CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture

by

A. SKEVINGTON WOOD
B.A., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S.

*"I am bound by the Scriptures . . .
and my conscience is captive
to the Word of God".*
Martin Luther

THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

SBN: 85364 087 4

Copyright © 1969 The Paternoster Press

AUSTRALIA:
Emu Book Agencies Pty., Ltd.,
511, Kent Street, Sydney, N.S.W.

CANADA:
Home Evangel Books Ltd.,
25, Hobson Avenue, Toronto, 16

NEW ZEALAND:
G. W. Moore, Ltd.,
3, Campbell Road, P.O. Box 24053,
Royal Oak, Auckland, 6

SOUTH AFRICA:
Oxford University Press,
P.O. Box 1141, Thibault House,
Thibault Square, Cape Town

Made and Printed in Great Britain for
The Paternoster Press Paternoster House
3 Mount Radford Crescent Exeter Devon
by Cox & Wyman Limited Fakenham

By the Same Author

THE BURNING HEART

John Wesley, Evangelist

THE INEXTINGUISHABLE BLAZE

Spiritual Renewal and Advance in the Eighteenth Century

VOL. VII in the PATERNOSTER CHURCH HISTORY

PAUL'S PENTECOST

Studies in the Life of the Spirit from Rom. 8

CONTENTS

PREFACE

"LUTHER LIVED IN THE CLIMATE OF THE BIBLE, NOT as if in the sunlit archipelago of a few chosen books; rather he was at home in the whole continent of Holy Writ, and was the first biblical cosmopolitan for over a millennium." So writes Bertram Lee Woolf, and the correctness of his estimate is being increasingly recognized today. Luther is indeed one of the pivotal figures in current dialogue, and the whole question of his relationship to Scripture is of major significance. If we are to reach a right judgment on the theological issues which now confront us, we cannot afford to ignore the contribution of the pioneer reformer. He represents something more than merely an echo of the past. Because his supreme concern was to transmit the Word of God, his is still a living and therefore a relevant voice.

The full measure of Luther's stature is presently emerging into view. "Even if Christianity disappeared so that he survived only as a maker of myths," Sir Herbert Butterfield has declared, "he would still be a colossal figure – almost the greatest of the giants in modern times." But, of course, Luther's essential contribution lay in the realm of faith. He was the instrument of God in recalling the Church to the truth of the gospel. It is as the progenitor of the Protestant Reformation that he is to be assessed today. And it is recognized that the renewal he initiated was in the first instance theological rather than either ecclesiastical or political. It arose, moreover, from his own encounter with God in the Scriptures. It was because he thus experienced divine grace in Christ, through the medium of the written Word, that henceforward the Bible was to be central in the Reformation. Throughout his career as a remodeller of the Church, Luther occupied the chair of biblical exegesis at the University of Wittenberg. As he himself often explained, it was simply as he fulfilled his academic function of expounding the Word of God that the Reformation was effected. The title he most cherished was "Doctor of Sacred Scripture".

Our approach to Luther in these ecumenical times is immeasurably facilitated by the virtual disappearance of previous caricatures. There was a Roman Catholic distortion which presented Luther as a renegade monk whose revolt against the papacy was motivated largely by pique. There was a Protestant legend which deprived him of all the temperamental traits that make him seem so human, and blew him up into a king-size

Gothic hero figure who put to flight the armies of the alien. Happily, each of these caricatures is now emphatically repudiated by responsible historians, whether Protestant or Roman. More recently, a psychological reinterpretation of Luther has been attempted by scholars like J. Paul Reiter and Erik Erikson, which might unfortunately encourage the perpetuation of a further misunderstanding. It is to be hoped that this pseudo-Freudian mock-up of a Luther whom the historians find hard to recognize will be discarded as resolutely as the two former misrepresentations, and that we may be left free to meet him as he really was, untrammelled by preconceptions. This man and his Bible provide the theme for the present study.

No claim is made to originality, except in the organization and projection of the material. The footnotes sufficiently indicate the range of my indebtedness. The only justification for such an undertaking as this is that comparatively little has been written on the subject in English. My aim has been to put the general reader in the picture: there is scant likelihood that the specialist will come across much that he has not seen somewhere before. But in this country such specialists are rare, and the need to know more about Luther is great. It is this consideration that has prompted me to rush in, no doubt foolishly, where angels fear to tread! Wherever possible I have tried to let Luther speak for himself, making use of the latest English translations as these are available. A historian's passion for accuracy has compelled me to provide references to a considerable number of German sources, but it would be misleading to imply from these a general familiarity on my part with such literature.

In addition to recording my gratitude to the publishers and printers, along with a list of libraries too lengthy to itemize, it is a particular pleasure to mention two teachers without whose help and inspiration such a work as this would hardly have been possible. The project was first discussed more than twenty years ago with my former Principal at New College, Edinburgh, the Very Reverend Doctor Hugh Watt, under whose aegis I pursued post-graduate studies. The counsel of this distinguished Church historian, who in 1967 celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination, proved invaluable. My first serious introduction to Luther research, however, dates back to my days as a theological student at Wesley College, Headingley. It was then that the Assistant Tutor succeeded in communicating to me some of his own enthusiasm for the subject. He is now Professor Philip S. Watson of Garrett Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, and belongs to a select band of British-born Luther experts. To these men, and others like them who have influenced my thinking, must be attributed any merits this book may possess: its shortcomings are all my own.

York, September, 1968 A. SKEVINGTON WOOD