

Book Review – J.A. Nestingen: MARTIN LUTHER: A LIFE

Colleagues,

For this week's ThTh posting a book review. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

***James A. Nestingen, MARTIN LUTHER: A LIFE.
Minneapolis: Augsburg Books. 2003. 111 pp. Paper.
\$9.99***

Nestingen has given us a winsome "Life" of Luther, presenting a complex figure in a conflicted era in a little over 100 pages. And it'll play in Peoria. Illustrated with color photos from the Luther movie now making the rounds, it is a "must" read for any discussions that, many of us hope, the Luther movie will generate. [We've already had one such with Roman Catholic friends who invited us for dinner a few days ago just to talk about the movie.]

Of course, Luther's life is an incredible story—even for folks not in the Lutheran club. Yet Nestingen makes that story credible, and even a story that makes sense. Partly this comes from the fact that Nestingen—I witnessed him once "live"—is a master story-teller. For "Luther: A Life" he does so with broad attention to the facts of Luther's tumultuous times, plus great skill in weaving them into a real life story. A special "tease" is the author's "Lake Wobegon" dry humor (doubtless his

Norwegian heritage) that accompanies his narrative at unexpected places—as droll as Peter Ustinov’s portrayal of Elector Frederick in the movie.

Here are some of his bons mots:

Concerning the sale of indulgences: “There is good money in bad religion.”

“Martin Luther was a printer’s dream. At one point in the 1520s, three-quarters of the material in print in Germany had been written by Luther.”

“Dumpy little Wittenberg with its university became a dynamite closet.”

Called on to recant at Worms, “like a good professor, Luther began to make some distinctions.”

Nestingen’s segue to Luther’s marriage to Katie: “There is something peculiar about a monk writing an essay like ‘The Estate of Marriage’ and discoursing on diapers.”

On Katie herself (more so than Luther, Nestingen presents her in heroic format): “Once when bleakness was upon Luther and he had gone to his office, she had the door removed and forced him out.”

Luther and Erasmus: Is human will in bondage (so Luther) or free (Erasmus)?: “Erasmus looked at life from the top down; Luther from the bottom up.” After their classic debate: “Luther won the battle even if in the end he lost the war. . . . Erasmus’ view became a keystone for modern life. Luther’s was ignored.”

Not just from the pulpit, where he could talk the language of “the folks,” but also in the classroom, “Luther was always a

preacher.”

Concerning Agricola (Luther’s faculty colleague) and his alleged anti-nomianism: “Agricola argued that trying to make people legally righteous by scaring the hell out of them doesn’t produce faith but self-protection.”

Concerning the umpteen glitches that almost derailed the Lutherans from making their Confession at Augsburg (1530): “Once more, it looked like things would finish before they even started.”

Seems to me that Nestingen gets the theology right. Luther’s fundamental “Aha!” was how to read the Bible so that you hear Gospel, the Christ-quotient in the scriptures. From that Aha! “Luther had a sense of the rhythm of life in Christ. It was and is...a broken meter—a dance of dying with Christ in the crucifixions of everyday life to be raised with him to newness of life—life in faith.”

Which led to the 95 theses on indulgences and the fracas they created. “By the time the smoke cleared, Luther had become—for all intents and purposes, and by accident—a church reformer. It was hardly a calling he sought.”

As Luther’s theology took shape, he articulated it in “opposing pairs,” paradoxical pairs he found in the Bible itself: “law and Gospel...two kinds of righteousness, the two kingdoms, or the Christian’s life as saint and sinner.” “The trick to understanding Luther is to find the pairing and to catch the way the contradictions work on one another and how they develop out of the first Gospel, God’s gracious act in Christ Jesus.”

Nestingén applies the “sinner and saint” set of terms to Luther himself. So we see no unblemished superstar, though superstar he was. Nestingen captions Luther’s shadow side, especially in

his senior years, as being "sick and tired of being sick and tired." Luther's sinner-side is not ignored. What trumps even that, of course, is not his "better side," but The One whom Luther claims to trust even in these valleys of the shadow in his life. None of us, he said, at the end, gets out of life as a hero. "We are beggars. That's the truth." But the Good News right in the face of such truth is: Look WHOSE beggars we are!

Ten chapters of about 10 pages each. Nicely parcelled for discussion. Easy to read. A delight to read. GO for it.