

A man with a light beard and mustache, wearing a dark blue beret and a dark blue suit jacket over a blue and white striped shirt. He is holding a small globe in his left hand, which depicts a village with red-roofed houses on a hill. The background is a solid teal color.

Fabian Vogt

LUTHER *on* THE FLY

His Most Important Writings
in a Nutshell

edition  **chrismon**

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**'STAND UP FIRMLY,
SPEAK UP CLEARLY,
SHUT UP EARLY.'**

Martin Luther

PREFACE

Can words change the world? Of course they can! No one has given more impressive proof of that than Martin Luther, the courageous, uncompromising and passionate 16th century Reformer who became one of the founders of the modern age with his daring writings.

At the end of the Middle Ages, Luther demonstrated the unbelievable explosive force of words. The history of the Reformation is an example of the way rousing phrases can, under certain conditions, shake up a society more thoroughly than new laws, amazing technologies or entire armies – and how easily a person with imagination can jump into another, better world with a single leap.

It is no surprise, then, that some of Luther's writings have been added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme. They tell the fascinating story of a plucky monk who successfully took up the fight with all the powers that were at his time – the pope, the Emperor, the nobility and with all who were – in his opinion – adhering to a wrong and life-stifling way of thinking.

But Luther did not fight with a sword. His weapons were words, written as well as spoken, loud as well as soft, erudite as well as provocative and polemic, deadly serious as well as full of jest. A mighty wielder of words, the unconventional thinker from Wittenberg called the ruling system in question until no one could get away from his outrageous outspokenness. The result was the Reformation, a great 'process of renewal of the Christian faith' – and with it came a far-reaching transformation of church and

state whose beneficial after-effects we still feel today.
Thank God!

Thus, the best way to get familiar and understand Martin Luther's importance is to get to know and understand his great writings: those trailblazing publications that topped the 16th century bestseller lists for years, even decades, although they were not called that at the time.

The book you are holding in your hands now will introduce you to typical examples from Luther's most important writings in a way that is short and to the point, accessible and easy to understand, informative and highly entertaining. It will serve you an array of 'Lutheran' appetizers, as it were, a kind of Wittenberg starter plate. With only the best ingredients of course: from the famed '95 Theses' to 'On the Freedom of a Christian' to Luther's speech at the Diet of Worms which made it irrevocably clear that this celebrated popular hero was fundamentally challenging the way the world was ordered.

My hope is that after reading this book, you will not only have discovered what made – and makes – this extraordinary spiritual awakening so very powerful, but also acquired a taste for relating the explosiveness of some of Luther's revolutionary statements to our everyday life in the 21st century. Join the discussion!

Besides, wouldn't it be nice to be able to let your profound knowledge of history shine through at parties and receptions from now on? 'Oh, it's interesting that you say that. By the way, Martin Luther wisely remarked something very like that in his „Open Letter on Translating“ ...' But no ... you would never stoop so low of course.

I am convinced that it is wholesome to talk about Luther and the things he has to say to us. For the Reformer's wisdom still inspires us today and invites us to look with curiosity and discernment at seemingly immovable structures and fixed habits. Or, as the later Reformers

themselves put it with respect to the theological impulses of their movement: 'Ecclesia semper reformanda!' – The church is always in need of reformation. In other words, the change must never stop.

If that is true, then it must have been clear to Luther from the beginning that every one of us is called to contribute to this renewal. At least he once wrote: *The Church needs a reformation. But this reformation is not only the pope's or the cardinals' responsibility. It is the responsibility of the whole of Christendom, or even better, of God alone. Only he knows the hour of reformation.*

This means that if you start thinking about Luther, you will find yourself encouraged to become part of the ongoing process of Reformation. Maybe it was just this suggestive invitation to become a 'revolutionary of love' yourself that made his writing so luminous.

Before introducing you to a selection of Luther's writings, I would like to take you on an excursion into his writing workshop to take a look at the circumstances in which this diverse body of work came into being.

In a second introductory chapter, I then want to take you through the most significant stages of his life, for in the case of this Wittenberg professor it is highly instructive to be aware of the biographical background of his writings and to be able to relate them to the history of the Reformation.

After that, I will dare tackle twelve of Martin Luther's works and writings considered by scholars as milestones of Reformation history, giving you a highly condensed overview of their most important statements and concerns. In a nutshell, as it were, or compact, to use a modern expression.

This is a risk, of course. I know that well. Especially as I am taking the liberty of summarizing the texts. And summarizing always entails leaving things out. It entails bundling information and elementarizing. But that doesn't

matter, I think. 500 years ago, after all, Luther himself was keen on making complex matters understandable for everyone. And if this gives you an appetite for reading the original work in its entirety – go for it! It's worth it.

This book, though, is called 'Luther on the Fly' – and for good reason. For reading Luther in the original is not a quick affair. Believe me! I have tried that thoroughly. Therefore, allow me to occasionally simplify, paraphrase or otherwise illustrate the theological connotations. Luther himself once described this approach thus: *If you preach about the article of justification, people will sleep and cough; but if you start offering stories and examples, they will perk up both ears and listen diligently.* Doesn't that sound encouraging?

Incidentally: For centuries, scholars have been trying to give an account of how Martin Luther might have managed to set so many people in motion in his time. What was his secret? Well, aside from the fact that we know today that the great reviver did have a dark side too and was, in the end, only one piece in the great jigsaw puzzle of the Reformation – albeit a pretty big one and most of all the one who got the whole thing started – it probably was his personality that contributed a lot to his life's work.

Put another way: Behind almost everything Luther ever published lay a personal life experience. Most of all the experience of a man driven by the fear of hell who suddenly discovered the freedom of heaven – a God-seeker who experienced the leap from primordial fear to a primal sense of trust as a personal new birth.

And as the Church of his time had not been able to help him in his desperate wrestling with his fears (it rather did the opposite), Luther took it upon himself to renew this institution. By doing that, he called ancient hierarchies into question that also pertained to worldly structures of power.

What is essential, then, is that behind all these social upheavals there was the 'converted' Reformer's ardent

desire to make the 'Good News' of the love and mercy of God accessible to as many seekers as possible. Or, as he himself put it: *Making a sad, despondent person happy is more than conquering a kingdom*. In this, of course, Luther was closely emulating his model Jesus Christ, who also changed history by changing the hearts of people.

Thus, the Lutheran answer to my question at the beginning - 'Can words change the world?' - is really: 'Yes, because they can change people's hearts.' Well, if such a power dwells in written words, then it is a pleasure to interact with them.

Wishing you a stimulating read,
Fabian Vogt

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Luther and the Reformation

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