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BOOK REVIEWS

LUTHER: MAN BETWEEN GOD AND THE DEVIL

Heiko A. Oberman

New Haven: Yale University Press (1989).

380 pages, cloth, \$29.95.

If James Kittelson has given us the best readable and accessible introduction to Luther's life, then the next step up in the biographical journey must include this English translation of the original German volume, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. Luther scholar Heiko Oberman, now professor of Medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation History at the University of Arizona, tackles his subject from the standpoint of Luther's conflict with Satan, whom Luther considered to be locked in continual conflict with God and His people. Here one of the world's most highly respected Luther scholars provides what most think is the definitive single-volume treatment of Martin Luther.

Oberman, the author of numerous books, including *The Dawn of the Reformation*, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, *The Impact of the Reformation*, and *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, is a distinguished Reformation scholar who has a profound knowledge of medieval scholastic thought. This knowledge allows Oberman to range across a number of important fields of study while providing, at the same time, a closely reasoned biographical account of Luther's life and times.

Oberman begins with the background of the political and social setting at the turn of the sixteenth century. He

gives a rather brief account of the young Luther, describing his relationship with his parents and his unique intellectual growth. After showing how Luther's theology emerged out of early struggles Oberman helpfully unpacks the controversies within the new movement begun in the second decade of the century. Controversies, which played such an important part in the true story, are accurately opened and addressed.

What makes this book intriguing, and at the same time unusual, is how the author traces Luther's struggle to his opposition of the Devil. He insists that Luther was acutely aware of Satan. Oberman believes, therefore, that the Devil "provides the key to understanding this man at once creative and crude, who railed bitterly against popes, Turks, and Jews as instruments of the Devil" (dust jacket). The same description concludes that Luther ". . . brought hope and consolation by emphasizing the need for people to have faith in God's mercy and to perform acts of righteousness—with the aim not of winning favor with God but of improving the world."

Oberman demonstrates that the times were such that belief in the Devil was commonplace. He then develops his unique thesis by showing that whether it was Luther's rebellion against the church or his exhortations against the wiles of the enemy, it must all be understood by the belief that Luther understood himself to be locked in a profound conflict with Satan himself. In only eleven chapters, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* has three major sections. The first is titled "The Longed-for Reformation." Here Oberman sets the stage well by looking at pre-Reformation influences, and by telling the story of Luther's family and background. The middle section is appropriately titled "The Unexpected Reformation." I found the material dealing with Luther's embracing nominalism important for understanding how Luther later arrived at *sola fide*. "With

Augustine Against Aristotle" is also important in the same way. To miss the Augustinian influence upon Luther's thought is to miss the very key to his development. Finally, in section three, Oberman sees the story as "The Reformation in Peril." Here he unpacks the numerous controversies that Luther engaged in once the new Reformation movement had broken free of the medieval church and its philosophical doctrinal system.

Whereas Kittelson tells the story of Luther in more readable detail, interacting with various biographical questions of immense importance, Oberman reads Luther with his theme continually before him. Oberman is more controversially interpretive than James Kittelson's treatment of Luther, but he is just as valuable in his own way. Though at times I do not follow Oberman's minor trails I personally found his thesis convincing. After you read Kittelson try Oberman.

EDITOR

CONFESSING THE FAITH: REFORMERS DEFINE THE CHURCH, 1530-1580

Robert Kolb

St. Louis: Concordia (1991).

181 pages, paper, \$14.95.

Kolb, a respected Lutheran historian, provides in *Confessing the Faith* one of the most illuminating investigations we have to date of what it really meant for Lutherans to confess faith in Christ in the sixteenth century.

Beginning with the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530 Kolb shows both the impact and influence this confessional effort had upon the church. He demonstrates that Luther was consummately confessional and that the need for a *confessing* faith would only grow more obvious as the Reformers sought to define and direct the work of the visi-

ble church. He takes the reader through the tumultuous years leading up to the *Formula of Concord* (1577) and the *Book of Concord* (1580).

