

## **Study and Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer***

### *Introduction*

This guide for study and discussion of Frederick Nohl's *Luther: Biography of a Reformer* is designed for use by individuals or study groups.<sup>1</sup> It will help you gain a deeper knowledge of the life and teachings of Martin Luther. Reading the book before you see the movie is a good way to appreciate more fully the events portrayed in the movie. Reading the book after you see the movie will supply information the movie left out due to time constraints. And no matter when you read the book, a guided study is very helpful to help you make sure you have learned as much as you can from the book.

After reading Nohl's biography, you may wish to pursue further study about Luther and the Reformation. At the end of this study are suggested additional resources.

Throughout this study/discussion guide the numbers in parentheses are references to page numbers in the book. It will be helpful to have handy the hymnal *Lutheran Worship*. Martin Luther's hymns are some of the very best sources for understanding his teachings. In these hymns, he summarizes beautifully the Gospel of Christ, which was what the Lutheran Reformation was all about.

Before you begin, hear what Luther had to say about why his discovery of the biblical Gospel of Christ is so important.

*"This is why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive." (AE 27:387)*

May God bless your study of this fascinating servant of God, Martin Luther.

### **I. CHAPTER 1: "Martin Comes and Grows" (2–9).**

1. How did Luther come to receive the name "Martin"? (2)
2. What do we know about Luther's parents? (4)

---

<sup>1</sup> This study guide is copyright 2003 by Concordia Publishing House. Permission is given freely to copy and use for educational and personal reference purposes. Any duplication for the purpose of resale is strictly prohibited. Written by Rev. John T. Pless.

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

3. In what sense was Luther's experience of the Christian faith within his childhood home typical? (4–5)
4. How would Luther's early education at the Latin school in Mansfeld equip him for the work that he would later accomplish? (5–6)
5. What was the significance of each of the following cities in the life of the young Luther?
  - Magdeburg (6)
  - Eisenach (7)
  - Erfurt (8)
6. What was Hans Luther's occupational aspiration for his son? (8–9)

### II. CHAPTER 2: "St. Anne's Monk" (12–21)

1. What fears and hopes motivated Luther to leave his study of law and enter a monastery? (12–13)
2. Behind Luther's fears stood a particular picture of God. What was this image of God? How was it shaped by medieval piety that Luther would have experienced as a boy? (13–14)
3. Why did the question of death haunt Luther? (14)
4. In 1524, Luther wrote a hymn that expresses the biblical teaching of sin, grace, and faith, "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice" (353 *LW*). How do stanzas 2–4 of this hymn reflect Luther's own life? How does Luther express the Gospel of justification by grace through faith alone in the remaining stanzas of this hymn? Read Ephesians 2:8–9 and discuss.
5. What was the "eventful hour" in July 1505? (14)
6. Who did Luther call upon and what pledge did he make? (14)
7. What is the significance of the monastic order that Luther joined? (14–15)
8. Luther's progress in monastic life soon made him a candidate for the priesthood. Describe Luther's first celebration of the Mass. (16)
9. In the autumn of 1508, Luther is appointed to teach philosophy at the University of Wittenberg. What were this city and its university like? (17–18).
10. Luther continued to struggle with his sin. How did an older priest comfort Luther? (19)

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

11. Why did Luther's monastic order send him to Rome? (19)
12. What did Luther see and experience in Rome? How would this trip be formative in his own path to the Reformation? (20–21)

