

A Starter Bibliography for Luther and the Reformation



Because the Lutheran Reformation was a turning point in world history, the literature for Luther and the Reformation is vast and interpretations of the events vary. Knowing where to start (or restart) a study can be perplexing. This selected bibliography includes mostly mainstream works that students of the Reformation generally agree are standard readings. The list is deliberately short so as not to intimidate the interested visitor. All inclusions are in print and available through the usual sources.

Most (not all) of the inclusions here are older rather than newer. The selection is deliberate. These works have stood the test of time, having been read and not dismissed by more than one generation. They give us a sense of how others have applied the Lutheran tradition to concerns of their times, thus prompting us to do our own thinking and application in our time. And they smooth out the bumps of whatever current commentators may be insisting in this blog or new release.

Reading all these books will not make the reader a Reformation or Luther scholar. Reading several of these books will give the reader a good working knowledge of the Reformation's key insights about the Gospel. Reading a few will enrich the reader with many main themes that drove the Reformation at Wittenberg. If you're just getting started and are willing to read just three, consider the first three but in this order: Bainton, Dillenberger, and Althaus.

1. Althaus, Paul. *The Theology of Martin Luther*. This systematic arrangement of Luther's theological reasoning in fairly short, readable chapters will provide the non-expert with several "Ah ha!" and "Oh, so that's why..." moments. Medium reading, not too hard, not too easy.
2. Bainton, Roland. *Here I Stand*. Generally regarded as "the official biography" of Luther, Bainton tells the story in an engaging and informed way. Consider it required reading to put you in the picture. See also Oberman, *Luther: man between God and the devil*.
3. Dillenberger, John. *Martin Luther: selections from his writings*. An anthology of key Reformation documents that define what Elert calls "the Lutheran ethos." Every selection counts but read it especially for "The Freedom of the Christian," "Two Kinds of Righteousness," "Secular Authority," the preface to his commentary on Romans, and "An Appeal to the Ruling Class."
Another available but more expensive reader is *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* edited by Lull, Russell, and Pelikan. The book includes more selections than does Dillenberger's collection, and it comes with a searchable CD-ROM.
4. Elert, Werner. *The Structure of Lutheranism*. Probably reads easier in German but worth slogging through to better understand the concepts that distinguish Luther and Lutheranism both within the fold of Christian thought and as a powerfully developed world view. Not easy reading.
5. Forde, Gerhard. *Where God Meets Man*. Forde is a good writer who translates complex ideas into meaningful sentences. This book helps us better understand Luther's practical grasp and application of the Gospel for real people and real sinners.
6. Forde, Gerhard. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*. About 100 pages and widely appreciated as a brief and readable treatment of the topic and its introductory essay.

7. Graebner, Theodore. *The Borderland of Right and Wrong*. Published in 1951 by the long-time editor of the Lutheran Witness, this fascinating and easy-to-read book examines Christian liberty, *adiaphora*, and Lutheran ethics. It uses examples that were very controversial in earlier years but now seem quaint to us. This feature gives the book its usefulness for today since the reader will not likely get bogged down by issues and can, instead, think through the Gospel rationales.
8. Harran, Marilyn. *Martin Luther: learning for life*. Perhaps the best single volume on Luther the educator, read this book to understand the origin and nature of the teaching ministry. Lutheran educators need to read this book.
9. Kittelson, James. *Luther the Reformer: the story of the man and his career*. Published in 1986, this Kittelson takes advantage of the Luther studies done after Bainton's 1950 biography. This full service biography gets good reviews.
10. Koeberle, Adolph. *The Quest For Holiness: a Biblical, historical, and systematic investigation*. This study of a Lutheran perspective of justification and sanctification has to be included here because it is constantly referenced in discussions about Lutheranism. To be part of the conversation, read it.
11. Kolb, Robert. *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition*. Kolb provides here an alternative to plowing through one of the systematic theology texts or series. He sets out the basic theological themes and topics in a single volume, chapter-by-chapter fashion with helpful discussion along the way.
12. Kolb, Robert and Arand, Charles. *The Genius of Luther's Theology: a Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*. Here is a particularly helpful and readable expression of the Lutheran tradition from the perspective of our two kinds of righteousness. Good reviews.
13. Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther's works comprise fifty-four+ volumes of which this piece is just a small part. But it is critical reading in order to understand Luther's position on God's sovereignty, God's will, and man's will. Without these basics, the Lutheran tradition tends to become, well...not Lutheran.
14. Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Galatians* (1535 version). Of all that Luther wrote, this was one of just a few that he believed worth preserving. Those who read it agree. It is among the best expositions of the Gospel ever delivered, essential to the formation of a Lutheran perspective. At the very least, read the abridged version in Dillenberger's anthology.
15. McGrath, Alister. *Luther's Theology of the Cross*. Several years ago McGrath, a very versatile evangelical scholar, set out to understand Luther's imprint on the church. He locates it in Luther's emerging and exciting grasp of our justification and righteousness in a "theology of the cross" rather than either God's glorification or man's glorification. See also Forde's book on this theme.

16. Oberman, Heiko. *Luther: man between God and the devil*. All biographies prompt questions about selection and interpretation of events and Oberman's is no exception. Nevertheless, this "theological" rather than only chronological biography offers lots of insights about Luther's comprehensive approach to the human condition and what God has done about it in Christ. See also Bainton, *Here I Stand*.
17. Ozment, Steven. *Protestants: the birth of a revolution*. Two hundred fascinating pages that put Luther and the Reformation in a social context any of us can understand and appreciate. Says Jarislov Pelikan: "Ozment's highly readable account is superb."
18. Sasse, Herman. *Here We Stand: the nature and character of the Lutheran Faith*. Written in 1938, here is an effort to restate a Lutheran grasp of the Gospel and why it is notably different from Reformed theology and from theological modernism as these were expressed in the 19th and early 20th century. Many (not all) regard this as a classic formulation of Lutheranism. An accessible 180 pages.
19. Schwiebert, Ernest. *Luther and His Times: the Reformation from a new perspective*. The perspective is no longer all that new for this 1950 publication, but Schiebert delivers on his title in a positive and informative way.
20. Veith, Gene E. *God at Work: your Christian vocation in all of life*. Now the standard popular general reading on the doctrine of vocation and very well written. The classic on vocation is by Wingren (see below).
21. Veith, Gene E. *The Spirituality of the Cross: the way of the first evangelicals*. Veith's little book may be the best short introduction and overview of several of the Reformation insights. Here is a good place to start your reading—or to continue it.
22. Watson, Phillip. *Let God be God! an interpretation of the Theology of Luther*. A widely appreciated treatment of Luther's thought by a British Methodist scholar. It was written in 1948 and reflects the growing interest in existentialism during that post-war time. Covers the bases well.
23. Wingren, Gustaf. *Luther on Vocation*. The doctrine of vocation is a central feature of Luther's understanding of the Gospel. Every article and book on this doctrine uses Wingren as an anchor. Briefer treatments on the topic do a good job (*The Christian's Calling* by Donald Heiges, for example), but they all refer back to Wingren.