As one of its chief concerns, research on the Reformation has posed the question of which modes and media were used to establish and develop the reformational inheritance. This research has appropriately found many foci, from the correspondence of humanistically-inclined municipal circles to the reformational sermon and hymn and the rise of publishing. In contrast, the decisive, crucial role of the controversies that systematized and synthesized the teaching of the Wittenberg theologians, conducted first in personal exchanges and then in print, has been largely neglected, these controversies dismissed as unnecessary squabbles among theologians. Only recently have researchers begun to study the bases for the public controversies, the topics they treated, and their results and impact, and to appreciate and take seriously this culture of controversy as the decisive motor for the refinement of reformational teaching, as the occasion for a process of composing a variety of confessional documents, and as a determining factor in the final consolidation of the confessional churches.

Of course, such struggles over proper expressions of faith and doctrine in academic and public disputes were nothing new. Development of a “culture of controversy” characterized the entire era of the Reformation, even if the second half of the sixteenth century, at least in the sphere of influence of the Wittenberg Reformation, cultivated this form of communication in a particular way. Indeed, this reflects historical developments in the political and educational as well as the theological realm. The term “Wittenberg Reformation” has been intentionally chosen to designate the pre-confessional phase of changes wrought in the faith, doctrine, and life of the church by both Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, and their colleagues as well. Only in looking at the controversies that broke out over the preservation of the reformational legacy in the second half of the 16th century does it become clear that it was not readily possible to hold the two great authorities of the Wittenberg Reformation, Luther and Melanchthon,
with their quite distinct theological developments, together. One group of their disciples were on the way to constructing a confessional position they designated as “Lutheran,” while another—in reaction to the first—grew ever closer to Calvinism. A confessional variation between them which could be designated “Melanchthonian” or “Philippist” could not maintain its identity in the tensions of the age.

This essay lays out the general contours of a period that could command several volumes, narrating the story of the controversies that determined fundamental categories of Lutheran thinking and referring readers to recent literature on this era. Where the narrative depends on general recitals of these developments, references are not given, often pointing to the many challenges that still lie before researchers interested in the period.

The Rise of a Culture of Controversy in the Wittenberg Reformation

Solving problems and seeking truth by way of conversation, that is, through confrontation in the exchange of ideas, was an oft-used means of reaching understanding, with roots in the academic disputation of the medieval university. Academic circles often put the process employed in such disputations to use in both oral and published contexts. Luther chose it for his Ninety-five Theses against Indulgences, which he brought to public attention on October 31, 1517, in a literary form borrowed from the academic disputation. His theses challenged other intellectuals to a public exchange of opinions. They were sufficiently provocative to elicit clarity, as he intended, regarding the indulgence trade, which he found offensive theologically and contrary to canon law. This exchange of positive and negative opinions served as means for academics to use, according to specific rules and rhetorical patterns and techniques. It was new, however, in the 16th century, in the wake of the Reformation, for the disputations increasingly to leave the academic realm and make an impact in the public sphere, moving even into the vernacular. That did not end academic disputations, which also had, as a by-product, colloquies or religious dialogues that involved the non-academic public as well.¹