Kolb's treatment of the differences between Luther and Melancthon is worth the price of the book. Here he allows the reader to get a glimpse of the true positions of both men, all the time showing how their actions must be understood by their respective positions; i.e., theology does prompt action.

But why do confessions really matter? Don't they just provide a basis for further division? Why should a church, or denomination, have confessional standards? Kolb's answer to these kinds of questions, which are very modern in terms of reforming the church in our time in history, are powerfully clear and filled with insightful wisdom for moderns, especially if they do not come from confessional traditions.

This book is a valuable historical study. But it is much more. It is an articulate and readable primer on the act of "confessing the faith," especially for modern Christians in an American context. This valuable little book should be read by pastors and students alike. It will not only give you historical perspective but modern reflection upon a subject well worth the time of busy ministers.

EDITOR

LUTHER THE REFORMER: THE STORY OF THE MAN AND HIS CAREER

James M. Kittelson
Minneapolis: Augsburg (1986).
334 pages, paper, \$15.99.

John M. Todd, a Luther biographer, wrote in 1982, the year before the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's

birth, that "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." I have been told that this is not exactly true, since some claim that next to Christ more is in print about Abraham Lincoln than any other historical figure. But however you calculate these interesting numbers the simple fact is this—Martin Luther has commanded a great deal of biographical interest over the past 500 years. And since 1983 a plethora of new Luther material has been added to the ever growing list. One such volume is *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*.

So, you are entitled to ask, "Why should I bother with another biographical account of Luther's life?" The famous Reformation scholar, Lewis W. Spitz, writes of James Kittelson's biographical treatment of Martin Luther, "[This is] The best complete biography of Luther for our times." I agree. Kittelson, a professor of history at Ohio State University, has authored numerous books and articles on Reformation history and has made a lifetime study of the life and work of Luther. The fruit of Kittelson's prodigious labor provides for the modern reader the very best overview of Luther, both the man and his message, available in English.

In the Preface Kittelson writes:

People still find themselves taking sides on the question of Luther. No matter what he really said or did, the sheer bulk of his writings (more than 100 quarto volumes in its modern edition) contains plenty of grist for everyone's mill. Consequently a bewildering variety of well-known people have claimed him as their own, ranging from both orthodox and pietist Lutheran theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries to the Wesley brothers, to Francis Bacon, Handel, and Bach, and including both Nazi propagandists such as Josef

Goebbels and a martyr under Fascism such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (13-14).

So why an entirely new biography, Kittelson asks? And why an attempt to replace the ever popular Roland Bainton classic, *Here I Stand*? Kittelson answers: (1) Luther research has greatly advanced over the past thirty years or so. He notes that since Bainton wrote in the 1950s "... a generation of research makes it possible to go beyond Bainton's brilliant guesses and trace the genesis of Luther the reformer with great precision" (14). (2) Historians of the Reformation have been doing far more than simply adding one piece after another to the jigsaw puzzle of the young Luther. Kittelson accurately notes this important point: "Scholars no longer content themselves with studying Luther's formal theology, but also examine the theological and religious traditions in which he was trained, the actual religious practices of his time, and the conditions of daily life in the 16th century" (14). (3) The ecumenical movement has allowed serious thought about Luther to advance. Why? Friends of Luther do not feel as strongly compelled to justify all of his actions, while foes have taken a better measure of the man at the same time (e.g., the volumes by Roman Catholic scholars John Todd and Daniel Oliver, etc.). (4) Earlier general biographies tend to trace Luther's career until 1521 and the rise of the Reformation itself. Often, at this point, the story falls off and the work loses its breadth and carefulness. In doing so, as Kittelson notes, they leave out some of the more important parts of the story; e.g., the Peasants' War, the fierce debate with Desiderius Erasmus over the bondage of the will, Luther's marriage to Katie, and even the famous Diet of Augsburg. Even recent serious studies which have dealt with these later years often give the impression that Luther's life was not of one piece. But now this false impression is corrected by one well-writ-

ten, clear and easily accessible volume.

