



# Martin Luther and the Present Tense of Faith

MARK D. TRANVIK

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

—Romans 8:1

“Why are we so vexed by our thoughts, given that we have no power over the future—not for a single moment? Let us be satisfied with the present and rest in the hands of God, who alone knows the past and the future.”

—Martin Luther<sup>1</sup>

**I**t is easy to overlook that little word “now” in the Bible. But once you notice it, you discover that it is all over Scripture, particularly in the correspondence of Paul. In addition to the quote above, in Romans 5:11 he stresses that we have *now* received reconciliation in Christ. Romans 6:22 says our freedom from sin is something that happens *now*. Second Corinthians 6:2 exclaims, “See, now is the

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Annotations in Ecclesiasten* (1532) in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 71 vols. to date (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–), 20:121, 5 (my translation). Hereafter, cited as WA.

*Just as the past can be a helpful and welcome tool, it can also be a prison. The future can likewise be an escape from reality. For Martin Luther, the key was the “now” of faith, that the gospel is lived out in the present, and its power is with us now, if we can live into it.*

acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation.” This is echoed in other letters too. First John 3:2 underlines that we are God’s children *now*. The book of Revelation says the kingdom of God has come *now* (12:10). Numerous other verses could be cited as well.

In other words, there is something about the nature of faith that is of the moment—an experience in the present. Some folks will think this is odd. Many connect faith with what has happened in the past: to believe is to embrace a set of historical “facts” about Jesus concerning his life, death, and resurrection. Others will link faith primarily with the future: to have faith is akin to having hope about a favorable outcome in this life or the comfort of knowing that something better awaits us when we die. Faith connected to the past or future is not wrong, of course, but it does miss something central about the nature of our trust in God.

In this essay I explore how Martin Luther’s concept of faith puts great stress on the present tense.<sup>2</sup> In order to fully understand this we need to explore how Luther understands faith’s enemies—which he often terms as “sin, death, and the devil.” Using examples from Luther and from our own experiences, I will demonstrate that it is in the very nature of faith’s opposition to keep us stuck in the past or the future. And when that happens, the light of faith is darkened and we are no longer fully in the present. That means trouble for the neighbor, creation, and ourselves.

#### TIME: FRIEND AND FOE

We are creatures of time. We may try to escape, but time will simply not let us go. Devices to measure time are ubiquitous. Many of us have watches on our wrist. Time is the first thing that shows up on the screens of our phones, and it is present on the corner of our laptop screen. Let’s also recognize that much of our experience with time is positive. We have good memories from time spent with friends and family. I can think back to some of my own summer vacations along Lake Superior, and immediately a smile comes to my face as I hear laughter of loved ones and the crackle of a campfire. Further, when we think about the future, time often has a positive connotation. We look forward to seeing someone who has been away or we anticipate a trip to a park or city that we have not seen previously. So time can truly be a gift when we remember good things that have happened to us or as we await an event or gathering that brings pleasure and perhaps a renewal of relationships. But as Martin Luther experienced and stressed, there are also dimensions of time crossed with shadows and darkness. Let us see how time can be transformed into an enemy.

<sup>2</sup> This should not be confused with the so-called “realized eschatology” movement in the middle of the twentieth century that was forged in opposition to some forms of Christianity that were obsessed about the future and the actual dates of Christ’s return. While there is some overlap with the theological insights of that undertaking, this essay does not deny that time is headed toward some type of ultimate consummation.

Readers of Luther's writings have noticed his frequent use of what is sometimes referred to as the "demonic trinity": sin, death, and the devil.<sup>3</sup> On occasion the "world" will be added but that is just a shorthand way of referring to all three.<sup>4</sup> For example, this triad is at the heart of his explanation to the second article of the Apostles' Creed in the *Small Catechism*. Speaking of the work of Christ, Luther says, "He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death."<sup>5</sup> You do not have to read very far to find the presence of this dark trinity throughout Luther's works. One of his best-known writings is his later commentary on Galatians (he wrote two), a book that was among his favorites in the Bible. In the first chapter alone I counted at least twenty references to clusters of words that included sin, death, and the devil. We are dealing here with a central concept in Luther's theology. But I believe this particular combination of words is easily passed over by readers. Their very repetition makes them too familiar, so we do not stop and ask ourselves about the actual meaning of this demonic trinity. It is time to "defamiliarize" ourselves with this combination of words. One way to make sense of "sin, death, and the devil" is to locate the phrase within the nexus of time.

