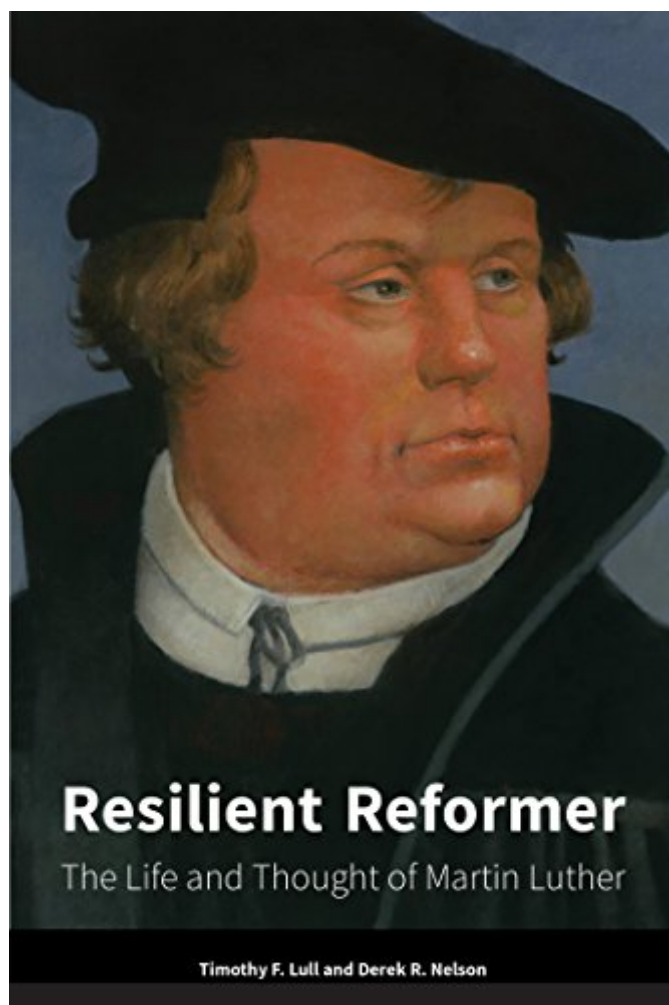


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Resilient Reformer: The Life And Thought Of Martin Luther



Synopsis

Some would argue that there is no need for yet another biography of Martin Luther. The story has been told many times, and very well at that! And yet, interest in Luther's life and thought remains high, and each generation brings its own set of questions to the task. This biography, begun by Timothy F. Lull prior to his death and capably finished by Derek R. Nelson, is marked for its fresh, winsome, and invigorating style—one undoubtedly shaped by the years that each author spent in undergraduate and seminary classrooms. In this telling, Luther is an energetic, resilient actor, driven by very human strengths and failings, always wishing to do right by his understanding of God and the witness of the Scriptures. Luther is portrayed here more as a loud tenor in a Reformation chorale than as a solo voice of dissent against church and empire, as he and his work are closely linked with his many collaborators. At times humorous, always realistic, and appropriately critical when necessary, Lull and Nelson tell the story of an amazing, unforgettable life, one that impacted our world in countless ways.

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Customer Reviews

Although much has been written about the "resilient reformer" and great man of history, it is still difficult to recommend one definitive biography of Martin Luther in English. In part, this is because Luther is distant enough from us historically as to be strange when presented in all his idiosyncrasy. Until the arrival of Timothy Lull and Derek Nelson's new biography, my go-to recommendation was typically Heiko Obermann's *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. Obermann's biography stands out and succeeds as a biography by making Luther distant from our own time and place, especially our peculiar forms of heroism, and is sufficient to allow Luther to stand on his own terms. The great danger of Luther biographies is the Erik Erikson problem. Erikson attempted to use "young man Luther" as a foil for his developmental psychology and psychoanalytic thought. The result has been an unfortunate cottage industry of biographies and monographs all attempting to explain Luther's life, theology, and culture in light of his psychological makeup. In part, this new biography is a successful attempt to dig out of the morass of this psychologizing. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Lull's analysis of Luther's end of life. Luther was not well for approximately the last quarter of his, having suffered from kidney stones, among other ailments. Much of Luther's preaching and theological output of this period is read in light of the supposed effects of this illness. So Lull begins the biography with a story from the end. Luther left Wittenberg briefly about six months before his death, and wrote a letter to his wife, Katharina von Bora, promising never to return. This behavior could have been explained away in terms of psychology. But Lull reads it differently. First, he notices that Luther preached a sermon during this trip that was clearly still fresh and humorous and theologically rich. Clearly not the product of a declining mind. Furthermore, Luther is finishing up his major work on Genesis through this period, a portion of Luther's authorship that has become, over time, one of the lodestones for understanding his reading of Scripture. After this opening end of life chapter, Lull and Nelson proceed chronologically through Luther's life, with an intense focus on Luther as public theologian and Wittenberg pastor. For those who have read other Luther biographies, or seen Luther movies, or are familiar with the significant touchstones for Luther's significant life, this book will not disappoint. It covers familiar territory, but frequently with a refreshing spin. A couple of examples. First, early in the book Lull notes that perhaps Luther's commitment to his promise--to become a monk if he survived a terrible thunder storm that caught him on his way home to Erfurt--is not unlike his own understanding theologically of God as one who makes and keeps promises. It's a simple insight, but profound. Promise is a leitmotif both in Luther's vocational call and in his theological worldview. Or consider this quote on Luther's experience of *Anfechtungen*: Luther continued to have these attacks all his life with irregular frequency and

