

CURRENT THEOLOGY RECENT LUTHERAN STUDIES

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The 1983 celebration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth brought a rich treasure of Luther studies to English-speaking readers. Interest in Luther is always keen, and as the towering figure he was, his life and thought can be approached from a host of angles. As John Todd wrote one year before the quincentenary, "In most big libraries, books by and about Martin Luther occupy more shelf room than those concerned with any other human being except Jesus of Nazareth."¹

The best-known study has been Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand*, which for over 30 years has been a classic.² This elegant, popular work dramatized the twists and turns of Luther's career and was based on Bainton's own perceptive insights as well as the best scholarship available. But since then, there has been a veritable Luther renaissance, with numerous scholarly treatments of many dimensions of Luther's biography and theology.³

Among those who have contributed to this harvest of Luther studies have been E. Gordon Rupp, Martin Brecht, Heinrich Boehmer, Heinrich Bornkamm, H. G. Haile, and Mark U. Edwards.⁴ Each has focused on a period of Luther's life—his "road to Reformation," "mid-career," or his "last battles"—to examine minutely the events and the character of this mover and shaker. Among the major treatments of Luther's theology as a whole have been the studies by Paul Althaus and Gerhard Ebeling.⁵ In

¹ John M. Todd, *Luther: A Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) xvi.

² Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950).

³ See Mark U. Edwards, Jr., "Martin Luther," in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982) 59–83.

⁴ See E. Gordon Rupp, *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Heinrich Boehmer, *Martin Luther, Road to Reformation* (Cleveland: World, 1967); Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career, 1521–1530* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980); Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1983).

⁵ See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), and Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, tr. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

addition to vast strides in Luther research, recent decades have also provided an explosion of other works in areas that directly impinge upon and illuminate Luther's world and context. These include studies of medieval theology and philosophy, society and politics, Reformation history, the Church, and popular religious culture in general.⁶

Though we are now several years past the anniversary year, the stream of Luther and Lutheran studies continues to flow. 1986 brought six books in particular that are substantial works which make unique contributions to this field. Two of these are biographies, two introduce Luther's thought and its context, while two trace the theology that stemmed from Luther and is embodied in the Lutheran confessions. Without presenting an exhaustive description of these works, I shall attempt to give the flavor of each as well as the niche each will find in the ongoing catalogue of Luther resources.

BIOGRAPHIES

From America and Germany come two Luther biographies that can best be seen as supplements to each other. James M. Kittelson, professor of history at Ohio State University, has given us *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Augsburg, 1986), which historian Lewis Spitz tags "the best complete biography of Luther for our times." This is an attractive book geared to nonspecialists and enhanced by a number of illustrations and photographs to give a real "you are there" effect to the reader.

Kittelson notes that his book covers Luther's entire career in a relatively even way. This moves the pace of the book along, but even more asserts that there was a fundamental unity to his multifaceted life and that the Reformer did not live "one short life, or maybe two lives, or perhaps even three distinct lives" (15). Kittelson tries to give a well-rounded picture of Luther both as a public figure and as a human being who lived in a particular place and time. As such, he believes that Luther's person and career explain each other.

This is a beckoning book which compares favorably with Bainton for painting a compelling portrait of what motivated and drove Luther over the course of his whole life. As one would expect, its major drawback is that it does not delve too deeply into Luther's theological ideas so that we can have a better sense of how Luther stood in relation to the Church and theology of his day. Yet this is a sterling entrée which should whet the appetite for further courses of Luther cuisine by bringing the Reformer to life in a compelling way.

⁶ For bibliographies on these topics, see James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 313-26.

Of larger proportions is Walther von Loewenich's *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work* (tr. Lawrence W. Denef; Augsburg, 1986; German, 1982). Von Loewenich, professor emeritus of church history at the University of Erlangen, also deals with the whole of Luther's life. But only three of his 30 chapters (56 of 386 pages) consider the "old Luther," from 1530 till his death in 1546. The book includes some 1500 quotations from the Weimar edition of Luther's works, so the voice of Luther himself is clearly heard. Being a translated work, the prose is not as smooth as Bainton's or Kittelson's.

The great strength of this book is its thoroughness in its attention to historical and theological detail. At some points the author is critical of Luther and the categories he used. At one point he claims that Luther's views in *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525) "reduced systematic theology to a pile of rubble" (276). But for the sake of reference and for a blow-by-blow account of Luther's major struggles, this volume will be consulted often. Von Loewenich himself has been captivated by Luther's dynamism and so writes from the perspective that "separation in time does not divide persons when their lives touch. Luther has a message for the church and the world today" (Preface).

THEOLOGY

A most useful volume is Bernhard Lohse's *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (tr. Robert C. Schultz; Fortress, 1986; German, 1980). The format of this volume from the professor of church history and historical theology at Hamburg University is different in that it is made up of a group of 249 sections through seven chapters (243 pages) that cover aspects of his world, life, role, writings, theology, and questions of interpreting Luther, as well as a survey of the various aids to Luther study.

This book is a springboard to Luther studies because of its comprehensiveness and Lohse's directness in targeting issues of controversy and scholarly disagreement. The longest chapters are on Luther's theology and his writings. Lohse goes to the core of each theological aspect and writing by Luther to give not only the nub of Luther's teaching but also the various slants on Luther's views that individual Luther interpreters have emphasized. This, combined with his chapter on the history of interpretation of Luther tasks, perspectives, and problems, makes this an outstanding volume to show not only what Luther said but also how he was "heard" and construed by others. Some elements, of course, are not covered. Heiko Oberman, for example, has pointed out that Lohse does not deal substantially with Luther against the background of late-medieval theology or show clearly enough Luther's powerful eschatology

as a shaping force in his theology.⁷ But this volume clearly is, as Oberman notes, "more comprehensive and discerning than anything else available," and one can heartily recommend it as a splendid way to get a capsulized view of Luther as well as an important source book for launching into further, more detailed examination of Luther's life and work.

