

Book Review of Martin Marty's MARTIN LUTHER

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh is Steve Krueger's review of Martin Marty's just-published biography of Martin Luther. A couple of weeks ago we passed on to you a sermon that Steve preached at the January DAYSTAR conference. From this review you'll see the same law/promise theology at work which grounded that sermon. That's one reason I pass it on to you. Steve's e-address is <skreegs@earthlink.net>Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Ten days hence, D.v., Marie and I depart for Singapore and a 3-month assignment in Continuing Education with the Lutheran Church there. We might even stay around a while longer. We have invitations from Malaysia and Sumatra—where there ARE Lutherans—and just this week one concerning Cambodia—where there aren't! Twenty of you dear colleagues have already channelled contributions into this misision venture. They total \$2300 which suffices for our 2 roundtrip airfares. Other angels are helping with some of the other costs involved. We are grateful for all our partners. EHS

***Martin E. Marty. MARTIN LUTHER
(New York: Viking Penguin, 2004),***

199 pages. \$19.95.

Martin Marty sets out on an enormous enterprise in his new biography of Martin Luther, as anyone who has seen the recent "Luther" movie can attest. How does one do a satisfactory biography of Luther within the space allotted? The movie, "Luther," was roundly criticized, among other things, for its patchy coverage of a life. Yet, what is one to do with the massive material surrounding Luther in the span of a two hour film?

Marty's Martin Luther could have easily suffered from the same fate because of the constraints of the Penguin Lives series to which this volume is now added. Joining a list of Lives books which includes biographies of Crazy Horse, Rosa Parks, Herman Melville, Joan of Arc, Abraham Lincoln, Elvis Presley, and Robert E. Lee, to name a few, the series is obviously meant to provide a diverse, high end introduction to interesting lives which have shaped or stirred. For 199 pages in a compressed but beautifully bound book, complete with the famous Lucas Cranach portrait of the reformer on the cover, Marty pulls it off, perhaps, as only Martin Marty can. The prose is tight and even, compressing in a sentence what lesser writers take a paragraph to say. As one friend of Marty's once quipped to me about listening to a Marty presentation, "He talks faster than I can think," so, in vintage Marty style, no written word goes to waste. It is not, despite its size, a quick read but the prize is a complete and clear biography in the space of less than 200 pages. It is an incredible feat.

The book's challenge is further compounded in that Marty is writing this volume as an eminent historian for an educated, secular audience. While his love for Luther, especially toward the book's end, shines through unmistakably, it is a fair and even-handed account. There are no free passes for the reformer,

nor for his critics. Marty weaves theology and history, Luther story and larger meanings together making historical judgments to give us a coherent biography that is enormously worth the price of admission. In Marty's own words:

"Thanks to his gift for pithy and salty expression and his passion for transgressing linguistic and social boundaries, Martin Luther makes it possible for a biographer with some ease to invite into his world people who might, in the normal course of things, stand outside it. It is the biographer's task to make them feel sufficiently at home in that world that they can make judgments about the story and sufficiently ill at ease in that the telling can provoke them into fresh thinking" (pp. xiv-xv).

The volume is written chronologically, an "old way" of doing biography, apparently, but now seeing a return among historians. Because that is so, one can see the reformer's life unfold, mature, be taken up by events, and, to some degree, grow cold. I decided to tackle the book by wearing less a historian's set of lenses than a theologian's (because that is who I am). In historical judgments, and there are (as one might expect) many, I found myself always deferring to Marty who makes them with ease. For example, after the Leipzig debate, "Opinions about the outcome depended on the eye of the beholder. Most Leipzigers thought Eck had triumphed, while Wittenbergers deemed that, while scarred by some of Eck's sallies, Luther was the winner" (p. 47). Of course, Lutherans have often heard another version but our party line histories have not always been the most reliable.

Marty divides his biography into four periods in the life of the reformer: 1483-1519 ("The Hunger for Certainty"), 1520-1525 ("Defining the Life of Faith"), 1525-1530 ("Living the Faith"), 1530-1546 ("The Heart Grown Cold, the Faith More Certain").

In the first period Luther's beginning years and the medieval penitential system in which Luther wrestled are interpreted in ways very familiar to Lutheran types and very adequately for the general reader. One wonders among Roman Catholics if the story gets told the same way. Marty diagnoses Luther's core dilemma with more meat than just the usual "quest for a gracious God" against the backdrop of medieval contrition as Luther made contrition "complex," seeing how "being sorry could mean being self-centered":

"Through contrition a person could seek advantage by proving to God that he could cooperate in the steps he climbed to please God. Luther instead began a lifelong search for ways in which humans could experience the love of God without using God, without turning God into a convenience" (p. 15).