### III. CHAPTER 3: "The Sound of a Hammer" (23–32)

1. What happened in Luther's life between 1511 and 1516? (23–25)
2. Which books of the Bible were of most influence on Luther during this period? (25)  
How did Luther come to see that God's justification of the sinner through faith in Christ alone is the Gospel? Read Romans 3:21–28 and discuss.
3. How did Luther come to understand the "righteousness of God"? Read Romans 1:16–17 and 3:28 (25–26). Note how Luther describes this righteousness in his 1519 treatise, *Two Kinds of Righteousness*: "Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather he himself becomes ours. Therefore the Apostle calls it 'the righteousness of God' in Rom. 1 (:17): 'For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed...; as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by his faith.'" Finally, in the same epistle, chapter 3 (:28), such faith is called 'the righteousness of God': 'We hold that a man is justified by faith.' This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ; he is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as he" (*AE* 31:298).
4. How are we righteous before God? Read Romans 4:7 and reflect on Luther's comment on this verse as he states that the Christian is "at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man (*simul peccator et iustus*); a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God" (*AE* 25:260). How does this truth comfort us in the ongoing battle against sin and the flesh? Several years later Luther would write "Provide yourself with armor from Scripture concerning justification, which takes place through faith. Collect, I say, a number of Scripture passages that ascribe righteousness to God. Then, if you put your reliance on these passages, you will be able to stand even after a fall" (*AE* 30:296).
5. Who was Albert, Archbishop of Mainz? What was his significance in the unfolding story of the Reformation? (27–28)
6. What were "indulgences"? How did they relate to penance? (28–29)
7. Describe the preaching of John Tetzel? (29–30)
8. How did Luther respond to Tetzel's indulgence trade? What was Luther's *pastoral* concern? (30–31)

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

9. What did Luther intend to do with the *Ninety-Five Theses*? (31–32)
10. The first of the *Ninety-Five Theses* reads “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers be one of repentance” (*AE* 31:25). How did Luther’s understanding of repentance differ with the Roman Church’s concept of penance?

### IV. CHAPTER 4: “The Echo of the Hammer Blows” (35–43)

1. What was Rome’s response to the *Ninety-Five Theses*? (35–36)
2. What was the significance of the meeting of the Augustinian order in Heidelberg in the spring of 1518? (36)
3. How does Pope Leo X attempt to deal with Luther in May 1518? (37)
4. Who was Cardinal Cajetan? What was his role in Rome’s case against Luther? (38–41)
5. Who was Frederick the Wise? How did he aid Luther? (40)
6. Who was Carl von Miltitz? What was his estimation of Luther? (41–42)
7. How did the appointment of Charles I of Spain as the Holy Roman Emperor impact Luther’s cause? (42–43)

### V. CHAPTER 5: “A Wild Boar in the Roman Vineyard” (46–54)

1. Who was John Eck? (46)
2. What happened at the Leipzig Debate in the summer of 1519? (46–47)
3. How did each of the following men assist Luther at this early stage of his work?
  - Elector Frederick (47)
  - John Staupitz (47)
  - Desiderius Erasmus (48)
  - Albrecht Durer (48)
4. What was Luther’s appeal in *An Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*? (49–50)
5. How did Luther attack the Roman Church’s understanding of the sacraments in *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*? (50–51)

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

6. In the same year that he wrote *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther authored his *Treatise on the New Testament, that is the Holy Mass*. In this essay, Luther says “If man is to deal with God and receive anything from him, it must happen in this manner, not that man begins and lays the first stone, but that God alone—without any entreaty or desire of man—must first come and give a promise.” (AE 35:82) How does this passage demonstrate that Luther understands the Lord’s Supper as a testament of Christ and not as a sacrifice of man?
7. Written in 1520, Luther’s essay on *The Freedom of the Christian Man* sets forth his understanding of faith and love. How does Luther express the paradox of Christian freedom? (51) What does this mean for our Christian life?
8. On June 15, 1520, Leo X issued a papal bull condemning Luther. How does the document describe Luther? (52)
9. How does Luther respond to the papal bull? (52–54)

### VI. CHAPTER 6: “God Help Me!” (56–68)

1. What kind of man was Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor? (56–60)
2. Who was Aleander and what was his function at the Diet of Worms? (61)
3. Describe Luther’s journey to Worms. (63)
4. What questions were put to Luther at the Diet? What was Luther’s request? (64)
5. When Luther returns to the assembly the following day, how does he confess his faith as he answers Eck? (65–66)
6. At Worms, Eck questioned Luther saying, “Martin Luther, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they all? You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith, instituted by Christ, the perfect law-giver, proclaimed throughout the world by the Apostles, sealed by the red blood of the martyrs, confirmed by the Sacred Councils, defined by the Church in which our fathers believed until death and gave us as an inheritance, and which now we are forbidden by the pope and emperor to discuss lest there be no end of debate” (quoted in Herman Preus, *A Theology to Live By*, 12). How did Luther’s answer to this inquiry demonstrate his source of authority? (66) How is this authority challenged in our own day?
7. How does Emperor Charles react to Luther’s answer? (66–67)
8. Under what circumstances does Luther leave Worms? (67–68)