For a more intensive study of some aspects of Luther's thought, *Luther in Context* (Indiana University, 1986) by David Steinmetz is outstanding. Steinmetz is a noted Reformation scholar who is professor of church history at Duke University and is able to clarify complicated theological issues by cutting through the knots and giving a succinct statement of what is involved. He does this in the ten essays in this book. Among the theological topics tackled are Luther on temptation, freedom of the will, the Lord's Supper, the hiddenness of God, and justification by faith alone. As a historian, Steinmetz shows how Luther forged his own views in relation to theologians of the past such as Augustine, William of Ockham, and Gabriel Biel, as well as through interaction with contemporaries such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli.

These essays are particularly appealing because they set Luther in his intellectual as well as his political and social world. They show that the struggles in Luther's theology rose from his theological vocation and were not merely the products or pressures of social factors, cultural biases, or childhood training. While Steinmetz does not introduce us to the full range of Luther's thought, his essays do give us a fine sampling of what themes were crucial to Luther. He shows how Luther dealt with them in the context of his own times and in light of those thinkers, both past and present, who were his dialogue partners in the theological enterprise. The focused attention on these major themes is another angle of approaching Luther and has increased value the more one already knows about Luther's various contexts.

CONFESSIONS

The historical extensions of Luther's thought became part of the Lutheran theological tradition through the various confessions of faith which the Lutheran Church developed. These confessional writings are gathered into the *Book of Concord* and include the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Schmalcald Articles, the Great and Small Catechisms of Luther, and the Formula of Concord. The standard English-language edition of *The Book of Concord* is the translation by Theodore G. Tappert (Fortress, 1959; rpt. 1983).

Two significant 1986 books provide guidance for studying these confes-

⁷ See Heiko A. Oberman, "The Quest for the Historical Luther," *Christianity Today*, April 17, 1987, 47. Oberman also considers and critiques von Loewenich's book.

sions. Friedrich Mildenerger has produced his *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (tr. Erwin Lueker, ed. Robert C. Schultz; Fortress, 1986; German, 1983) to present the basic concepts of the Lutheran confessions, to describe the relationships of these concepts to one another, and to show how the confessions are significant for contemporary theological discussion. This is primarily a theological rather than a historical analysis. It starts from Lutheran commitment to the binding character of these documents for the Church's life and belief. The confessions are a *corpus doctrinae* or body of doctrine that try to be in harmony with Holy Scripture, which is considered the primary source of God's revelation. The confessions are theological statements about the nature of the Christian gospel. The gospel is captured, according to Mildenerger, by "the basic decision of the Reformation," namely, that justification by faith is "the doctrine by which the church stands and falls" (37-38). From this center Mildenerger analyzes the Lutheran confessional writings in light of their contexts and controversies—both with Roman Catholicism and with the Reformed and Anabaptist branches of Protestantism.

Wilhelm Maurer in his *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession* (tr. H. George Anderson; Fortress, 1986; German, 1976, 1978) analyzes from the other direction. Maurer was professor of church history at the University of Erlangen for many years, and in this book he scrutinizes only one of the confessions, the Augsburg, and subjects it to a detailed analysis that is both historically and theologically oriented. In doing this, Maurer illuminates not only the document itself but also the various influences of Luther and his associate Philipp Melancthon, who was the Confession's primary composer. This raises questions as to whether the Confession is an adequate formulation of the Reformers' emphases, whether it lays aside important questions and concerns, whether it shifts emphases, or whether the Augsburg Confession should be seen as a supplement to Reformation teaching in order to give it full expression. Maurer does not restrict himself to the theological statements of the developing Wittenberg theology of the 1520s that laid the groundwork for the Confession presented to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. But he also goes beyond to contemporary responses to the Diet as well as to Luther's 1531 lectures on Galatians (planned during the 1530 Diet) to allow "the full voice of the Confession" to be heard (6). Maurer's extensive documentation from Luther's works clearly shows the continuities between the Reformer and the Confession. His stature as a Melancthon scholar provides helpful illumination, so Maurer can show how certain nuances in the Confession reflect Melancthon's own understandings

and ordering of materials.⁸

This short assessment of Luther and Lutheran studies published in 1986 displays a rich complementarity of approaches. Kittelson has given us a dynamic, popular biography of Luther. Von Loewenich offers an ample scholarly one. Lohse provides an aerial survey of many issues in Luther's thought and opens the door for further research. Steinmetz has entered the research room and given us striking essays on ten such theological topics. Mildenerger has interpreted the Lutheran confessions as the extension of Luther's shadow. Maurer has finely analyzed the Augsburg Confession historically and theologically to show the way Reformation theology was expressed in a major statement of Lutheran faith.

The influence of Luther will continue. So will the volumes about his life and thought. With so many important resources now available in English, readers with all interests and purposes can gain new understandings of the Protestant Reformer.

⁸ See, e.g., the discussion on the doctrine of justification and the relation of the Latin terms *reconciliatio*, *acceptatio*, and *imputatio*, in which Maurer shows Melancthon's influence in maneuvering these three traditional doctrinal complexes "so close to one another that they largely overlapped" (346-47).