Marty's way of saying why Luther found no solace in Staupitz's efforts to pastor him, that his church only provided ways for seeking to manipulate God thus offering Luther no certainty, has a certain good ring to it (I had never thought of it quite that way before) and would be amply enforced by Luther's later great Large Catechism line on the First Commandment: "faith makes both God and an idol" (or, as Marty would have it, "the creator of the Deity," p. 39).

Crossings Community followers will be pleased that Marty walks through the progression of spelling out that core dilemma for Luther in a way that would remind one of "initial, advanced and final" diagnostic talk, taking us to the realization that coram deo, "before God," humankind essentially has a God-sized problem in need of a God-sized solution. You'll have to read the volume to see how Marty does it. Ultimately, though, Marty's portrayal leaves us with what the reformer's "Anfechtungen" were all about, that is, the collision of the hidden God experienced in seeming arbitrariness and uncertainty

and the revealed God seen in weakness in Christ.

The flip side, of course, is the question, does Marty give his reader the real thing in Luther's prognostic side?

Here is where I find Marty's account of Luther's theology deficient. While there are many familiar accents and themes in Luther's own attempts to find a God-sized solution: connecting faith with righteousness (pp. 37ff), God showing us God's "backside" ala the Heidelberg Disputation (Thesis 20), pp. 40ff., the themes of Luther's earlier years, missing in action in Marty's account, is Luther's deepest Christology on not just that a sinner's sins are Christ's (Marty covers that amply later) but how and why a sinner's sins are Christ's as Christ defeats the law. More on this later as we notice how one of Luther's great works of 1531, his later lectures on Galatians, is missing. That and noticeably absent is the great theme of the proper distinction between law and gospel, so key to understanding Luther's mature theology. The reformer ultimately comes up with a God-sized solution to the dilemma. The question is, does Marty faithfully explicate it?

The second period of "Defining the Life of Faith" begins with the issuing of the Papal bull (June, 1520). As Marty describes the scene, the issue for the reformer and those grown excited about him was, "he had to describe how they related to each other and to Christ" (p. 57). That, indeed, was the question to a tee and Marty draws from Luther's answers in the reformer's three treatises of that year (Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and The Freedom of the Christian). Here the author picks up clearly not only Luther's unfolding thinking about the Mass (pp. 61ff.) but also the "happy exchange" language of Luther's radical understanding of the Christian gospel (pp. 65ff.). "In this exchange Christ changes places with sinners, something

that Luther agreed the heart can only grasp in faith" (p. 65). Yet, here there is a line that has been part of a debate on Luther's theology ever since regarding the place of the law which may be more Marty than Luther, "But following the law of God now became a part of the free believer's expression of faith" (p. 66). There are heavyweight assessors of Luther's thinking (e.g., Werner Elert) who would disagree with Marty's judgment call which the author himself even later contradicts:

"In the matter of being declared just, the law of God always and only accused sinners, which meant it judged everyone in the church" (p. 79).

Worms, the monumental work of Luther in the Wartburg, and the unfolding two kingdoms distinction with all the contextual tensions are among the themes discussed brilliantly in this section, the author doing a superb job of unpacking the dynamics surrounding the Peasant's Revolt in Luther's emerging thinking. Earlier assessors such as Paul Althaus (*The Ethics of Martin Luther*) would most likely concur.

The third period of "Living the Faith" begins with Katie. It is interesting that Marty is attentive to the things that interest in the context of modern life and who better than Luther to grab us with issues of sexuality and the church? "Luther, never shy, was almost tasteless when he brought talk of marital intimacies into the open" (p. 106). Yet, equally true, as later studies such as Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks reveal (*Luther on Women, Cambridge, 2003*), "As much as he honored wives, he still did little to counter the inherited understanding that the woman was subordinate to the man..." (p. 108). Here Marty dives into the "apparent contradictions" (p. 117) of all church life and secular order. The reformer can discuss the full egalitarian meaning of baptism and yet say "...all Christians are priests, but not all are pastors" (p. 117). It is a good

discussion and Marty treats his reader to the reality which any seminary trained pastor knows, doused with the reality of his/her first real parish. "Luther was often dismayed by the visitation reports" (p. 119). Experienced parish pastors, at least, can laugh and nod as Marty makes it all come alive when Luther encountered reality in these years.

