

Foreword

MARTIN LUTHER WAS ONE of those rare historical phenomena: a singular individuality in a particular place and time who, in and through his very particularity, became a figure of universal power and significance. Martin Luther was a classic, not a period piece. He is an ever-renewed present not a spent instant. He is not a mere fragment of our common history but a frag-event whose power still fragments and shatters all reified institutions, all “isms.” Martin Luther reveals the reality of the justifying, gracious God as the cross of Jesus Christ releases a liberating power in historical situation after situation in ever different cultures. As this brilliant book makes clear, Martin Luther, so grounded in historical fact, is thereby not a symbol but a *figura* which constantly transfigures itself in place after place, culture after culture.

Luther’s doctrine of justification remains as emancipatory as when he first rediscovered it in Galatians and Romans of St. Paul. In the Global South, where so many Christians now live (including approximately 40 percent of Lutherans), Luther’s emancipatory doctrine of justification has often been united to the strong liberation theologies of justice to provide yet another transfiguration of Luther’s figural power beyond earlier European and North American settings.

In this book, Professor Vitor Westhelle significantly adds to his former work focused on Luther’s foundational theology of the cross as well as his important work on the import of postcolonial theory for all theology. In this work, Professor Westhelle unites these two studies to show how Luther is now a *figura* in the Global South which can unite theological justification with social-ethical theological justice.

Professor Westhelle, by means of his fine development of the traditional literary category of the *figura* (in Erich Auerbach and others), shows how Martin Luther lives not merely as a symbol in allegory but as a *figura* in a way well beyond earlier North Atlantic, often politically conservative notions of Luther’s two kingdoms—Martin Luther as an irreplaceable, very

particular historical *figura* whose figure continues its liberating power over and over again in ever new ways. Professor Westhelle does not pretend that Luther was without faults. He faces straightforwardly Luther's disgraceful attitudes toward the Jews as well as his troubling reactions to the peasants in revolt against oppression, and Luther's more than occasional out-of-control polemical rhetoric of excess. This study is not hagiographical.

In sum, like us all only more so given his religious and theological intensity of genius, Martin Luther was both plural (as a *figura* who keeps transforming—there are many Luthers, as this book shows) and ambiguous—that is, disclosing the true and the false, the good and the bad, the holy and the unholy. However, Martin Luther's central theological truth (the doctrine of justification through grace in faith; the theology of the cross not the theology of glory; the *solus Christus* yielding *sola gratia*, *sola fides*, *sola scriptura*) overwhelms his limits and faults. At the same time, Martin Luther demonstrated an integrity in his life, an honesty about himself and us all: ultimately we are all beggars before a gracious God. Professor Westhelle, with his great advantage of living on the border between North and South, in this book shows the richness of plural forms of Lutheranism: many different Lutheranism of Europe and North America allied to the sometimes explosive new Lutheran theologies of liberation, justification, and justice of the Global South.

Professor Westhelle's own journey—deeply embedded in the theology of the cross and dedicated to the struggle for justice—shows us in this singular book many of the transfigurations in our day attending that irreplaceable *figura* of our common history, Martin Luther. Readers will feel privileged, as I do, to join Vitor Westhelle in his journey with Martin Luther.

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