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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

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# The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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## CONTENTS

EDITORIAL . . . . .		149
THE TEACHING OF MARTIN LUTHER . . . . .	A. G. Dickens	151
LUTHER AND THE ANABAPTISTS . . . . .	John S. Oyer	162
BRIDGES WHICH ARE NOT TOO SHORT: BAPTISTS AND LUTHERANS IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC . . . . .	Jörg Swoboda	173
LUTHERAN BONHOEFFER AND THE GUILTY NATION . . . . .	K. W. Clements	183

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## EDITORIAL

This issue is devoted to commemorating the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, on 10th November 1483. A Baptist contribution to the celebrations is only right and proper. Of course the formation of the first Baptist congregation had to wait nearly a century after Luther nailed his theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, and over the years Baptists have been suspected of arrogance in implying that they appreciated the principles of the Reformation more fully than the founding-figure of the movement himself. Moreover, it may be pointed out, Baptists owe a theological debt to Zurich, Geneva, Strasbourg and Frankfurt, at least as much as to Wittenberg. But Luther's historical primacy in the Reformation, of which Baptists are unquestionably heirs, is unshakeable. By faith alone, by grace alone, by Scripture alone, by Christ alone - Luther's great watchwords stake out the territory within which the distinctive Baptist site is found.

Further, one in particular of Luther's concepts has traditionally been seized upon by Baptists: the priesthood of all believers. But Baptists have not always appreciated the significance of this as Luther himself saw it. They have all too frequently bowdlerized it into an enthusiastically anti-sacerdotal slogan, or at least into an argument against any distinctive ministry of word and sacrament within the Church. It is

therefore worth recalling a most valuable essay by R. H. Fischer which appeared in this journal in July 1958, "Baptists and the Ministry: Luther and the Priesthood of all Believers". Luther, Fischer argues, "tried to steer a middle course to avoid both ecclesiastical tyranny and mere secularised rationalism or opportunism". This trenchant essay is still required reading for those of us who wish for some theological compass-bearings to avoid being stranded on the superficial equation of Protestantism with "democracy". The same can be said of a splendid recent collection of essays by B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New* (T. & T. Clark, 1982), which deals with an astonishingly wide range of issues, of both historical and contemporary relevance, flowing from Luther and the other major reformers.

But now to the contents of this issue. Those present at the annual meeting of the Baptist Historical Society at Nottingham in April this year were privileged to hear Professor A. G. Dickens's masterly summary and exposition of Luther's teaching in its historical context. We are glad to make this available to a wider audience, in the first of our articles. Particularly timely is the portrait which Professor Dickens gives us, of Luther's life as one in which scholarly theology, spirituality, practical pastoral concern and public responsibility were indissolubly fused. Modernity, with its specialization and compartmentalization of attitudes, in the Church no less than elsewhere, should reflect on this.

In surveying Luther, no historically-minded Baptist can avoid examining Luther's attitudes to the Anabaptists and other radicals of his day, no matter how far the later Baptist movement may be felt to be distant from the "left wing" of the 16th century Reformation. Historical links may be dubious, but a degree of spiritual affinity is not. We therefore welcome the essay by J. S. Oyer, an American Mennonite scholar, on Luther and the radicals. As so often in history, behind the invective and mutual acrimony there is revealed on both sides a lack of full appreciation of what the others were actually saying, and of what they were concerned both to emphasize and deny.

A contribution to the *Quarterly* from eastern Europe is as welcome as it is rare. The German Democratic Republic is now of course where Eisleben, Erfurt, Wittenberg and the other main "Luther sites" lie, and where this year the main Luther celebrations are taking place. Jörg Swoboda, of the Buckow Baptist Seminary, has written for us an informative and moving article on the changing relationships between Baptists and the Lutheran State Churches in the very heartland of Lutheranism. As readers will note, only until comparatively recently has the Lutheran tradition of suspicion against the "radicals", the brunt of which has been borne by Baptists there, been mellowed. The article also incidentally but usefully reminds us of the vitality of Christian life in this socialist state, in which relationships with the government and the official ideology are not the only preoccupations.

Finally the editor writes on the most famous 20th century son of the Lutheran tradition, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We shall grossly misunderstand him if we ignore the teaching of Luther in which he was soaked, and of which he saw himself as an interpreter.