

Preface to Second Edition

A great deal has been written about Martin Luther. Luther has always been controversial. Many people and groups claim Luther for their own side. Interest in Luther spikes around every major anniversary. These are the observations made in the opening paragraphs of Jim Kittelson's preface to the first edition of this book. Each of these observations about Luther holds true today. Because the introduction to the original volume remains so relevant, the introduction to the second edition requires fewer words.

October 31, 2017, marks half a millennium since the appearance of Luther's famous *95 Theses*. This 500th anniversary has inspired more than the usual number of Luther-oriented observances and celebrations, conferences and publications. But 2017 is just the beginning. The years 2021, 2025, 2029, 2030, 2037, and 2046 also mark major 500th-anniversary milestones in Luther's busy life. In 2012—the 500th anniversary of Luther's appointment to professor at Wittenberg's university—a prominent scholar claimed that “the Reformation” inspired by Luther and others “affected all domains of human life in ways that have led over the long term and unintentionally to the situation in which Europeans and North Americans find themselves today.”¹ Whether or not Luther and “The Unintended Reformation” can be blamed for the maladies of modern and postmodern Western society is to be debated. But the assertion suggests that interest in and controversy around Martin Luther and his legacy will not soon disappear.

The career of James M. “Jim” Kittelson (1941–2003) took shape during a time when Luther research sought to understand and explain Luther

1. Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012), 21.

in light of the forces that were thought to have created him.² Luther was supposedly the product of a late-medieval theological harvest, or a sensitive conscience, or strict parenting, or bad gas. Today the question among historians is not so much “What caused Luther?” but “What did Luther cause?” Kittelson would often warn his students to “beware historians bearing causes.” In light of the newer wave of research that seeks to link Luther to future developments, Kittelson’s counsel about cause-and-effect remains worth heeding.

About the title: Kittelson did not much like “Luther the Reformer” because he, like other Luther scholars, was aware that Luther himself did not primarily consider himself to be a reformer. Instead, Luther’s trajectory was shaped by an understanding of himself as a pastor, a preacher, and teacher of the Bible, as well as, later, a church leader and “consultant,” not to mention a husband and a father. Hence, Kittelson preferred simply *Luther: The Man and His Career* but was overruled. This second edition retains the “Luther the Reformer” nomenclature perhaps more willingly, in part to temper the old yet ongoing perception that Luther was primarily a church “deformer” or divider.³ In fact, Luther understood his teachings to be the teachings of the one catholic and apostolic church and, for a long time, he held out hope that a general church council would confirm rather than condemn his teachings. It is perhaps the shape of things to come that present-day Roman Catholic readings of Luther appear to be more conciliatory than at any other time in the past 500 years.⁴

A word in regard to the decision to write and publish a second edition of *Luther the Reformer*: How does one improve a book that is already excellent and that continues to be regarded as the best introduction to Martin Luther for “lay-readers”? As noted in the preface to the first edition, Kittelson wrote to update Roland Bainton’s *Here I Stand* (1950) in light of new Luther research as well as in light of changes in scholarly norms for writing history. Bainton’s *Here I Stand* remains a standard and a classic. At the same time, Bainton’s admiration for his main subject is transparent. In the early 1980s, Kittelson thought it was time for a

2. For an overview of Kittelson’s career, see Hans Wiersma, “James M. Kittelson (1941–2003), A Doctor of the Church,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (2004): 333–41.
3. For instance, “It is, then, absurd beyond the power of expression to imagine that anyone so noted as Luther for the ungovernable transports, riotous proceedings, angry conflicts and intemperate controversies that made up the greater part of his life could be an instrument of God to bring about and effect a moral and religious reform. That he was a deformer and not a reformer is the honest verdict of all who are not blind partisans.” Patrick O’Hare, *The Facts about Luther* (New York: Pustet, 1916), 315.
4. See for example, John Radano, *Lutheran and Catholic Reconciliation on Justification: A Chronology of the Holy See’s Contributions, 1961–1999, to a New Relationship between Lutherans and Catholics and to Steps Leading to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

new standard—one that was still highly accessible but also academically sound. This new standard would read like a novel and tell the story of one of history’s most fascinating figures in a way that was both engaging and scholarly. This second edition maintains and updates that standard.

Professor Kittelson wrote his Luther biography thirty-five years after Bainton wrote his. This second edition appears thirty years after the original publication. This edition remains true to Kittelson’s original purpose, “to tell the story of Martin Luther to readers who are not specialists in the field of Luther studies and who have no desire to become ensnared in the arguments of specialists” (as he explained in the original preface, above). Kittelson wrote of Luther “the Man and his Career”—with the emphasis on *career*. This edition puts added accent on Luther the *man*, and further highlights material that depicts Luther’s daily life, his associations and friendships, and his marriage and family life.

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Hans Wiersma
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