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

### VII. CHAPTER 7: “Kidnapped!” (71–80)

1. Who was George Spalatin? What role did he have in Luther’s “kidnapping”? (71–73)
2. Where was Luther taken? (73)
3. How does Luther disguise himself while in hiding? (74)
4. How does Luther occupy himself while living at the Wartburg? (75–77)
5. What conclusions does Luther draw in his treatise *On Monastic Vows*? (76) How would you apply Luther’s insights to the understanding of Christian vocation today?
6. How does Luther make the Greek New Testament “speak German”? (77)
7. Why does Luther risk capture by returning to Wittenberg in March 1522? (77–80)
8. How had Carlstadt gone beyond Luther’s teaching in his reforming efforts at Wittenberg? (77–78)
9. Who were the Zwickau prophets? (78)
10. What are some contemporary counterparts to Carlstadt and the Zwickau prophets? Note Luther’s counsel in *Against the Heavenly Prophets*: “We treat the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the Supper or Sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once and for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world.... “If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the sufferings of Christ, as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the Sacrament or Gospel the Word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.” (AE 40:212–214)

### VIII. CHAPTER 8: “Work, Worry, and War” (84–92)

1. When Luther returned to Wittenberg, he preached a series of eight sermons known as the *Invocavit Sermons*, named after the first week of Lent in which they were delivered. In one of these sermons, Luther declared “For the Word created heaven and earth and all things (Ps. 33:6); the Word must do this thing, and not we poor sinners.... “I opposed indulgences and all the Papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

(see Mark 4:26–29), or drank my little glass of Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.” (AE 51:77) How did Luther use preaching rather than political force to restore order in Wittenberg? Read Isaiah 55:11 (86–87) and discuss.

2. What happened to Carlstadt? (87)
3. Who was Thomas Muenzer? What did he teach? (88–89)
4. What were the causes of the Peasants’ War? (89)
5. How did the peasants misunderstand Luther’s teaching on Christian freedom? (89–90)
6. What was Luther’s reaction to the Peasants’ War? (90–91)
7. What was the outcome of the Peasants’ War? (92)

### IX. CHAPTER 9: “Building the Reformation” (94–104)

1. Why was Emperor Charles unable to move against Luther? (94–96) In what way did this situation change in January of 1526? (96)
2. What happened at this first Diet of Speyer in 1526? (96)
3. How did the name “Protestant” come to identify the followers of Luther? (97)
4. What was the purpose of the Saxon Visitation? (98)
5. What was uncovered by these official visits? How did the visitation lead Luther to prepare both the Small and Large Catechisms? (98–99)
6. In 1525, Luther prepared the *German Mass*. What principles guided Luther in his liturgical reform? (100)
7. The post–communion collect in the Divine Service comes from Luther’s *German Mass*: “We give thanks to you, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore you that of your great mercy you would strengthen us through the same in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever” (*Lutheran Worship*, 174). Compare this prayer with Luther’s statement in *The Freedom of the Christian Man*: “We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and the neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, and in his neighbor through love” (AE 31:371). How are **faith** and **love** the key words for Luther’s understanding of the Christian life?

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

8. For Luther, theology is doxology, praise and worship of God. The teaching of the truth of God's Word centered in the justifying work of Jesus Christ, is expressed in hymns that praise the Triune God for His saving work. Luther's hymns catechize believers as they extol the wonderful deeds of God made manifest in His Son. Spend some time looking at some of the following hymns from Luther's pen (100–101). As you read (or sing) these hymns notice how these hymns teach the faith, often in words and phrases very similar to the *Small Catechism*. Discuss how Luther's hymns portray the person and work of Christ, the distinction of law and gospel, the location of God's gifts in Word and Sacrament, and the nature of saving faith.
9.
  - “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come”— 37 *LW*
  - “Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands”—123 *LW*
  - “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”—298 *LW*
  - “Here Is the Tenfold Sure Command”—331 *LW*
  - “We All Believe in One True God, Maker”—213 *LW*
  - “Our Father, Who from Heaven Above”—431 *LW*
  - “To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord”—223 *LW*
  - “From Depths of Woe I Cry to You”—230 *LW*
  - “O Lord, We Praise You”—238 *LW*
10. Why did it take Luther so much longer to translate the Old Testament than the New Testament? (101–102)
11. What was Luther's contribution to education? (102–104)

