



Making Sense *of* Martin Luther

David J. Lose



AUGSBURG FORTRESS


Minneapolis





Contents


Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction: Luther as Monk, Myth, and Messenger	1
Chapter 1: The Reluctant Reformer <i>Introducing “the Monk Who Changed the World”</i>	5
Chapter 2: Freedom! <i>Justification by Grace through Faith</i>	33
Chapter 3: The Present-Tense God <i>Law and Gospel</i>	57
Chapter 4: The Ambidextrous God <i>The Two Kingdoms and God’s Ongoing Work in the World</i>	81
Chapter 5: Called for Good <i>Vocation, Sinning Boldly, and the Respiratory System of the Body of Christ</i>	111
Chapter 6: God Hidden and Revealed <i>Luther’s Theology of the Cross and the Sacraments</i>	135
Chapter 7: <i>Semper Simul</i> <i>Sin, Forgiveness, and “Becoming Christian”</i>	165
Notes	195
For Further Reading	197






Introduction

Luther as Monk, Myth, and Messenger




Over the past five hundred years, Martin Luther has received numerous accolades and been credited with shaping some of the most important intellectual movements and societal views that endure to this day. In a lecture in 1835, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Martin Luther the Reformer is one of the most extraordinary persons in history and has left a deeper impression of his presence in the modern world than any other except Columbus.”¹ More than a century and a half later, Luther came in third—behind Columbus and Thomas Edison—in *Life* magazine’s list of the 100 most influential people of the millennium.² Various heralded as the founder of the Western notion of individual conscience, advocate of the separation of church and state enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, promoter of religious equality and freedom, and champion of God’s justifying grace, his mark on world history is undeniable.

But Luther’s legacy is by no means entirely admirable. His polemical writings against the Jewish people of his day were used by the Nazis to justify their abominable actions. Some believe his words calling for violence against protesting peasants sparked oppression that killed tens of thousands of people.



Good or bad, loved or hated, Luther achieved nearly mythic status even before he died. This only grew in the years and centuries to come. Yet despite all this attention, few people know all that much about Luther and, more importantly—at least to Luther—his theology. Oh, they know he was a monk, he nailed



ninety-five theses to a church door and ignited the Reformation, and he founded a church that took his name as its own. And, if pressed, some may know he believed in justification by faith (though they might not understand what that means) or remember his famous words, “Here I stand,” when facing down the emperor of his day.

Much of this “common knowledge,” however, is increasingly debated. Historians have questioned whether Luther swung a hammer or used beeswax to affix his theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. (Beeswax was more common, but not nearly as dramatic!) His sermon series on his *Ninety-Five Theses*, rather than the theses themselves, probably had greater influence in popularizing his reforms. Luther was aghast at the notion that Christians would take his name rather than the name of their Lord and Savior. And there is some doubt whether he uttered the statement “Here I stand” or—as with other sayings attributed to him—this was the creation of later myth.

Fortunately for us, we don’t need to resolve these matters. Rather than spend time on the details of his life, Luther would want us to grapple with the substance of his theology—that is, his way of making sense of how people experience God in their lives and the world. He would want us to focus on theological convictions like God’s justification of sinners by grace through faith, the role of scripture as norm of norms in all matters of faith, the first and second uses of the law, the primacy of the gospel, the two hands or governments of God, God’s call to each and all of us to care for our neighbor and the world in whatever roles we may play, the surprising nature of God being revealed to us in love where we least expect God to be, the importance of the grace freely given through the sacraments, and our simultaneous condition of being both fully justified and fully sinful.

What Luther would want most, however, is for us to meet the same God he met in and through his study of scripture. He would want us to know the same assurance, even confidence, that we are beloved by God, promised our salvation purely and entirely by grace, and used by God for the ongoing care of the world. He would want us to see in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection the absolute promise that God comes to us in love, eager to grant to us Christ’s own righteousness. In other words, more than a monk, and far more than a mythic figure, Luther comes to us five hundred years later as a messenger. In one of the most famous pieces of artwork seeking to capture the heart of the Reformation, Luther stands in a pulpit to the right side of the painting, a crowd of people on the left, pointing to a figure of Christ on the cross. That’s Luther—in everything he did he wanted

people to see Christ and particularly to see God’s love for the world revealed in Christ’s crucifixion.



Portion of altarpiece at St. Mary’s Church, Wittenberg, by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553).

This book seeks to draw you into Luther’s theology in a way that makes it both understandable and useful. *Understandable* to help you imagine and make sense of what was at stake for the great reformer in various elements of his theology. *Useful* in the sense that Luther’s theology is not merely a historical or even theological matter but is practical—informing our day-to-day faith and life. Throughout the book, I present what I have found most useful in my own life of faith. This means I’ve made some choices—I don’t cover everything I find interesting about Luther in these seven chapters. It also means you’ll get my biases. Not all will agree with which elements of Luther’s theology I chose to lift up, or even with how I present them, but if those disagreements spark further conversation, one of the aims of this book will have been met.

