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Book review

Martin Luther and the German Reformation

Rob Sorensen

New York: Anthem Press, 2016

Imagine Rob Sorensen walking into a classroom and surprising his students with a pop quiz: “How many theses did German reformer Martin Luther nail to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg 500 years ago?”, Sorensen might ask.

Answer: Perhaps none.

While most people peg the number at ninety five, Sorensen raises the less-familiar hypothesis that Luther’s call to reform Roman Catholic doctrine first appeared in a private letter – not a public salvo.

Although a less dramatic tale, it’s one Sorensen tells in *Martin Luther and the German Reformation* published last year (2016) as part of Anthem Perspectives in History series. For those who relish twists on conventional wisdom, Sorensen reveals the tasty nugget on page twenty-six of his slim, yet impressive, volume. It’s impressive because Sorensen achieves much in just 108 pages (excluding endnotes, bibliography and index).

Not to be confused with Robert Sorensen, associate professor of theology and Greek at Concordia University Chicago, the author of this slim book teaches history and western civilization at a college-prep school in Redmond, Washington.

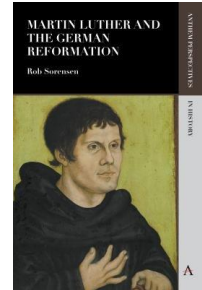
With the approach of the 500th anniversary of Luther’s purported nailing of ninety five theses, Sorensen provides – organized in numbered sections, as in a dissertation – historical context; explanations of the significant theological differences that Luther introduced; and a brief assessment about the German Reformation’s unquantifiable effect on western society historically and today.

For example, for readers who wonder why a considerable swath of Europe adopted Luther’s theological ideas after other reformers failed, Sorensen outlines the political power struggles within the Holy Roman Empire which led Frederick the Wise of Saxony, prince and elector, to become Luther’s chief protector. In part, Luther was able to refine and propagate his reforms in relative safety.

Sorensen also explains the essential differences between entrenched theologies in the sixteenth-century century versus Luther’s innovative thoughts on the authority of Scripture; authority of political rulers; the sacraments; the priesthood of all believers and, most significantly, the notion of justification by faith alone.

And Sorensen notes scholars often argue that Luther may have unintentionally promoted sovereignty of the individual, at the expense of institutional (church) authority, that continues into our own age. Sorensen cites Derek Wilson’s biography on Luther *Out of the Storm* (2007), suggesting that Luther provided “oxygen to human individualism.” (p. 93 in Sorensen; p. 344 in Wilson).

Of course, Sorensen’s overview has its drawbacks. For some, the flaws will be regarding its substance: Scholars might bristle at Sorensen’s less-than-exhaustive treatment of a rich and complicated historical matter.



Others might criticize the author's form: Sorenson employs straightforward prose throughout his book, which may open him to criticism for being less-than scholarly. Sorenson also liberally employs clichés to hammer home his points. For example, when explaining the concept of justification by faith alone Sorenson writes that salvation was God's promise "no strings attached" (p. 20). And when he provides a rationale for Luther's success, Sorenson states: "So, young Martin was, in many ways, born in the right place at the right time" (p. 12).

But one can argue that, in the twenty-first century North American context, we are comfortable with clichés. And although Sorenson employs too many of them for my liking, I understand his approach. After all, he's upfront about writing the book for high school and college readers.

Sorenson demonstrates that, to be of service to the public, a scholar doesn't have to employ impenetrable prose. He could have easily bogged down the reader in detail, but showed great restraint in parsing a rich history. And as experienced writers know, it's often more difficult to convey concepts accurately in relatively few words.

In addition to being a solid introduction to Martin Luther and the German Reformation for high school and college students, Sorenson has produced a helpful overview for those with a general interest in history and world affairs. He has also provided clarification for folks who might confuse the German reformer with an American civil rights leader with a similar name. At the same time, Sorenson's volume is a welcome reference for laypeople and perhaps even pastors searching for new words to tell the story of one of the most influential figures on faith and western civilization.

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