

Electronic Luther

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

Luther's Works on CD-ROM. Version 1.0. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. Fortress/Concordia, \$179.00.

My library boasts seven linear feet of red-bound volumes of *Luther's Works, American Edition (LW)* plus the Theodore Tappert version of the *Book of Concord*. This 56-book collection was assembled at the rate of a book a month on a graduate student's income in the early 1970s. To replace these volumes today would cost more than \$1,500 in hard copy, but only \$179 (introductory price until May 1) in a shiny CD-ROM.

The LW is a monumental resource. The selections are intelligently chosen from the more than 110 volumes of the *Weimar Ausgabe (WA)*, the critical edition of Luther's works. The translations are reliable and fluid. The introductions, though often brief, are useful and a few are superb--Gottfried Krodel's introduction and annotations to a selection of Luther's letters adds significantly to the commentary in the *WA* itself. If you are not professionally obliged to use the *WA*, the *LW* is the collection of choice. Though the Tappert volume has been superseded by the Kolb and Wengert version of 2000, it remains a useful addition to the CD-ROM. Jaroslav Pelikan's *Companion Volume to LW* is not included, but the KJV of the Bible and Apocrypha are.

What are the gains and losses in moving to a CD-ROM? Since the CD-ROM requires a computer you can't read it in the bathtub, as you can the hardbound volumes (though that has its dangers, too--I once dunked volume 27 after a wearying day of study). You can of course print out a section, but most of the time you'll need to read Luther directly on the computer, a process hard on the eyes and tending to lessen comprehension.

The loss of portability and legibility may be balanced by faster access, more robust opportunities for annotation, and easy copy-and-paste assembly of quotations to use in articles, sermons or other compilations. A mouse click on a word or phrase allows four classes of annotation and many types of highlighting. Annotations can be printed out or shared electronically. You can set ten book marks and three links--

although it is nowhere explained how the links work! The software even automatically footnotes excerpts, using your choice of several popular formats, including APA, MLA, Chicago and SBL.

If ever a series of books cried out for an index with multiple, distinguishing subentries, the *LW* does. Unfortunately, the printed index collected in volume 55 often offers many hundreds of undifferentiated entries under a single heading. For example, "Word (of God), The" lists approximately 1,600 entries. The CD-ROM substantially improves on the print version by treating each index entry as a hyperlink. When your pointer hovers over an entry, the referenced page pops up; one click on the entry, and you jump to the text. Each volume also has its own index, which operates similarly.

The indices can be supplemented by a direct search, employing Boolean operators--AND, OR, XOR, ANDNOT--and various (poorly explained) ranges and functions. In principle these operators should allow a person to hone in on what she is looking for. In practice, even robust operators cannot substitute for a concordance compiled by a knowledgeable Luther scholar. To illustrate the problem, a basic search for the phrase "Word of God" yielded 3,063 hits. A search for "'Word of God' ANDNOT Scripture" yielded 1,586 hits--still an unhelpfully large number. A search for "'Word of God' AND 'Gospel of John'" yielded 26 hits, which is manageable. Now that the *LW* has been digitized perhaps a dedicated Luther scholar will create the concordance that this electronic collection deserves.

The collection's underlying search engine is the Libronix Digital Library System, a powerhouse that was originally designed for Bible study. Its parentage remains visible, with software functions that only apply to Bibles, and are not implemented or make little sense for *LW*. On a fee basis you can supplement your Luther collection with additional digital media, including Bibles and Bible study aids.

Aside from a four-page installation and registration guide, the program comes without a manual. The electronic help file is annoyingly unhelpful, and the program's esoterica of "advanced searches," "keylinks," "datatypes" and the like demand better documentation to allow users to get full use of the software's bells-and-whistles. Online support does not close the comprehension gap. The collection must be registered within 45 days of first use, either by Internet or U.S. mail, or the program stops working.

I still enjoy reading in the bathtub, so I do not intend to donate my 56 red volumes to the local church. I will continue to use the WA when writing for a scholarly audience. But for both quick reference and thoughtful study this CD-ROM cannot be beat. At \$179 pastors, scholars and interested laypeople can acquire a first-rate collection at a remarkably affordable price.