I have chosen to write in the form of a conversation between two persons. One voice knows a little more and assumes the role of teacher or coach, someone who has had the time and opportunity to study the faith in some depth. The other voice assumes the role of the student or novice, someone who is curious and knows a little bit about the faith but brings a lot of questions. It may be tempting to imagine the first voice is the more important of the two, but I want to suggest the second voice is equally and in some ways perhaps more important, as the questions asked and insights offered are finally what move the dialogue forward.

I chose this way of writing—which may take a little getting used to—because I have found time and again that I learn best in and through conversation. And I don’t think I’m alone, as there’s something about the give-and-take of conversation that helps to stretch us. If we can imagine the brain metaphorically

as a muscle, then conversation is one of the most effective ways to exercise and strengthen that muscle. As you read the book, I hope that hearing some of your own questions embodied in the voice of the earnest, honest seeker gives you confidence to start your own conversations with others about Luther and ultimately about your faith. (And should you want to write down some of your own questions and insights, there's always a place to do so at the end of each chapter. Go ahead, it's your book!)

While I've used this conversational format in the other Making Sense books and materials published by Augsburg Fortress, it seems particularly appropriate when treating Martin Luther. Dialogue, written out or spoken in "live time," was a beloved tradition in the Reformation. Indeed, Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* were written precisely to spark a dialogue on the use of indulgences in the church. They were not offered or received initially as a radical protest but as an invitation to scholarly conversation and debate.

The dialogue in this book begins with a chapter on Luther's context and then dives into the central theological impulse of the Reformation—that we are justified freely by grace through faith. It moves forward with the various implications of this single insight as it relates to our experience of God (law and gospel), God's continuing influence in our lives (two kingdoms), our life as Christians called to care for the world (vocation), and God's surprising presence in Jesus' cross and the sacraments. It concludes with a discussion of Luther's painful—and, at places, simply awful—writings about his Jewish neighbors, using these to look at both the limitations and continued vitality and importance of Luther's theology.

I have said on occasion that Luther helps me remain a Christian. Here's what I mean by that. In contrast to many religious thinkers and writers, Luther is remarkably down-to-earth and committed to a realistic view of the life of faith. His theology does not take you away from the world, let alone rescue you from its challenges, but rather immerses you in the world convinced that God is there—in the world and our lives—already at work and eager to meet us in grace and to use us for the good of our neighbor and world.

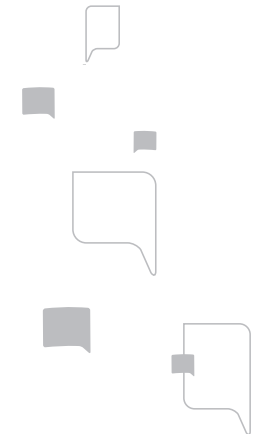
I hope these reflections help you make sense of Luther's theology and, more importantly, help you make sense of your life of faith in, with, and under the grace of the God we know most fully in and through Jesus the Christ.



CHAPTER 1

The Reluctant Reformer


*Introducing “the Monk
Who Changed the World”*



So, I'd like to ask you some questions about Martin Luther.

Sure. Go ahead.

Some of them might be dumb.



There is no dumb question.

Everyone says that.

Maybe. But I mean it. Actually, I think *not* asking your questions is kind of dumb. Because if you don't ask, how are you going to learn?

Okay. But you're sure it's all right?

Absolutely, why wouldn't it be?



I don't know. I guess I feel like I should know more about Luther. After all, I grew up in a Lutheran church.

But you don't go to one now?

Oh, I still do. And that makes it worse. I mean, I don't go all the time, but I go enough to feel like I ought to know more about the guy our church is all about.

Actually, maybe that's the first thing I can tell you about Luther.

What?

That he'd be a little bummed out to hear someone say the church is all about him.

Why? I mean, it's got his name and everything.

True, but that wasn't Luther's idea. In fact, when he first heard folks call themselves "Lutherans," he got kind of mad.

Seriously?

Oh, yeah. He said he was nothing more than a "bag of maggots"¹ and that he cringed at the thought that the children of God would take his name.

Okay, I have to agree with you. It does sound like he was both mad and bummed out that people called themselves Lutheran. But I'm still not sure why.

Because Luther saw himself first and foremost as a follower, not a leader.

A follower?

Yes, he identified first and foremost as a follower of Jesus. He didn't set out to lead anything or to attract followers.

But didn't he start the Reformation? I mean, wasn't he the leader of that whole thing?

Maybe, but not on purpose.

Why not?

Because Luther wasn't trying to start anything. He was simply trying to be a decent pastor to his people.

Say more.