---

*Time can truly be a gift when we remember good things that have happened to us or as we await an event or gathering that brings pleasure and perhaps a renewal of relationships. But as Martin Luther experienced and stressed, there are also dimensions of time crossed with shadows and darkness.*

---

## THE PAST AS PRISON

As most students of the reformer know, "sin" for Luther was much more than individual acts of wrongdoing. Those are simply the symptoms of the underlying disease. In his commentary on Genesis, Luther reminds readers that the problem is not the eating of the fruit in the story of the fall but the underlying lack of trust in God and God's Word.<sup>6</sup> Adam and Eve desire "to be like God" and thus declare independence from God. This results in disobedience, but the remedy is not better

<sup>3</sup> As Hans-Martin Barth notes, for Luther, "sin, death and the devil dominate the human situation, indeed all of creation and history." Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 112.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–), 26:42. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 355.

<sup>6</sup> *LW* 1:160–62.

instruction or a list of virtues that they promise to imitate. Sin is in fact a “supra-human” power that envelops human beings. It is something above and beyond us that nevertheless penetrates deep within us to the point that sin ultimately evades all rational categories. That is why it must be *confessed*, because only God could possibly know the depth of our rebellion. While Luther’s understanding of sin has many layers, one of its dimensions is the way it frustrates faith and love of neighbor by keeping us captive to our past in anger and guilt.

Martin Luther certainly knew anger. While confessing that he was relatively free from love of money and sexual lust, he recognized that anger was his special sin.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes, of course, this anger could be righteous. When he sensed that his core conviction that we are made right with God not through our own efforts but by faith alone was being threatened, he lashed out with sharp language. For example, his reason for his delayed response to Erasmus’s espousal of free will elicited this outburst: “It was, then, neither pressure of work, nor the difficulty of the task, nor your great eloquence, nor any fear of you, but sheer disgust, anger, and contempt . . . that dampened my eagerness to answer you.”<sup>8</sup>

But there is also a kind of anger that is less than holy, and it imprisons us in the past. Some of Luther’s later eruptions against the papacy have this flavor. In the year before his death, he authored *Against the Papacy at Rome, Founded by the Devil*. Among other things in this work, Luther calls the pope “a teacher of all lies, blasphemy, and idolatry . . . a brothel-keeper above all brothel-keepers and lewdness; an antichrist; a man of sin and a child of perdition; a true werewolf.”<sup>9</sup> Now it is true that some of this language can be attributable to Luther’s view that he was living in the end times, and thus he thought it was imperative to call out the false from the true.<sup>10</sup> But most will agree that the later writings are over the top and give off far more heat than light. Many of these works have done little but taint the reformer’s reputation.

But that is the nature of anger, isn’t it? The objects of our wrath trap us in the past and in what has been done to us. I remember as a pastor counseling a woman who insisted on pursuing an ill-considered lawsuit over a five-year period. She claimed she had been treated unfairly in her work and was terminated without sufficient cause. However, the amount of money involved was not significant, her case did not involve sexual abuse or harassment, and she found a better job shortly after her dismissal. Nevertheless, she insisted on revenge, and over these five years I watched this woman shrink into a shadow of the person she had been. She was trapped by her past and haunted by what had been done to her.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–46* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 6.

<sup>8</sup> *LW* 33:17.

<sup>9</sup> As found in Edwards, *Last Battles*, 183.

<sup>10</sup> Many find this surprising. We should be clear that Luther is not to be identified with Christian movements that attempted to provide dates and places for the second coming of Christ. Nor did Luther, like many of these groups, retreat into a place of isolation from the world. In fact, few thinkers have been more affirming of creation than Luther. But he did think there were signs that his own age was the last one. Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles*, 97–114.