With all the positive contributions to be gained from the massive number of modern studies of Luther there are significant difficulties to be encountered as well. If Luther is interpreted from an economic perspective (e.g., by Marxist historians), or as a great social figure in the transition to the modern era, or as a major political spokesman for the modern European way, something is missed. Kittelson notes:

Taken together, such studies have the virtue of making it possible as never before to see that Luther was very much subject to the economic, social, religious, poetical, and theological conditions of the times in which he lived. By the same token, their overriding concern for the forest inclines them to ignore the mighty oak in its midst. Luther is seen as no more than one factor in the general period under investigation. He is viewed as having been overwhelmed by the tides of impersonal historical change. Each of these three ways of looking at Luther has serious limitations. . . . The life of Luther exhibited two characteristics, and a biographer must treat them both. In the first place, this man had a public career that transcended its own time and still draws attention today. Second, Luther was someone who had an accessible personality; he was a human being who lived in a particular place and at a particular time (17).

So what we have, in Kittelson's treatment, is a readable, historically sensitive, fully biographical treatment of Luther's entire life with a careful recognition of the times in which Luther actually lived and the humanity with which he dealt every day.

For more than twenty-five years I have commended the aforementioned classic biography of Martin Luther, *Here I Stand*, by the late Roland Bainton. I still think Bainton was

both a fine scholar and a clear writer. Do not, by all means, throw away Bainton. But if you have to pick one biography to understand the massive contribution of the man Martin Luther, buy Kittelson. He will not disappoint you, even if you have studied Luther for some years.

EDITOR

THE CLINTON ENIGMA: A FOUR-AND-A-HALF-MINUTE SPEECH REVEALS THIS PRESIDENT'S ENTIRE LIFE

David Maraniss

New York: Simon & Schuster (1998).

111 pages, cloth, \$17.00.

In the short space of 111 pages, and twenty-one crisply written chapters, David Maraniss, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton*, provides an amazing look into the life and struggles of President William Jefferson Clinton. Written in only a few days, this book is based upon President Clinton's famous four-and-a-half-minute speech to the nation on the evening of August 17, 1998, after he had spent the day giving his now famous testimony regarding the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

Maraniss, a writer-at-large on the national staff of the *Washington Post*, is eminently fair in this insightful book. He is regarded by his peers as the nation's leading authority on Bill Clinton. I believe his two books on the president demonstrate why this opinion is widely held within the beltway of the nation's Capitol.

On the night of August 17, as Clinton spoke, Maraniss was sitting in a darkened studio in New York. He was struck by the fact that what he heard in those few minutes was exactly what he had heard from Bill Clinton over and over again during several long interviews. All of the contradicto-

ry qualities of the man's tumultuous life passed before Maraniss as he soberly pondered exactly what he heard the president saying to the people of America. Maraniss decided to dissect Mr. Clinton's speech as a revelation of his life. In doing so he offers perhaps the best window into the life and soul of Bill Clinton that, perhaps, we will ever get.

The dust jacket description of Maraniss' excellent book succinctly gives us his thesis:

Alternatively reckless and cautious, relying on family and friends to protect him, affirming his faith in God and then turning to polls to tell him what the public would tolerate, communicating with the public over the heads of pundits and professionals, transforming this personal trauma into a political cause by attacking his and his wife's enemies, asking us all to put his troubles behind us, Clinton combined all his weakness and strengths in that one brief address.

Maraniss explains the troubled childhood of young Clinton with deep sensitivity. He explains the obvious with great dignity—e.g., Clinton's father dying before the future president was born, his adoptive father not even being in the home when young Bill's name was legally changed to Clinton, and this same adoptive father, who so influenced Bill, an alcoholic who forced Bill to stand up to his violent rages while still just a teen. What I found particularly interesting was the description of how much Clinton has been haunted by the short life of both his natural and adoptive fathers. Maraniss argues that this reality is often spoken of by Clinton in terms of living his life in a hurry since he may not be given three score and ten years in which to live. Clinton once noted to Maraniss, "Because I grew up sort of subconsciously on his timetable, I never knew how much time I would have. It gave me an urgent sense to do everything I could in my life as quickly as I could" (105). For

