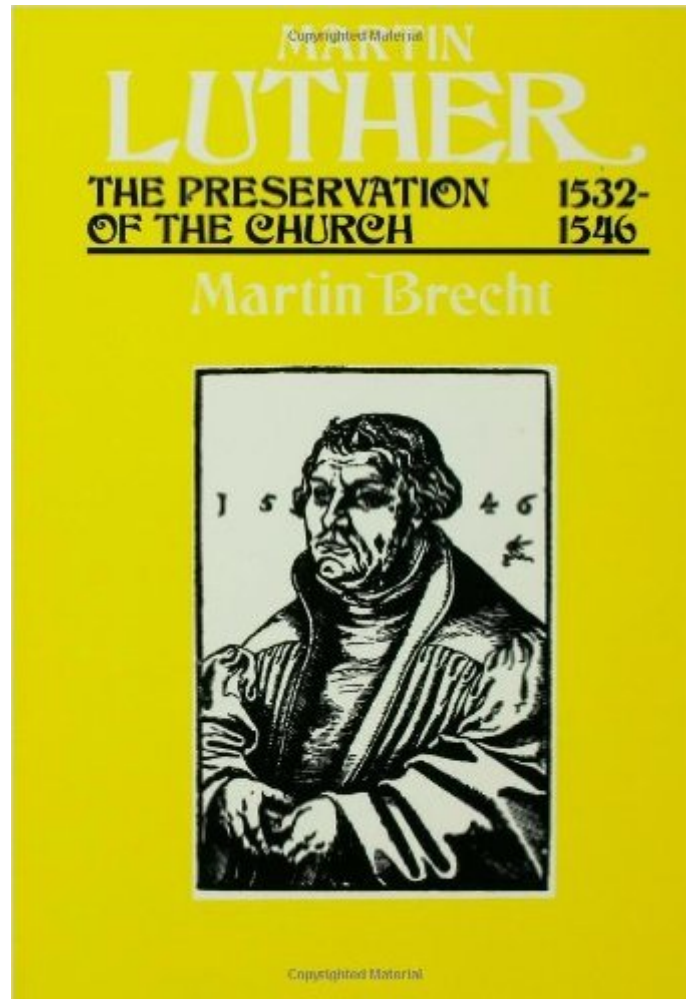


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# Martin Luther The Preservation Of The Church Vol 3 1532-1546



## Synopsis

Exacting scholarship and balanced judgement of this biography will help ensure its place as the definitive work of its kind.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is the third volume of a trilogy on the Life of Martin Luther. (The other volumes are: "Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation," and "Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation.") This volume deals with Luther's life after the glory days of the 95 Theses, Diet of Worms, and gradual acceptance and establishment of the Reformation. Luther the Doctor of Theology is beset by health problems and grows old and cantankerous, having limited patience to respond to the errors of supporters and opponents alike. Enduring great physical illness and miseries, he longs for life to end. But he continues to guide Melancthon and other reformers as they develop the foundational documents of Lutheran theology. At the end of his life, he confidently affirms the gospel he has preached. Many histories of Luther gloss over this period in his life. It was therefore interesting to see how the aged Luther continued to face ordinary problems of politics and church governance, and also ever-emerging errors in theology among those who accepted the reformation as well as its opponents. He continued to face his "Anfechtungen" (feelings of despair and condemnation) and frequently needed to cling to Christ's mercy and be reminded of the Gospel. I found this comforting, to see that even such a giant of the faith was not immune to doubt all through his life. This volume is shorter than the preceding two, and I feel that maybe the author rushed through it a little bit, as it

does not seem as in-depth as his earlier volumes. However, I am glad that he pressed forward to complete the trilogy and allow us to see this part of Luther's life. This volume also includes interesting illustrations, including a drawing of Luther a year before his death, showing his physical decline, the house where Luther died, his gravestone, a cast of his hands, and a drawing of the dead Luther's face.