### **X. CHAPTER 10: “The Family Man” (107–117)**

1. How did Luther come to marry Katherine von Bora? (107–110)
2. What was life like in Luther's parsonage? (110–112)
3. How was an appreciation for God's good gifts that He created evident in Luther's life? Read the First Article of the Creed and Luther's explanation and then think of his home life. (112–113)

## **Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer***

4. How did Katie recall her husband to the promises of God in times of distress? (113–114)
5. Martin and Katie were blessed with six children. What kind of father was Luther? (114–117)
6. Luther lost two of his children to death at an early age. Elizabeth died before she reached her first birthday. Another daughter, Magdalene died in her thirteenth year. How does the episode of her death reveal Luther’s humanity as well as his confidence in Christ? (114–115)
7. What do we learn about Luther from his letter to his son, Hans? (116–117)

### **XI. CHAPTER 11: “That They May Be One” (120–134)**

1. Who was Ulrich Zwingli? (120–121)
2. What did Zwingli teach regarding the Lord’s Supper? (121–122)
3. What happened at Marburg? (122–124)
4. How was the term “Lutheran” first used? (125)
5. Who called the Diet of Augsburg? What was the goal of this Diet? (125–126)
6. Who prepared the Augsburg Confession? What documents did he use? (126)
7. What was Luther’s involvement in preparing for the Diet of Augsburg? (126–128)
8. How was the Augsburg Confession presented to the Emperor? (129–130)
9. How was the Augsburg Confession received by the Roman Church? (131–132)
10. What is the Apology? (132)
11. How did the Lutherans unite after the Diet of Augsburg? (133)
12. Why did Luther write the Smalcald Articles? (133–134)

### **XII. CHAPTER 12: “February 18, 1546” (138–145)**

1. Luther viewed the Smalcald Articles as his theological “last will and testament.” Yet He was not as close to death as he had imagined. He lived for another nine years. What characterized these final nine years of Luther’s life? (138–139).

## **Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer***

2. What problem faced Philip of Hesse? How did Luther attempt to deal pastorally with this situation? What was the outcome? (140–141)
3. Why did Luther travel back to the town of his birth in the winter of 1546? (141)
4. Luther remained active up to the end of his life. How did he spend his last days? (142)
5. What did Luther pray when death drew near? (143)
6. Who attended Luther in his death? (142–144)
7. Luther died at the age of 62 about 3:00 a.m. on February 18, 1546 in the town of his birth and Baptism. Describe Luther’s funerals and burial. (144–145)

### **XIII. CHAPTER 13: “In Death He Lives” (147–149)**

1. Summarize Luther’s influence for both the church and the world. (147)
2. How did Melanchthon assess Luther’s legacy in his funeral sermon (148)
3. Luther’s seal (sometimes called Luther’s Rose) continues to function as a symbol for the Lutheran Church. What do each of the following elements of the seal express according to Luther? (148–149)
  - Black cross
  - Red heart
  - White rose
  - Sky-colored background
  - Gold ring
4. Why did Erasmus call Luther a “rough doctor”? (149) How is the legacy of this “rough doctor” needed in contemporary Christianity? See Hebrews 13:7–8.

### **XIV. APPENDIX: For Further Reading and Study**

There have been more books written about Martin Luther than just about any other person in history. Below are suggestions for further reading and study. In a few cases, as noted, the resource is out of print, but may be in a pastor’s library. Otherwise, all other titles are available from Concordia Publishing House, as noted behind each title.

**To inquire or to place an order call: 800–325–3040.**

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

Plass, Ewald. *What Luther Says: A Collection of Quotations from Luther's Writings*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

A large volume that offers more than 5,000 quotations from Luther on over 200 subjects, arranged both alphabetically and topically. There is no other single resource like this in English. Many of the quotations from Luther are nowhere else available in English.

