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Book Review

Martin Luther as He Lived and Breathed: Recollections of the Reformer

Robert Kolb

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018

It is hard to imagine how there can be anything about Luther that has not already been documented by the myriads of Luther biographies and yet in his latest book, *Martin Luther as He Lived and Breathed*, Robert Kolb, professor emeritus at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, manages to do so with flair. The result is an eminently readable compact and thought-provoking contribution to the field of Luther studies.

Kolb begins each chapter by providing succinct overviews of the various stages in Luther's life. He clearly relies on the most current research about Luther—much of which he has provided as one of the foremost Luther scholars of this generation—to provide an easy-to-read narrative of Luther. His skill at summarizing current studies into a concise picture of the stages in Luther's life makes this book suitable for anyone looking for an introduction to Luther's life. What really sets this book apart, however, is that the last half of each chapter includes what Kolb calls “interviews;” excerpts taken from Luther himself. Moreover, these Luther interviews are combined with numerous first-hand accounts of Luther's life provided by many of his colleagues and opponents. From these first-hand recollections (as the subtitle of the book suggests), the reader gains an intimate glimpse into how Luther viewed himself and his Reformation agenda. These recollections also provide the reader with an invaluable glimpse of how Luther was seen by his colleagues and the generation of Lutherans that followed in his footsteps. While some of these recollections unsurprisingly border on the idolization of Luther, other accounts tend toward demonization—which is also not surprising. Kolb makes it clear that Luther impacted people. Those that encountered him or his theology could not remain neutral bystanders. As a consequence of these recollections so deftly used by Kolb, however, a one-dimensional view of Luther turns into a multifaceted portrait of a complex person. To further enhance the learning experience, Kolb provides a series of short, thoughtful questions for discussion, along with a short list of recommended readings for the topics covered, at the end of each chapter. These questions, along with the recommended readings, are carefully selected, thus providing a balanced focus to the highlighted issues discussed.

The first six chapters cover the first forty-two years of Luther's life, from his childhood to the aftermath of the Diet of Worms, his return to Wittenberg to resume his teaching career at the university, and his debate with Erasmus on the bound will. Most Luther scholars focus on these years since they help explain and describe his reforming agenda and the beginnings of a new way of thinking theologically. This was the period of major change and innovation, and, as such, deserves the attention given to it by Kolb. The last two chapters cover the last twenty years of his life, where the reformation churches become established and the Reformation network expands and the Reformation movement becomes institutionalized. The last chapter also includes a brief recounting of Luther's writings against the Jews, which Kolb labels a ‘sinful fury’. While Kolb briefly explores why Luther might have said what he did, he does not justify Luther's writings.



Martin Luther as He Lived and Breathed is a versatile book. It can be used as a supplemental textbook in a church history course, a textbook for adult instruction courses in a congregation, or as a study text in an adult education program in a church. It provides the basic information and whets the appetite for more discussion and conversation. Kolb is to be commended for yet another wonderful contribution to making Luther accessible to a wider audience.

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