intensity. His 'breakthrough' on justification by faith did not mean an end to *Anfechtungen*. Rather, it meant that he had something, or rather someone--the person of Christ--to hold over against these shattering and life-dissolving experiences. And because many in his time had experienced a measure of the doubts and fears that Luther experienced, he was soon regarded as a great soul doctor, a spiritual director to a generation that had trouble believing the formal church teaching on the grace of God, given their own doubts and the church's far from grace-centered practiced (38). There is a particular poignancy to this biography even beyond its subject matter. The first author, Timothy Lull, beloved seminary president and Luther scholar, died tragically and prematurely in 2003, leaving behind him many unfinished projects. One of those, this Luther biography, has now been taken up and completed by the very able Derek Nelson. Lull assembled a number of popular works on Luther, including the incredibly popular *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. The team of Reformers in Wittenberg, among them Melancthon, Bugenhagen (whose sermons have also recently been published by Augsburg Fortress), Staupitz, George Major, Amsdorf, Jonas, and many others, regularly had each other's backs, assisted one another in their work. In this sense, Derek Nelson is continuing a pattern he and Lull and many of us have learned from the Reformers--to lean on one another and continue each other's projects. Finally, a longer quote from the close of the book, that gives a sense of Lull and Nelson's approach to Luther as a whole. As Luther's heart grew cold about Wittenberg and all that the small city represented to him, the achievements and failures of his years there weighed heavily on his mind. Morals were low; morale was lower. And yet Luther found the means to work through this crisis as well. Because he was unusually silent about his thoughts, we cannot piece together his sources of resilience. As this book has argued, however, the likeliest place to turn is not Luther's psychology, but his theology. His doctrine of sin led him to low expectations for communities. In this respect, he was the furthest thing from naive. And yet his doctrine of grace led him to high hopes for what God might do through such imperfect people. These were the binoculars through which Luther saw the world, and resolving the two lenses into one image was difficult. Or, to alter the metaphor slightly, perhaps just before his death Luther's view of the world came through a kaleidoscope, which, when just a quarter turn off, shows a mess. With a slight adjustment, beauty comes through again. As a reformer, Luther was a man without a plan. As a theologian, Luther trusted in God's plan, no matter the detours and apparent dead-ends. A thesis of this book has been that the best way to understand Luther is by grasping his resilience. Luther's genius comes from the fact that, rather than seeing crises that came upon him as interruptions distracting him from his real calling, he saw these crises--imprisonments, facing death, the loss of Magdalena, and so on--as opportunities. Luther

used those very setbacks as occasions for revising his work. Each of these very negative experiences motivated him to a high level of achievement, especially given that he feared he had little time left to work. In each case, these staggering interruptions were the inspiration for some of his most remarkable work rather than a distraction from brilliant work already underway. There is a reason scholars pay as much attention to Luther's life as Luther's thought. As much as any person of any time, his teaching (his sermons, his lectures, his letters) are of a piece with his life. Who he is is what he says, and what he says is who he is, to a remarkable degree. We will always need new Luther biographies. For the time-being, this is the biography to read. And it is more than enough.

This superb addition to the many books on Luther provides a theological biography of Luther. As a theologian who was first and foremost a pastor who responded to the situations he faced, this is probably the best way to delve into his ideas. His life and theology simply can't be separated, and this work is full of great prose that drives just the right balance of theological and historical explanation. As one of the reviewers on the cover explained, it's written with today's need to understand Luther, not simply to recount what happened to Luther but why that's important to his legacy and what has been interpreted in ways that are unhelpful. It does so without giving Luther excuses for some of his more repugnant writings, balanced with examples of his being ahead of his time. Even though I was already familiar with Luther's life, theology, and legacy, I found myself looking forward to the next time I could pick this book up. Finally, as a work begun by Timothy Lull and completed by Derek Nelson, the style and tone is consistent throughout. While Nelson worked on the book for many years after Lull's death, the handoff appears to be seamless. I recommend it to anyone interested in good nonfiction writing of any kind, particularly those interested in an overview of Luther, theology generally, or early-modern European history.

This is by far the best Luther bio out of the 10 or so I've read over the past several years. The main thing setting this book ahead of the others is the author's frank revealing of Luther's faults as well as his wonderful insights and of course his kick off of the reformation. Also well covered is Luther's tendency to lash out in anger leading to later apologies and recanting of polemics he regretted upon reflection. Perhaps a better way to say this is that author Timothy Lull reveals many facets of Luther's thinking and personality not covered in the other bios I've had the pleasure of reading. Perhaps the best example is Luther's reversal of his regard for Jews--early in his break with the Roman Catholic faith he sides with the Jewish old testament and praises up how well Jews keep the faith. Later in his life, Luther reverses himself and goes on a long rant against Jews. Of course well

later, the Nazi leadership took Luther's later beliefs to reinforce their attack on Jews resulting in the horrible loss of life in WWII. My highest recommendation for this book.

This is a good book for understanding the complexity of Luther as a real man in his time.

Very well written, highly informative, excellent reading.

A very good introduction to Luther. Good, even coverage of his life and fairly balanced between the achievements we want to remember and some that we don't.

Interesting approach. Uses many other work about Luther in a useful way.

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