

Pondering Luther

by [Mickey Mattox](#) in the [December 20, 2000](#) issue

*Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, by Bernhard Lohse

In an essay summarizing recent Finnish research on Luther, Tuomo Mannermaa posed the straightforward question, "Why is Luther so fascinating?" Because, he answered, "Luther still has something to teach us." Luther's thought, Mannermaa claimed, combines a much-discussed theology of the cross with an underappreciated theology of love and participation. These elements are made existentially relevant, he declared, by means of Luther's "central insight" that "in faith itself Christ is present."

The fuss that Mannermaa stirred up in the normally staid world of Luther scholarship makes it clear that under his leadership the Finns at least managed to make Luther interesting again. But did they get him right? Theologically interesting and ecumenically helpful as the Finnish interpretation of Luther may be, its scholarly fate ultimately will be determined not by ecumenists or systematicians, but by the painstaking work of specialists who labor in the 100-plus volumes of Luther's *Werke* and the vast secondary literature.

Among such specialists of the last generation, few surpass the learning and industry of Hamburg University's late Bernhard Lohse. That learning and industry are displayed for the benefit of English readers in this translation of his last book-length work (German original, 1995). Lohse's text is certainly an impressive work of synthesis and evaluation. He straddles the gap between historical and systematic approaches with the ease of a scholar accomplished in both fields. His goal is to produce a comprehensive introduction, one that accounts for development and change in Luther's theology while attempting to construe it as a consistent whole.

In 35 succinct chapters, Lohse first takes up Luther's theological development through the late 1520s, then moves on to consider its systematic shape. Each chapter is a model of concise and sober scholarship.

The book is divided into three sections. The first offers a quick overview of significant late medieval theological and intellectual trends (humanism, curialism, nominalism, etc.), together with a brief biography. The second gives a synopsis of the historical development of Luther's thought up through the antinomian disputes of the early 1530s. Lohse addresses the nature and dating of the so-called Reformation breakthrough, Luther's dispute with John Eck over ecclesial authority, his rejection of the monastic ideal, the debate with Erasmus over free will, and much more. Part three provides a systematic overview of Luther's thought, beginning with the doctrine of scripture and proceeding through the doctrines of God, humanity and sin, soteriology, church and sacraments, and eschatology. In a final somber excursus, Lohse treats Luther's attitude toward the Jews, observing sadly that in this case Luther was unable to rise above the limitations of his age.

As the reader may gather from this description, this is the ideal Luther book for graduate students cramming for exams, or, for that matter, professors cramming for lectures. Chapters average about ten pages in length, and read like solid if not particularly exciting state-of-research reports. In its terse attention to problematic issues in Luther's thought and the competing positions taken by (mostly German) scholars, the book provides a quick way to get up to speed. In that sense, the book is a great achievement and affords an excellent survey of Luther's theology.

Not content with a merely descriptive approach, Lohse in his dissection of Luther also poses the question of his continuing significance. Appreciating Luther's achievement, he suggests, means understanding how the Reformer's theology can be distinguished from the antecedent tradition. First, he says, Luther was determined that the point of departure for theology must be the question of salvation. Second, he insisted on a "theology of the cross," one which begins from the presupposition that the theologian is sinful, standing under God's judgment, and therefore cannot approach God directly, as it were, through the creation, but must instead seek the God hidden and revealed in the mystery of the cross.

Third, Lohse notes, Luther takes a traditional Augustinian approach to the subject matter of theology, defining it as the knowledge of God and the self in mutual relation. However, the strongly existential quality of Luther's theology means that knowledge of both God and the self should be sought in the cross, where the Christian experiences herself as simultaneously judged by God and raised to new life. The doctrine of justification, in which the Christian knows God only in relation to the self and the self only in relation to God, thus becomes the criterion of

evangelical theology.

This conventionally Protestant answer to the question of Luther's significance is typical of Lohse's cautious evaluations. Suspicious that revisionist approaches like that of the Finns run the risk of distorting the historical Luther for the sake of his contemporary systematic or ecumenical relevance, Lohse offers us a Reformer who remains comfortably Protestant.

It is helpful to have a book like this in English. Those who want to understand Luther better will tolerate Lohse's choppy prose and appreciate the text as a single-volume handbook. When in doubt, check Lohse first.

Nevertheless, Lohse's cautious slicing of the elephant of contemporary Luther studies into bite-size pieces is not without its ironies. Few contemporary theological studies feel as ponderously scholastic--and in that sense, unlike Luther--as this one. To be sure, methodical analysis has its place. But a book like this does little to acquaint the reader with the living voice of a Luther who can still surprise, who still has something to teach us. Lohse accomplishes the difficult task of surveying Luther's thought both historically and systematically in part by burying his rage and outrageousness under a mountain of scholarly caution. Although it is a fine survey, this is not the book to awaken interest in Luther--at least not if one expects others to find him fascinating.