

A Unique Look at Luther

If you have already read a biography of Luther and want to dig a little deeper into the man, you might want to pick up *The Wit of Martin Luther* by Eric W. Gritsch. It is a small book of 134 pages by Fortress Press and is nicely written. Gritsch is a retired professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and a recognized expert on Luther.

If you think you might want to read this book, keep in mind, it is not a flippant or irreverent study. Luther was not a stand-up comic nor was he a Steven Colbert. But Luther did have a sense of humor and he used humor as a way to get his points across to his readers and hearers. In some cases, we might not quite appreciate his humor as the joke is based on some aspect of sixteenth-century culture which might be alien to us.

Luther appears to have been a very social man. One gets the impression that he was entertaining at the dinner table and a pleasant person to hang out on the deck with some cold beers. His letters reveal his sense of humor. Even more important, we have the Table Talk.

When Luther married Katharina von Bora, Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony gave them the dissolved cloister of the Augustinian monks for their home. The Luthers went on to have six children. They were not a rich family. Luther's professorial salary was modest and he made no money from his massive volume of writings. Katie tended the family garden along with various livestock in the form of cows and chickens. The Luthers ate well or went hungry based on how that garden grew. So they looked for other ways to make a little extra money.

Luther was a professor and Wittenberg was a university town. In those days, universities did not have dormitories. Students had to find housing in the town. Since the Luthers lived in the Augustinian or Black Cloister, they were ideally placed to take in student boarders. Monasteries had many small rooms or cells which were where the monks would sleep. So instead of monks, the Luthers housed students. Housing included meals so the students at the dinner table with the Luther family. The Luthers also had frequent house guests who stayed for a few nights or far longer. They also appeared at the Luther dinner table as did friends from the university and the town of Wittenberg.

Some of Luther's friends were concerned by the seeming chaos of so many people inhabiting the Luther home. They also felt that some of the house guests were sponging off the Luthers. Both Martin and Katie, however, were uncomplaining. Clearly they were both generous people.

The guests at Luther's table also recognized that they were in the presence of a great man. A goodly number of them took notes on Luther's utterances and he provided them with a wealth of material. These notes or anecdotes were collected into a work called the Table Talk. The notes record Luther's comments on all sorts of subjects from religion to politics to the economy to human nature. They tell us a lot about Luther and his times. In many cases they show us that Luther had a sense of humor and that he and Katie had an affectionate relationship that included harmless teasing.

Gritsch's book also delves into Luther's theological writings for examples of humor and wit. Luther maintained that due to God's grace and the Gospel, Christians could and should laugh at the Devil. Not only could the one little word of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" fell the

Devil, so could the laughter of the faithful. So if you would like to learn more about Luther check out *The Wit of Martin Luther*.