Anderson, Charles. *Augsburg Historical Atlas of Christianity in the Middle Ages and Reformation*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

Color maps of Reformation lands along with short historical commentary.

Luther, Martin. *Through Faith Alone*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

Daily devotions from Luther's writings, translated fresh from the original German.

Spitz, Lewis. *The Protestant Reformation: 1517–1559*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

A world famous Reformation scholar traces the development of the Reformation through its various streams. An excellent one volume guide to the Reformation era.

Schwiebert, E.G. *Luther and His Times*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

This book uses primary source materials to examine the life and career of the Reformer. A good “intermediate” level biography, offering illustrations and good insight into Luther's life and work.

Martin, Brecht. *Martin Luther: Volume I: His Road to Reformation; Volume II: Shaping and Defining the Reformation; Volume III: The Preservation of the Church*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

These three large volumes are the most detailed and definitive biographical studies of Luther in English, offering a wealth of detail and historical commentary on Luther and his works.

Kittelson, James. *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

Perhaps the best overall intermediate biography of Luther currently available in English. Kittelson tells the story of Luther with vibrancy and clarity. Also contains a number of period paintings and pictures of places and documents, in black and white.

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

Kolb, Robert and Wengert, Timothy (editors). *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

The doctrinal confessions of the Lutheran Church including Luther's *Small Catechism*, *Large Catechism*, and the *Smalcald Articles*.

Leaver, Robin. *Luther on Justification*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975.

- Book is presently out of print. Check [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com) for a copy.

Luther scholar Gordon Rupp describes Leaver's book "The wayfaring Christian who needs to know what Luther taught about the heart of the Gospel, and who wants to know it in Luther's own words, will find ample satisfaction in these pages." A concise map to Luther's confession of the scriptural Gospel that sinners are justified by faith alone, without the works of the law, for the sake of Christ alone.

Lull, Timothy (editor). *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

Contains thirty-seven of Luther's essential theological writings from the American Edition. A good collection to use for personal reading or an adult study group.

McKim, Donald (editor) *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

A fine collection of essays by Reformation scholars and Lutheran theologians on various aspects of the Reformer's work and its continuing significance today.

Pelikan, Jaroslav and Lehmann, Helmut (editors). *Luther's Works: American Edition* (55 Volumes). Available from Concordia Publishing House.

Standard English translation of Luther's works. Also available on CD-ROM from CPH.

Oberman, Heiko. *Luther: A Man Between God and the Devil*. New York: Image Books, 1992. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

An important biographical study of Luther that accents Luther's self-understanding as one who lived in the midst of conflict between heaven and hell.

## Study/Discussion Guide for *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*

Preus, Herman A. *A Theology to Live By: The Practical Luther for the Practicing Christian*. Out of print. Check [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com).

Excellent introduction to basic themes in Luther's theology, especially the theology of the cross. Accessible to laity.

Sasse, Hermann. *Here We Stand*. Available from Concordia Publishing House.

Sasse focuses on Luther the theologian and his significance for the church that bears his name. *Here We Stand* is a good corrective to social and political misinterpretations of the Reformation.

Simon-Netto, Uwe. *The Fabricated Luther: The Rise and Fall of the Shirer Myth*. Presently out of print. Check [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com).

Well-crafted apologetic in the face of accusations that Luther is the spiritual ancestor of Hitler.

Tappert, Theodore. *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*. Out of print. Check [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com).

This volume displays Luther at his pastoral best as it contains letters written to a variety of people in crisis situations. Excellent for devotional reading as well as study.

The journals *Logia: A Journal for Lutheran Theology* ([www.logia.org](http://www.logia.org)) and *Lutheran Quarterly* ([www.lutheranquarterly.org](http://www.lutheranquarterly.org)) contain many fine articles on Luther and the Reformation. Also see the Project Wittenberg site ([www.ctsfw.edu/etext/luther](http://www.ctsfw.edu/etext/luther)) for additional Luther materials. For the complete text of the Book of Concord, visit [www.bookofconcord.org](http://www.bookofconcord.org).

*This study and discussion guide was prepared by Rev. John T. Pless, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions, and Director of Field Education, at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. Concordia Publishing House wishes to acknowledge and thank Professor Pless for his kind assistance.*