The past not only captures us in anger; we can also be imprisoned by guilt or by what we have done to someone else. An incident from Luther's own family can be instructive here. Many know from his story that Luther made a sudden change of direction in his life when, in 1505 in the midst of a thunderstorm, he left law school and entered an Augustinian monastery in the city of Erfurt. What is sometimes glossed over is that Luther did not even tell his father of his decision. This was the same father who, proud of his son's academic achievements and hopeful for a notable career, had purchased an expensive set of law books (they cost perhaps a third of his annual salary) for him. A significant rift developed between Luther and his father, and hints of any reconciliation are faint until seventeen (!) years later, when Martin was imprisoned in the Wartburg and wrote his father a letter indicating that the anger had now been dealt with.<sup>11</sup>

Guilt, like anger, has the power to preoccupy. Luther was never prone to much reflection on his relationship with his father. But we know from our own experience what guilt can do. Left untended, it can even become twisted into shame.<sup>12</sup> In other words, we do not just feel bad because of something we have done; our guilt makes us believe there is something actually wrong with us, as if we are some kind of divine mistake. Long ago the Bible recognized this dark feature of sin. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve foolishly try to hide from God in shame. Their relationship with their gracious Creator has been completely shattered. They become preoccupied with themselves, and the beauty of creation and the joy of being a couple (Gen 2:24) recede from view. Captured by their past, they are banished from the garden.

Let's review where we have been so far. We are examining Luther's unholy triad of "sin, death, and the devil," and we have suggested that this phrase can be unpacked by viewing it through the lens of the ways we can be warped by time. "Sin" in this view stands for a past that is crowded with anger, guilt, and shame. It is actually a field of power that entraps us and prevents us from being fully alive as children of God. We now look into another realm crossed with shadows and the power to distort—the future.

## THE FUTURE OF DEATHLY FEAR

Luther certainly stressed the biblical idea that sin and death are inextricably linked. Paul's notion that the "wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23) is often underlined in the reformer's writings. But Luther also recognized that death is not only a singular event in the future but also signifies a realm of enormous power that enslaves, engulfs, and disfigures our lives:

If you look at it honestly the entire world moves within the realm of death.  
We are surrounded by images of death—everything is preoccupied by

<sup>11</sup> See Mark D. Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 84–89.

<sup>12</sup> Shame deserves far more attention than can be given to it in this essay. A helpful resource is Cathy O'Neill, *The Shame Machine: Who Profits in the New Age of Humiliation* (New York: Penguin, 2022).

the business of death. Until the day of Judgment our lives are nothing but a journey toward death. One after another dies and the living share the burden of bringing them to their graves. . . . Thus we bear death into the world from the moment we proceed from the womb and we all go on the same path together.<sup>13</sup>

One of death's fruits is fear. When death exercises its hold on us in the form of fear, we are gripped by a concern about something specific in the future. For example, we worry about the peer group of a teenage son or daughter. Or we feel a suspicious lump in our neck, and we fear that we may have cancer. Fear and worry then preoccupy us, crowd our field of vision, and rob life of joy and pleasure. Moreover, we tend to become so focused on ourselves and our own concerns that we fail to recognize the needs of our neighbors. At a certain level, of course, fear is a gift that warns us about a forthcoming harm. But I am talking about the kind of fear that encloses us in ourselves and disconnects us from service in the world. As Martha Nussbaum says in her book *The Monarchy of Fear*: "Fear, indeed, is intensely narcissistic. It drives out all thoughts of others, even if those thoughts have taken root in some form."<sup>14</sup>

Luther, of course, knew fear. He grew up in a time when the fear of God's judgment overwhelmed him and many others. Much of the theology and practice of the church was based in fear. When Luther took his vows upon entering the cloister, he was admonished: "Not he who begins but he who perseveres to the end will be saved." Fear was the basis of the idea of Jesus as the final judge, coming at the end of time to separate the sheep and goats, causing a crisis that enveloped Luther for years. At its most intense, these experiences led the despairing friar into a spiritual abyss:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God.<sup>15</sup>

Fear reverberates in our lives by shrinking our worlds. In Luther's case, it resulted in an ultimately futile quest to satisfy a relentlessly demanding God. It produced a form of faith enclosed within the boundaries of the self, anxiously attempting to honor God by good works that were seldom connected to loving the neighbor.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity* (1534) in WA 22:289 (my translation). Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973) remains one of the best examinations of how death haunts every corner of our life.

