

COMMENT

Five Books on Luther and the Reformation for Your Congregation's Library by 2017

by MARY JANE HAEMIG

The approach of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 leads to a question: what sorts of resources and materials would be useful in conveying the importance of the Reformation and its message to people today? Often forgotten is the congregational library: at worst simply an array of old books donated at random, but at best a resource for congregational ministry and individual reflection. In the summer of 2014 I contacted about thirty present and former Lutheran seminary and college/university professors with the following inquiry: "What five books concerning Luther and/or the Reformation do you think every congregational library should own?" I added this comment: "Of course, given the audience of congregational libraries, I know you will not recommend lengthy or obscure tomes. What would you recommend? and Why?" Most respondents provided not simply a list but also, as requested, a short comment giving the reason(s) for the recommendations. A few also took advantage of the opportunity, explicitly permitted in the request, to recommend their own books.

Many recipients of this query gladly took up the challenge, although readers will not be surprised to learn that some could not limit themselves to five books. The responses I received (twenty in all) varied considerably. A large number of books were recommended, with most having only a single supporter. This witnesses to the wide variety of literature available and may also say something about the high quality of that literature; many commented that it was difficult to choose. The large number of books receiving just one mention

surely attests to a lack of consensus as to what best belongs in a congregational library. It may also reflect a splintering of scholarly perspectives. Given the level of the books mentioned, one can also safely say that most respondents have a very high view of what a lay audience will or should read. Although a few of them selected books for non-specialists, this was not the driving force behind most choices.

What were the books recommended? Most popular, mentioned nine times, was the biography *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* by James Kittelson (Fortress, 1986, new edition 2003). Robert Rosin of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, wrote:

I think it's the best one-volume biography of Luther (still), that does a good job of recounting theology in context as history unfolds. People may still want to read Bainton (and I wouldn't discourage that if it means someone is taking an interest in Luther), but when people mention Bainton, I ask, "Why don't you try..." Has short chapters easily done in one sitting and soon one has run through the 300 pages. Jim once remarked to me that the point was to make sure people would not be put off by dozens of pages in chapters that went on and on. Better to break them up. And given the target audience of ordinary people, it was a good call.

The next most mentioned work (with six voices), also in the category of Luther biographies, was Heiko Oberman's *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (1992).¹ As Robert Christman of Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, noted, "Oberman's biography of Luther is not for readers coming to the Reformer for the first time. However for those who have some background, Oberman presents Luther in all the complexities of his historical context, and it is clear that every sentence has a lifetime of learning behind it."

Other biographies mentioned more than once included *Martin Luther: A Very Short Introduction* by Scott Hendrix (three times) and another short work, also by Scott Hendrix, *Luther* (in the Abingdon Pillars series) (twice). As Timothy Wengert, retired from The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, commented, "I would say Scott Hendrix's little book: *Martin Luther: A Very Short Introduction* is good for laity not likely to read longer things." Those preferring longer books will be happy to know that four people mentioned

Martin Brecht's definitive three-volume biography of Luther.² As Robert Kolb of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, says, "It is long but has no competition as a reference book for biographical detail that can serve a variety of levels of readers." Some nominees address specific aspects of Luther and his heritage. Two scholars supported Kolb's *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer 1520-1620* (1999). Four mentioned the durable biography by Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950). Stephen Burnett of University of Nebraska-Lincoln commented, "It is an oldie but goodie, that has worn fairly well over the years. It is also lavishly illustrated and intended for readers without much background knowledge of Luther and his times."

Many responses mentioned books concerned with Luther's theology. *The Genius of Lutheran Theology* (2008) by Charles Arand and Robert Kolb garnered three votes. Hans Wiersma, Augsburg College, commented, "This book offers an engaging exposition of Luther's theology focused on two concepts: two kinds of righteousness and the power of the divine word. For those who've been around the block with Luther a bit, Arand and Kolb may seem to be stating the obvious, but for newcomers, this is a fine place to start!" Also gaining three ayes was Oswald Bayer's *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (2008). Mark Mattes of Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, noted, "Obviously this is advanced stuff, but a congregation with thoughtful lay people can get much from this text." Timothy Maschke, Concordia University, Mequon, Wisconsin, said that Bayer's book "provides a sensible application of Luther's thinking for the twenty-first century church." Two mentioned Kolb's *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (2009). Kurt Hendel, recently retired from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, one of two who chose Bernhard Lohse's *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (1999), commented "every congregational library should have a good, one-volume introduction to Luther's thought; Lohse's is particularly helpful since he introduces both the historical and the 'systematic' development of Luther's theology." Two others mentioned Steven Paulson's *Luther for Armchair Theologians* (2004); Timothy Maschke commented that it "nicely captures Luther for the modern reader in a winsome manner." Also receiving two

votes was Gerhard Forde's *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (1997), described by David Lumpp, Concordia University, Saint Paul, as "a good modern treatment of an abidingly central topic." Deanna Thompson's *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and the Cross* (2004) was also mentioned twice. Kirsi Stjerna, recently relocated to Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, called it "important for people in the congregations to learn from the feminist critique and re-constructive work with Lutheran faith tradition . . ."