some years Clinton conducted an annual ritual of visiting W. J. Blythe's gravesite in Hope, Arkansas. As he gazed at the tombstone of William Jefferson Blythe, his biological father whom he never met and who died at age twenty-eight (and his grandfather, who died at fifty-six and who rests beside Clinton's father), the young Clinton later said that he became "... acutely aware that you never know how much time you have." He even once wrote a letter to a friend, after such a cemetery visit, in which he said the visit was "a good reminder that I have a lot of living to do for two other fine fellows who never got close to the average life span. . . ." Clinton concluded, in the same letter, "If I die tomorrow I guess I'd feel in a way that I've lived a long time—and a full time. But should I live to be old I know I'll feel as if I just started on this journey of life and hardly be ready to leave." Clinton took one book on his honeymoon, *The Denial of Death*, by philosopher Ernest Becker. This is clearly a man in a hurry who wants to accomplish something great, yet senses that he might not. This background helps me give context to many of the strange and contradictory actions of the president.

To me it is even more important to recognize that Bill Clinton is the first president in our nation's history to come from the "boomer generation" (i.e., that abnormally large segment of modern American society which was born between 1945 and 1963 and which has shaped the whole direction of the nation and its future). As a "boomer" Mr. Clinton has a different feel for life, a different outlook on the self and the world. What really matters to Bill Clinton escapes many older people because they do not understand the "boomer" generation and its narcissism. The theme song of Clinton's first presidential campaign (and remember that music to the "boomer generation" is part and parcel of its very ethos) was Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop (Thinking About Tomorrow)." No accident here. As

Maraniss writes: "Clinton's entire life has been a rush to tomorrow, away from yesterday and today." Influenced during his undergraduate days at Georgetown University Clinton has always insisted on "future preference" as a theme for his life and efforts. This outlook was one learned in the 1960s by a generation of thoughtful, serious, spoiled and reactionary young people. Boomers developed a new outlook about life, about what really matters, about values and faith, and about themselves. Clinton, a consummate boomer, who knows how to appeal to fellow boomers of his generation ("I *feel* your pain"), soon began to develop policies which looked toward the future, e.g., civil rights, Social Security, education, etc. This emphasis in Clinton, Maraniss suggests, is a key to understanding his potential greatness. At the same time it is a key to understanding his recklessness which will undoubtedly tarnish his legacy as a leader. Maraniss concludes, sadly, that

... to Clinton, future preference became more than that; it gave him, when in distorted form, the final defining aspect of his self-deluding character. Blocking out, denying difficult truths, creating his own sense of reality, compartmentalizing his life, using semantic nuances to explain his behavior, relying on his wife and aides to protect him—finally, always, pushing the past and the present away, moving on to the future, to what's next (105).

Like so many boomers Clinton has lost his moral moorings. Life is precious, valuable, and good, to be sure. But feelings often take precedence over substance with boomers. And nowhere is this more true than in religious faith and practice. Here again Clinton is the consummate boomer.

In his speech to the nation Clinton, as he always does in important moments, invoked God. He referred to God,

on this particular occasion, as "Our God." By this, Maraniss notes, Clinton was turning again, along with his amazing wife Hillary, to his faith. (The night before this speech Clinton had prayed with Rev. Jesse Jackson, the social activist minister, and prayed the words of Psalm 51. And as we now know Clinton later attended a prayer breakfast in which he sought the prayers and counsel of famous evangelicals such as Tony Campolo and Gordon MacDonald.) But what of the faith of the Clintons?

I have elsewhere written that one cannot understand the present interaction and engagement of modern life by evangelicals without understanding that Bill Clinton is an evangelical.

