

LUTHER READING LIST – ANNOTATED

Luther is not an easy author to get into. First, he's garrulous and unsystematic, which means you have to read a lot of him to get what he's doing. Second, he's a truly pivotal figure, straddling two worlds, the ancient and the modern, so he's hard to get a fix on, to locate in comfortable trajectories. In some ways he still lives and breathes the old, classical and medieval synthesis. Long stretches can read like completely conventional late medieval fare. But then – just when you are getting comfortable – he does something quite new and unexpected; he adds a completely new twist, something radical, startling. If you spend enough time with him, you slowly realize that here there is something tremendously new and powerful going on here. Ultimately, I think, Luther is doing the unthinkable: he's upending the entire ancient synthesis, Christian or otherwise. In its place he is constructing something new. Of course he's a pioneer, so his work is faltering, inconsistent, and often a bit brutal. But love it or hate it, it's amazing to watch. For those of us trained in the Greco-Roman patristic tradition, it's astonishing.

Be warned, however: Luther can also be a very big jerk. Some parts of his writings, esp. against the Jews, are simply vile. Yet others are sublime. In any case, he's definitely not an author for the faint of heart.

Three tips for reading Luther:

1) Luther doesn't see himself as a "father of the church" – so don't read him this way. In fact, he's trying to bring an end to the old "hermeneutics of the fathers". This means it's totally fine if you don't see him as an "authority", or if you can't stand whole parts of him. *You don't need to worry about him getting everything right.* You don't need to worry about "defending him". You don't need to worry about being openly critical of him. If something he says is stupid, that's fine, just say so. That's his point. The only thing that is ever key for Luther is: "does 'x' further the Gospel"? Does it *treibt Christum*? If something he says *doesn't* inculcate the Gospel, don't worry! Keep going. Chill. For Luther, we should never be setting anyone up as an "authority" – everyone is our brother or sister, meditating, imperfectly, like us, on the Gospel.

2) If possible, it really helps to immerse yourself first in the older patristic and medieval synthesis – and behind it, the conventions of the older Greco-Roman rhetorical-philosophical tradition. The wonder of reading Luther is how he is so often overturning, or undermining this synthesis. It's not just in ideas, but even in form, method, style. This can be subtle. Sometimes it's easy to miss how absolutely conventional passages can suddenly take a very unexpected turn if you don't first spend some time with the older tradition.

3) If you're a modern, and we all are, remember: this guy is *already* in your brain. If you don't find him too remarkable, it may be because you're already too Lutheran! Be very careful too when you think Luther's saying something that everyone always believed -- go back to those earlier sources and look again. Very often we've simply read the earlier material through a Lutheran lens.

A) Luther's Writings

Here's my introductory list, in something of a recommended order:

"A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels"

An up-ending of the whole classical tradition's obsession with mimesis... nice.

"Preface to the New Testament" 1545 (1522) – make sure you get the one with the extended ending.

Also quite important...

Individual prefaces to the New Testament (various; different dates)

Mostly dull summaries, but the ones on James and Jude, Romans, and his first one on Revelation, are quite important.

"Disputation against Scholastic Theology"

Luther doing the scholastic thing. Dense, but all sorts of key ideas; much more interesting and important than the Ninety-Five Theses.

"Heidelberg Disputation" (not to be confused with the Heidelberg Catechism, which is Calvinist)

Some really key bits on the theology of the cross, among other things. Quite short.

The Smalcald Articles.

These pack quite a punch – fundamental.

Commentary on Galatians.

Classic. Probably the biggest bang for the buck of the commentaries. Famously pissed off Wesley.

Commentary on Ps. 51

First part should be required reading for all seminarians and theologians. Then quite dull before becoming interesting again near the end.

Commentary on John

Some really key stuff; but even I'm not all the way through it! Many, long, dull stretches, punctuated with fundamental observations.

Third Sermon of the Eight Wittenberg Sermons

A few important points on the nature of church reform.

Small Catechism and Large Catechism

In the small catechism, I think the third article on the creed, and the commentary on the

Lord's Prayer are the most useful; the commentary on the Eucharist in the Large Catechism is also important. Truthfully, however, I think both of these works are weak as introductory works – they assume you've already heard a lot of Lutheran preaching.

2nd, 3rd, and 4th Sermons on Advent

Nice articulations of some key idea in a homiletic form. Some fun bits too.

Finally, some classics that got the Reformation rumbling:

“Treatise on Christian Liberty” (1520)

Again, long, but working out concept of faith... best of these early tracts.

“Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” (1520)

Very lengthy. In large part a technical catalog of specific financial wrongs; read the beginning and skim the rest quickly.

“The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (1520)

Also lengthy, but more theological, focused on sacraments – more rewarding than previous.

B) Excerpts/Anthologies

Barbara Owen (ed.) *Daily Readings from Luther's Writings*, Augsburg 1993.

Luther is one of those rare authors who can on occasion be excerpted to good effect. I've found the best compilation of excerpts to be this popular, devotional work. Owen often manages to capture both the ideas and spirit/tone of Luther's writing.

T. Lull and W. Russell (eds.) *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd edn.

Fortress 2012.

A standard collection.

C) Melancthon and Other Early Reformers

The *very* early Melancthon is Luther in a more organized form (but the later Melancthon becomes a kind of proto-Calvin). Certainly not to be overlooked. Recommended bits:

From Melancthon's first *Loci Communes*, the Hill translation, in the ugly little edition of Wipf and Stock 2007: pp. 66-68; 143-178.

From Melancthon's "Apology of the Augsburg Confession", in the *Book of Concord*, see section IV on Justification. *It's long, but important, covering much of the same ground as the Loci, but in a clearer and more extensive way.*

Melancthon's Commentary on Romans.

Even just the first little summary is quite helpful!

The Formula of Concord.

It's a long read, but I found the section on sin to have some very important formulations – even in just the first summary part. The bits on the "third use of the law" are, of course, unhelpful.

D) Secondary Reading

The best work I've found so far on Luther is in German, and has never been translated. It is Theodosius Harnack's *Luthers Theologie: mit besonderer Beziehung auf seine Versöhnungs- und Erlösungslehre*, 2 vols., Erlangen, 1862, 1886.

In English, I've hardly scratched the surface of Luther studies, but the following are useful:

Of the handbooks, I particularly recommend R. Kolb et. al. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, Oxford 2014. Esp. recommended are chs. 11, 12, 15, 16, 29, 33, and 40. Lots of references to modern lit.

Althaus, Paul. *The Theology of Martin Luther*. Fortress 1966.
Probably the best one-volume introduction for Luther's core theology.

Braaten, Carl. *Justification: the article by which the church stands or falls*. Fortress 1990.
Braaten is always crusty, but this is still a very clear articulation of the core logic of Luther's thought.

Braaten, Carl. *Principles of Lutheran Theology*. Fortress 2007.
Rather good when summarizing traditional Lutheran doctrines (e.g. chs 1 and 6), rather bad otherwise.

Pelikan, Yaroslav. *The Christian Tradition Vol. 4: The Reformation of Dogma 1300-1700*. Chicago 1984.
Recommended only with reluctance. It's verbose, with a low insight-per-page ratio (I've never understood why this series is so highly regarded). But I do recall a few important passages in his chapters on Luther and Calvin.

Sasse, Hermann. *Here We Stand: the Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*. New York 1938.
A totally random work I happened upon in my grandfather's collection. The first part can be skipped (it's almost bizarre), but the second section contains some very pithy, useful analysis of the difference between Lutheranism and Calvinism.