Older works on Luther's theology were not ignored. Two scholars each recommended Gerhard Forde's *Where God Meets Man* (1972), George Forell's *Faith Active in Love* (1954), and Gustav Wingren's *Luther on Vocation* (1957). Mark Mattes opines that Forde's book is "still the most readable and relevant contemporary introduction to Luther's thinking written in language lay people can understand." David Lumpp mentions that Forell's work "is still a splendid fusion of Luther's ethics and his theology, beautifully grounding the former in the latter." Robert Rosin comments, "Wingren and Forell are important, I think, for making sure people understand they are not second rate in service and Christian life [to clergy] but rather simply in different roles."

Some respondents encouraged familiarity with primary sources, advocating editions of Luther's writings and the Lutheran confessional writings. Several recommended the *Book of Concord*. Mark Mattes stated what should be obvious: the "library should have the most updated translation. More importantly, the congregation's constitution subscribes to this book." Several editions of Luther's works were mentioned: Martin Lohrmann, Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, was one of two who chose Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian" in the new translation (2008) by Mark Tranvik, observing, "The introduction gives a good background to Luther's journey to the Diet of Worms, and Luther's text remains accessible, inspiring and endlessly challenging and enriching." Hans Wiersma listed *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, edited by Theodore Tappert (1955, 2003). He noted "This volume . . . provides a broad sample of Luther's private correspondence with people experiencing tough times. The result: a fascinating glimpse of the pastoral Luther in his own words." Mark Tranvik, Augsburg College, mentioned Luther's

1535 Galatians commentary (LW 26 and 27), calling it “Very readable, convicting and even funny. See the great reformer working over his favorite biblical text.” Kurt Hendel was one of two who advocated for *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell. He wrote “if a congregation does not have *Luther’s Works* (now expanded) in its holdings, this is the best alternative; the CD of *Luther’s Works* would also be an option.”

Works aimed more broadly at the Reformation were also mentioned: Carter Lindberg’s *The European Reformations* garnered five votes. Kenneth Appold of Princeton Theological Seminary called it an “obvious choice.” Kirsi Stjerna considers it “the best, engaging textbook available. Engages the reader, inspires ecumenical study of Lutheran history in the company of others. Works for a ‘lay’ leader as well as one studying for a degree.” Carter Lindberg himself, retired from Boston University, was one of two who chose Appold’s book, *Reformation. A Brief History* (2011). Lindberg called it “a well-written, perceptive narrative that sets Reformers in historical context, explicates what was theologically at stake for them, and includes women, Jews, and Muslims.” Lindberg’s study of the Reformation’s effect on social welfare thinking and practice, *Beyond Charity*, was also mentioned twice. Martin Lohrmann noted, “This book proves that Lutheran theology is not quietistic or otherworldly, rather that Lutherans have cared from the beginning of the Reformation about connecting gospel faith with practical and beneficial social reforms.”

A wide variety of works received one vote each; it is not possible to mention all of them. Some discussed particular aspects of Luther and his work, such as Timothy Wengert’s *Martin Luther’s Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (2009) and Marilyn Harran’s *Martin Luther: Learning for Life*. Some evidenced interest in problematic aspects of Luther: *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People* (2012) by Kirsi Stjerna and Brooks Schramm, as well as Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther’s Last Battles* (1986). Some evidenced an interest in the Reformation’s use of and impact on worship and music: Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism* (2008), Christopher Brown, *Singing the Gospel* (2009), and Robin Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music* (2007). Some were concerned with relationships to Roman Catholicism both then and now: Scott Hendrix,

Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict (1981), John O'Malley, *What Happened at the Council* (2013), and the Lutheran World Federation's *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017. Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission for Unity* (2013). Some choices reflected interest in the Reformation's implications for women. Amy Nelson Burnett, University of Nebraska-Lincoln listed Stjerna's *Women and the Reformation* (2008), reasoning "People need to be reminded that women had a role in the Reformation as well. Kirsi's book is a good introduction." Timothy Maschke recommended Merry Wiessner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (2003), commenting that it "offers a nuanced, yet fair perspective on this continually current issue." Contemporary interests find their place too. Deanna Thompson, Hamline University, Saint Paul, recommended *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, edited by Christine Helmer (2009) and notes "This book gathers scholars from across the world to reflect—both appreciatively and critically—on the global significance of Luther for the twenty-first century, a task for all Lutheran churches today."

In sum, the three "top vote getters" were: James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (nine), Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (six), Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (five). In a tie for the next spot, with four votes each, were Martin Brecht's three volume biography *Martin Luther* and Roland Bainton's classic *Here I Stand*. In another tie (three votes each) for the final position were: Charles Arand and Robert Kolb, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, and Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: A Very Short Introduction*. My brief survey produced little consensus but many interesting suggestions. May at least some congregational libraries—and thus readers—benefit from this survey.

NOTES

1. Dates given for this and other works are the dates English translations appeared.
2. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521* translated by James Schaaf (1985); *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532* (1990); *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532-1546* (1993).