First, consider Hillary Clinton, the United Methodist. One of her ministers has referred to the First Lady as "a model of Methodism." Why? Because she consistently mixes social reform with a kind of Methodist piety. She once explained that she was a Methodist because John Wesley "... preached a gospel of social justice, demanding as determinedly as ever that society do right by all its people. But he also preached a gospel of personal responsibility, asking every man and woman to take responsibility for their own lives" (101). In her speeches on Methodism, Hillary often quotes John Wesley. Her own minister writes that "... the goal of her life is to restore what has been lost, to find oneness with God, and until we find this we are lonely" (101). Thus, as the president's troubles increased during their years in Washington, Mrs. Clinton embarked upon an even greater search for "what had been lost." She has turned to New Age spiritualists and is known to carry religious readings in her purse, reading them in times of trial. Interestingly, her favorite reading is from a source frequently quoted by modern evangelicals, Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen. It deals with the parable of the Prodigal Son and what he refers to as "the discipline of gratitude." Hillary

relates that this has helped her through trying times.

But what about Bill, the Southern Baptist in good standing and full communion with a Bible-preaching church? Maraniss suggests that for Bill, the prodigal son, his faith offers more than social service and gratitude. At age nine Clinton began attending church, carrying his leather-bound Bible with him. The pastor, Rev. Dexter Blevins, has said that young Clinton was at church not just Sunday mornings, but "every time the door opened." Clinton related to Maraniss himself, in 1992, that, "It was moral instruction . . . trying to get closer to being a good person and understanding what life was all about. I really looked forward to it every Sunday morning, getting dressed up and walking that mile or so alone" (101-102).

Moving to Little Rock, as governor of the state, Bill Clinton continued in fellowship with a local Southern Baptist church by joining Immanuel Baptist Church, a congregation of 4,000-plus members, pastored for many years by the highly regarded Dr. W. O. Vaught. (I have cousins who have been members of this same church.) Here Clinton sang second tenor in the choir where, as Mary Francis Vaught, the late pastor's wife, notes, "He sang as big as anything." (Who can not remember Clinton singing "Amazing Grace," and five verses from memory at that, at his second inaugural?)

What kind of ministry did W. O. Vaught have in Little Rock and on Governor Clinton's life? Well, Vaught was an intellectual man, a sincere conservative, who had a working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. I am told, by friends who know, that he faithfully preached the biblical text with considerable effect. It was Vaught who counseled Clinton on several important occasions. And it is this church where Clinton remains a communicant member until this day, though Vaught died in 1989.

It should also be noted that this president has had per-

haps more private prayer and personal time with evangelical leadership than any of our long line of very religious presidents in the last half of this century. It is a known fact that Bill Clinton meets, or has met, regularly with megachurch pastor Bill Hybels, among others, for several years. These times have included devotional counsel, intercessory prayer and discussion of the precise meaning of biblical texts, if those who been present are believed.

What then are we to make of President Clinton's faith? Exactly this: Whereas he understands the gospel as a message for prodigals *and* whereas he understands religious faith as a "private" matter, he is definitely a card-carrying evangelical. But here is the rub. What does all this have to do with the kind of faith we read about in the New Testament? The kind of faith that forms, and informs, character? The kind of faith that results in the "obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26)?

The problem for contemporary evangelicals, at this point, is critical. If they continue to see this president as outside the pale of their kind of churches and style of Christianity then they will continue to miss the irony of this man and this moment in history. Here is a man who clearly considers himself a Bible-believing Christian. Here is a man who prays with our leaders, counsels with the authors of our best-selling books, and sings our songs, with great emotion, from his heart. Yet here is a life so obviously unformed and unaffected by the true religion of the Bible. Why, I ask, can we not see that this president, sadly, is a "baby-boomer" illustration of what has happened to most evangelical churches over the last four decades? Bill Clinton, if we get a correct view of our evangelical movement over these decades, *is us*. We may not like him, and we do find his actions disgusting, but there is not much real difference between the faith of this man and the faith of many evangelicals in America.

Both political friends and foes alike should read David Maraniss' intriguing little book before they conclude they clearly understand the complex character of William Jefferson Clinton. It might actually cause us to better understand some of the very people who sit in the pews of most of our churches!

EDITOR