Martin Brecht's monumental three-volume biography of Martin Luther consists of *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, *Martin Luther 1521-1532: Shaping and Defining the Reformation*, and *Martin Luther The Preservation of the Church Vol 3 1532-1546*, all published in English translation from the German by Fortress Press. To date I have worked through the first two volumes and am now embarking on the third. [see update below] These three volumes represent an extraordinary achievement. For a full appreciation, however, it is important to understand what exactly Brecht set out to do and what makes this work so valuable. His work is neither a traditional biography of Martin Luther, nor a systematic treatment of Luther's theology. What Brecht gives us here is closer to an exposition or digest of Luther's works (his books, sermons, and correspondence) set within a narrative context. Luther produced an enormous amount of material during his lifetime, with the standard English translation of Luther's works running to 55 large volumes (*Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann). Brecht seems to have mastered not only this material, but the writings of many of Luther's opponents and contemporaries as well. The great service he has rendered for those of us who are not Luther specialists is that we now can turn to the appropriate section of Brecht's work for summary expositions of any of Luther's works and understand them in their particular historical context. Or perhaps better yet, we can read the biography to get a sense of Luther's activity as a whole, pausing here and there to read for ourselves particular works that strike our interest. For that purpose an excellent, affordable companion to Brecht is the beautifully bound and boxed four volume set edited by Theodore Tappert called *Selected Writings of Martin Luther* (Fortress Press, 2007). And what a benefit all this is to students and scholars! Imagine one is researching a particular event (for example, the Diet of Augsburg) or controversy (say, the sacramentarian controversy). Brecht will not only introduce us to those events and the major works related to them, but will bring into the discussion the more obscure sermons and letters of Luther from that period that shed important light of Luther's thinking. Consistent with his emphasis on primary sources is the fact that Brecht almost never mentions contemporary scholars in the body of his text. Endnotes cite the appropriate locations in Luther's Works (both English and German editions) along with any relevant secondary literature (the latter

mostly in German). As I mentioned, this is not a traditional biography. The best biography of Luther in my opinion remains Roland Bainton's, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Hendrickson Classic Biographies). In fact, Brecht seems to assume some knowledge of the key events, personages and locations on the part of his readers. Brecht includes helpful plates and illustrations, but no maps. He is less adept than Bainton and certain other biographers at painting the texture of a scene, or depicting the dramatic ebb and flow of events, or really helping us understand the driving inspiration behind some of the secondary characters. And to be honest, some narrative or descriptive portions can be tedious - for example, the initial chapter on Luther's ancestry and childhood (1:1-21) or the details of the struggle between Luther and the Zwickau city council (2:439-446). These are areas where Brecht seems to be striving for completeness or perhaps attempting to make an original contribution by unraveling the details of a complicated situation. The weaknesses just listed are things we can live with. Brecht has rendered us a great service with the wisdom, time and talent that he has poured into these volumes. This leads me to a final comment on the quality of the printing. These volumes are printed by Fortress Press (now Augsburg Fortress). I called the publisher in September 2009 and discovered that all three of these volumes are now available ONLY in "Print-On-Demand." The volume I saw printed this way was very difficult to read, but with some effort I was able to track down copies from earlier, regular printings. Let's hope that the publisher will go back to a regular printing. "Print-On-Demand" is not the way such an extraordinary achievement should be treated - by a Lutheran press no less! UPDATE: I have now completed the third volume and, as I expected, there are no changes necessary to my review above. Note that each volume has its own index, while volume three contains an additional, more comprehensive subject index covering the entire set. Finally, I assume that the "Print-On-Demand" problem noted above can be avoided entirely now with the appearance of the Kindle Edition.

As Brecht so correctly titles this final volume of three on the life of Luther, this was the theme of his final sixteen years: the preservation of the church. He was obsessed with the proclamation of the pure gospel. His final years were devoted to this cause, and Brecht preserves this history in his continued easy to read style, but very scholarly and historically accurate. While all around him toil and turmoil reigned against this pure gospel and its valued proclamation, the Reformer remained steadfast in spite of failing health. His disputes with those who wanted to reform too much as well as political problems and disputes even within those of the Lutheran persuasion all troubled him. At times his patience wore thin, and there were signs of anger and rudeness exhibited. But, my God, what this man endured and his steadfastness to the Gospel and God's means of salvation are

phenomenal and to be followed. We certainly want to not follow with his sometimes harshness, but when it erupts, seek our dear Christ's forgiveness. As much historical biography of Luther is of his early period, this treatment of his latter is valuable and a reliable one.

I really felt close to Luther's thought processes when reading this volume, and his fear of losing his soul and his step by step approach to a differing emphasis in Christian thinking.

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