernkirche*, 47 n.48, and compare Wehking and Mack, *Inschriften der Stadt Braunschweig*, 212–215 (no. 667).

¹¹² The remaining four were Martin Görlitz (Superintendent 1528-42), Nicolaus Medler (1545-51), Johannes Heidenreich (1586-88) and Lukas Martini (1594-99). See Seebaß and Freist, *Pastoren*, 1: 38-39.

¹¹³ Mack, *Bildzyklen in der Brüdernkirche*, 14-15, 26–28 and cf. Methuen, Methuen, "Eine visuelle Kirchengeschichte."

¹¹⁴ Patschovsky, "Heresy and Society," 26.

history, and this shifting understanding offers a reminder that any discussion of forerunners of the Reformation also needs to ask the question: of the Reformation at what stage in its development?

Whilst there can be no doubt that history was written (and depicted) in ways that supported particular conceptions of orthodoxy, and consequently of heresy, this article has shown that it is too simplistic to conclude that the historians of the Reformation saw their roots in heterodox movements. The realities of medieval heresy, and particularly the conception of heretics as traitors and as a source of infection,¹¹⁵ persisted into the Reformation and shaped its emerging self-understanding of the Reformation. However, as the sixteenth century progressed, Lutheran accounts of orthodoxy and heresy increasingly drew on the fourth-century trope of ‘original unity, purity, and truth derived directly from the teachings of Jesus [i.e. from Scripture – CM] and handed down to the apostles, only to be contaminated by later human and demonic doctrines.’¹¹⁶ It was this definition of orthodoxy, and thus also of heresy, that came to dominate Lutheran approaches to church history.

Disclosure statement

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Charlotte Methuen is Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Glasgow. She has previously taught at the Universities of Oxford, Bochum, and Hamburg. She has a strong research focus in the Reformation, but has also published on ministry in the Early Church and on the modern ecumenical movement.

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¹¹⁵ For heretics as traitors see Bosworth, “The Medieval Concept of Heresy,” 222; for heresy as infection, see Flower, “Genealogies of Unbelief,” and Barry, “Diagnosing Heresy.”

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