The chapter also notes the Lutheran ambivalence on the law:

"While Melanchthon favored also a third use of the law, Luther discouraged it. This third use was to be pedagogical, as it would provide a guide or a rule for reborn believers. This Luther thought unnecessary..." (p.124).

What is missing in the chapter is Luther's understanding of the dialectic of law and gospel which would have added considerably to why Luther resisted a third use of the law for the Christian. It might have added also to Marty's discussion of the great debate between Erasmus and Luther over *The Bondage of the Will* (pp. 127 ff.).

The final period for Marty on Luther is entitled "The Heart Grown Cold, the Faith More Certain." It's a gem. This chapter alone is worth the price of admission. It works with a Luther who:

"Remaining pastoral, he identified with and showed empathy to faithful communicants who suffered 'Anfechtungen' with him, but his hopes now focused on the end of life and the end of the world" (p. 145).

Here again, in Luther's dispute with Agricola and the antinomians, who, in Marty's assessment, took a good thing (Luther's burden) to the extreme and eliminated the law, "Luther did have answers to such questions, but his reliance on the theme of grace and faith made active in love was not easy

to articulate..." (p. 146), the author shows why the theme of the law continued to vex. The Zwinglians, too, are here, whose assault on the real presence, despite seeking Luther's affections, were "snubbed and marginal" (p. 147). Luther's relationship with Calvin is largely absent and that is a disappointment in the book. The reformer saw in his legacy factions that "were going their separate ways" (p. 147). In it all, Marty draws us into a movement which Luther had started but soon became one out of his control. The attempt to clarify that movement, at Augsburg, receives short notice, and, perhaps, for good justification. "The relatively mild tenor of the Augsburg Confession, a feature that may have resulted from the fact that Luther was not its author, surprised many" (p. 155).

This chapter also provides some much needed grist for reassessing Luther in the context of Jewish-Christian dialog. There is, of course, little excuse for the later Luther's well known and tragically misused views. Yet, for the widely beloved and respected author, there is a fresh appeal to contextualize the reformer's voice. Marty lifts up and assesses Luther's comments in *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* and notes how the reformer's major concern was for conversion (p. 170). Then later Marty notes about *The Jews and Their Lies* that Luther never conceded the "we" in the crucifixion of Christ (p. 171). To notice these with other harsher opinions, Eck's and Erasmus' are mentioned, the author "does not exonerate Luther so much as provide a framework for approaching him" (p. 175).

Would that in this section Marty might amplify what he does, in fact, identify as "the one teaching labeled justification" (p. 175). "The teaching" is apparent here and there but we never learn exactly why Luther claimed it as the "nonnegotiable teaching" (p. 175). It was nice to hear that Luther liked to treat the gospel "epigrammatically" (p. 177): "Sinners are

lovely because they are loved; they are not loved because they are lovely" (p. 177). But nowhere does Marty's reader get treated to the deeper Luther Christology of the period which so informed and shaped, such as, "This was a truly remarkable duel, when the Law, a creature, came into conflict with the Creator...Here the Law, which once condemned and killed all men, has nothing with which to defend or cleanse itself. Therefore it is condemned and killed in turn, so that it loses its jurisdiction not only over Christ—whom it attacked and killed without any right anyway—but also over all who believe in Him" (see LW 26, 369-371 for the full text).

Marty's "Afterword" assessment by which many are going to know Luther in the new millennium is grand. We are to know Luther as a liberator toward a new age, a boundary breaker, a spawner of a community of people of faith which still struggles to know what "Lutheran" means, but whatever it means, it will have been shaped by a beggar's faith (amply and beautifully discussed at the end of the book) who were guided by a reformer who said "'sin boldly' and did" (p. 194).

The volume is marred by liberal quotes from Luther for which there is never a footnote. Only eminent historians, I suppose, can get away with that but we are at a loss when we ask from where Luther's voice can be further found. The book, on the other hand, is beautifully enhanced by two superb maps by the author's son and by a fairly decent bibliography.

The Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of the University of Chicago has given the world a brilliant biographical read on Luther. I wouldn't hesitate to suggest it for a moment to the lady at the door who asked (as one did the other Sunday), "Is there a good book on Luther?"

Yes there is.

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