<sup>14</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 29.

<sup>15</sup> LW 34:336–37.

We should also note that fear rules beyond the individual. Whole societies can be ruled by fear. It is often the tactic of megalomaniac leaders to create fear in order to control their followers. The names differ but the tactics are the same: warn people that their very identity is at stake (the theme of death), call them to return to a previous time of glory (that didn't really exist), and viciously scapegoat those who are not part of "us" and therefore are enemies of the narrow vision being promoted. This leads to a culture that becomes inward-looking and unjust.

---

*Fear reverberates in our lives by shrinking our worlds. In Luther's case, it resulted in an ultimately futile quest to satisfy a relentlessly demanding God. It produced a form of faith enclosed within the boundaries of the self, anxiously attempting to honor God by good works that were seldom connected to loving the neighbor.*

---

We have now discussed two dimensions of Luther's demonic triad. Both have the ability to capture us and prevent us from living fully in the present. "Sin" represents the field of power that imprisons in a past of anger and guilt. "Death" stands for a future dominated by a fear that keeps us focusing inward, both individually and as a society. We now turn to examine the third figure of this dark trinity: the devil.

## THE SNARLING DOG

For Luther, the key figure in this demonic triad is the one we have saved for last: the devil. As Heiko Oberman pointed out years ago in his majestic biography of the reformer, Luther did not simply reflect the views of the devil in the late medieval world; he actually intensified them.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, we dare not reduce Luther's insights on the devil to cartoonish images of poltergeists or horned figures holding pitchforks.<sup>17</sup> Rather the devil is the chief enemy of faith in Christ. It is his special power to wrest us out of Christ's embrace and thrust us into the realms of either a guilt- and shame-ridden past or a fear- and anxiety-laden future. Luther says it well in a sermon from 1533:

When the devil attacks a person, he makes heaven and earth too narrow for him or her. At times he plagues me with such determination

<sup>16</sup> A nice summary of Oberman's views can be found in Heiko A. Oberman, "Luther against the Devil," *The Christian Century* 107, no. 3 (1990), 75–78. The biography itself is called *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> It should be acknowledged, however, that Luther had little doubt of the devil's power to appear in a literal or physical form. He believed in the devil's ability to make strange noises while haunting houses or, more troubling to modern ears, to inhabit women and transform them into witches. See Denis R. Janz, "Devil," *The Westminster Handbook to Martin Luther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 37–40.

that he converts a pardonable sin into an ocean and a fire so vast that I do not know which way to turn. That is what he does with sin. And he does the same thing with death. He can dress that up to look so terrible, horrible, and frightening that one completely forgets God and God's Word. He is a master of a thousand tricks, a master of sin and death.<sup>18</sup>

Luther would not deny, of course, that sin and death have power in and of themselves. As forces in a broken world, they plague and trouble all people, not only Christians. But it is the special concern of the devil to attack trust in God—a trust created by the Word. It is the one thing that cannot be tolerated:

It is always the case that when the holy Word of God appears then Satan goes to work with all his might. He will start with force and sheer violence. If that does not work then he attacks with false tongues and deceitful spirits and teachers. What he can't subdue by force he suppresses with cunning and lies.<sup>19</sup>

As many have recognized, part of Luther's appeal is his lively style and the way he takes everyday images and paints word-pictures for his listeners. To round out this section on the devil, I will use Luther's citing of an experience all of us have faced at one time or another: the angry dog on a chain. For him it is an ideal image of Satan, and also of his limits. The snarl is fearsome and threatening, but the chain represents a greater power holding back the beast:

Why are you so frightened? Do you not know that the prince of this world has been judged? He is no Lord or prince! For you have a stronger Lord, Jesus Christ, who has defeated and bound him. Therefore let the devil look sour, bare his teeth, growl, threaten and intimidate. He can do no more than a bad dog on a chain, who barks, runs around, and pulls on his tether. But because he is tied up he is not going to hurt you. So the devil acts toward Christians.<sup>20</sup>

