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The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther

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[1] In the series of 'Cambridge Companions to Religion', in which major topics and key figures in theology are introduced to non-specialists, this volume on Martin Luther was published recently. It contains eighteen chapters which together present an overview of all the major aspects of Luther's life, his work and the ways in which his ideas influenced the world until today. The chapters are written by international specialists, both historians and systematic theologians. Fourteen authors are from the United States, one from the United Kingdom, and three from Germany. When one thinks of the fact that much of the important research on Luther still comes from Germany and Scandinavia, more authors from Europe should have contributed to this collection of essays.

[2] The book is divided into four parts, which respectively deal with Luther's life and context, his work, his influence in history and his significance today. All chapters are an introduction to the field they deal with, and for this reason the book will be particularly helpful to those who have little or no knowledge of Luther's life and work. The book is completed by an index and a bibliography, which also contains the most important websites on Luther.

[3] Disturbing are the repetitions among the various contributions. Although these can hardly be completely eliminated in a work written by so many authors, the number of reiterations should have been diminished. Why, for example, should Luther's treatment of the Jews be noticed three times, if none of these add something to the other? (p. 57, 202-203, 248) Type-errors are almost completely absent, but some should have been noticed before publication, like this one: the title of one of Obermann's books on Luther is reported as *Luther: God Between Man and the Devil*, instead of *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (p. 250)!

[4] To three of the chapters I would like to draw special attention. The first is Oswald Bayer's treatment of 'Luther as an interpreter of Holy Scripture' (ch. 5). Bayer, Professor of Systematic Theology in the Evangelical Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen and president of the 'Lutherakademie Ratzeburg', recently published a magnificent monograph on Luther's theology (*Martin Luthers Theologie*, Tübingen 2003). The title of this monograph unfortunately is not listed yet in the bibliography of this Companion. However, the Companion contains Bayer's aforementioned chapter on Luther's interpretation of Scripture.

According to Bayer, Luther experiences 'the Bible as mirror of the world' (73). You can find in the Bible 'yourself and the true *gnothi seauton*, as well as God himself and all creatures' (80). Experience of God's word is closely connected to the experience of the world: 'God rules the world with his reliable and loving word. Whoever shuts himself off to this word, for him heart, mouth and hand are closed. The entire world becomes too narrow for him. He experiences anxiety and suffers God's wrath.' (81)

[5] Luther's view on the Word is described as the insight that the word is 'not a sign of a meaning, but the reality itself that affects – that kills and makes alive' (75). 'That the linguistic sign is itself the reality, that it represents not an absent but a present reality, was Luther's great hermeneutical discovery, his "Reformation Discovery" in the strict sense.' (76) That the word of God is a promise of eternal community with God, and that one can rely on this promise, even hold it up to God, is the experience that renews Luther's life. 'The liberation that Luther came to share was not first of all from earthly authorities and institutions, not even the restricting rites of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, including that of the papacy, but it was the forgiveness of sins occurring unambiguously in the word of absolution as a pronouncement of eternal salvation.' (78)

[6] Bayer writes on Luther not as an outsider, but as an insider; as someone who stands not as a stranger over against Luther's experience of the world and the Word, but as someone who recognizes Luther's insights as deepening his experiences of himself, the word and the world. This functions as a hermeneutical key that helps to understand Luther on a deeper level and gives this article a special draught.

[7] The second essay to be dealt with is Markus Wriedt's paper on 'Luther's theology' (ch. 6). Wriedt, Research Professor at the Institut für Europäische Geschichte of the University of Mainz, chooses a historical way of dealing with Luther's theology. He notices that Luther 'was not a systematic theologian' and that his theology 'rather grew out of a concrete situation.' (87) From this he draws the conclusion that we should not try to give a systematic overview of Luther's theological thinking, but rather search for a principle that 'unifies this multitude of disparate and even contradictory statements' (88). Wriedt finds the principle in Luther's Reformation Discovery. The Reformation Discovery leads to Luther's 'emphasis on the free, absolute sovereignty of God and his merciful acts of grace toward creatures full of sin and separated from him. Theological dispute always crops up when one of these two fundamental statements is narrowed down or leveled out.' (90–91) After describing this Discovery, Wriedt presents 'some typical historical situations, in which Luther proves his Reformation Discovery using the form of theological statements and doctrines.' (88) The conclusion is that Luther's theology can be defined as a conflict-aware (assertoric) theology (111).

[8] In my view, it is an advantage of Wriedt's method that Luther's theology is not separated from its historical context and development. But whereas Luther's theology was developed in a concrete situation, a description of Luther's theology should also make clear that its meaning transcends the historical situation. It

should not only describe the relation of this theology to history, but also its relation to truth. A more systematic way of describing Luther's theology, as for example Bayer does in his monograph on Luther's theology, is in this respect more fruitful. Although Luther was in many respects not a systematic theologian and a systematic description of his work is necessarily one-sided, we should not let the systematic description be swallowed up by the historical one.

^[9] The last essay I want to ask attention for is Robert W. Jenson's article on 'Luther's contemporary theological significance' (ch. 17). Jenson describes which parts of Luther's theology, according to him, are likely to further the present theological enterprise. He does not accept the division in the Western church that originated in the Reformation, but wants to do theology from the ecumenical imperative. The other task for theology that differs from Luther's context is doing theology in a context in which the Christian structures of plausibility are lost. The aspects of Luther's theology that we should not lose in this ecumenical and secular context are according to Jenson not the justification by faith or the *sola gratia*, but the *communicatio idiomatum* (274–278), Luther's theology of the *deus absconditus* (278–281), the *theosis* (281–284) and the *perspicuitas Scripturae* (284–286). On all these points Jenson criticizes contemporary Western theology and presents the new perspectives a fresh reading of Luther offer. 'If we could relearn from Luther [...] who knows what might again happen?' (286) At the end of this article the reader is indeed inspired to search for a renewal of theology and the church by listening to Luther again.

^[10] Summing up: this volume provides an up to date and accessible introduction to Martin Luther. It is especially helpful to undergraduates who come to the life and work of the great Protestant reformer for the first time.