So we have come to the end of our summary of the formidable and time-warping powers of sin, death, and the devil. One way to make sense of their frequent presence in Luther's writings is to frame them as dimensions of our experience of time. "Sin" is the realm of the past that keeps us chained to guilt, anger, and shame. "Death" points to the future and the way we can be seized by fear and anxiety. And lurking in, with, and under these forces is the devil, making the shadows cast by these powers dark and malevolent. But the story does not end there. There is a greater power of light and goodness that can return us to the *present* so that we might truly love God and neighbor.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermon on Easter Sunday* (1533), in *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Johann-Georg Walch (St. Louis: Concordia, 1880–1910), 13b:1892 (my translation).

<sup>19</sup> WA 15:210.

<sup>20</sup> WA 52:296.



## A PRESENT THAT COMES AS A GIFT

We have seen how sin and death, stirred up by the devil, have the ability to imprison us in ourselves. The great temptation is to assume that our liberty is within our own power. This is the classic American creed promoted heavily in our capitalist culture. We have constructed a red, white, and blue self that relishes control and assumes that forces like guilt, shame, anger, fear, and anxiety can be secured by a technique (usually pricey) offered on one of the thousands of marketplaces competing for our attention. Or if no “fix” is available, we can always distract ourselves to death by turning to social media, watching football, or going shopping.

---

*Placed squarely in the present by Christ, now through the eyes of faith the world becomes a new place. Creation becomes beautiful and is now seen as something to be enjoyed and cared for rather than as an object to promote human comfort. Also fully in view is the pain of others, near and far.*

---

Luther, however, stresses that true freedom comes only in Christ. To say otherwise is to give too much credit to human ability. So how does this happen? Luther says the Holy Spirit goes to work on us when we read Scripture, attend worship, remember our true identity in our baptism, receive the Lord’s Supper, or hear a word of mercy from a friend. When the Spirit interrupts and disables our desire for self-control, then Christ moves in and returns us to the *present*. And it is all a gift! As Luther puts it:

Faith takes hold of Christ and has him present, enclosing him as the ring encloses the gem. . . . Living in me as he does, Christ abolishes the law, damns sin, and kills death; for in his presence all these cannot help disappearing. Christ is eternal peace, comfort, righteousness, and life, to which the terror of the Law, sadness of mind, sin, hell, and death have to yield. . . . This attachment to him causes me to be liberated from the terror of the law and of sin, pulled out of my own skin, and transferred into Christ and into his kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

Placed squarely in the present by Christ, *now* through the eyes of faith the world becomes a new place. Creation becomes beautiful and is now seen as something to be enjoyed and cared for rather than as an object to promote human comfort. Also fully in view is the pain of others, near and far. It is not ignored because it would interrupt our schedule or put us in a bad mood. The suffering of others touches us deeply as we have “time” to see people as neighbors and not simply

<sup>21</sup> LW 26:132, 167.

as impediments to our supposedly important plans. Luther's famous exclamation about the power of faith fits well here:

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men. . . . O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them and is constantly doing them.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I have tried to “defamiliarize” readers with the phrase “sin, death, and the devil” to see that it functions as much more than a slogan in Luther's writings. When brought into conjunction with faith's power to bring us into the present, it can be seen as a way of speaking about our tendency to get captured by the past and the future and actually be warped by time. And when that happens, we aren't much good for anything—not the earth nor the needs of the neighbor. Luther knew his Bible well, and he knew the devil doesn't get the last word. He especially treasured the crucified and risen Christ at the heart of Scripture. This same Jesus is present in a life-giving faith. As Revelation 1:8 puts it, he is the Alpha and Omega, *who is and who was and who is to come* (italics mine). ⊕

*MARK D. TRANVIK taught for many years in the religion department of Augsburg University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and now is professor of the history of Christianity at Luther Seminary. He is the author of Martin Luther and the Called Life (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).*

<sup>22</sup> LW 35:370.