

A Word to Sheepdogs

MISERY LOVES COMPANY, THEY SAY. There may be an element of truth to that saying, but when Christians suffer for their faith, they need more than good company.

While Christians in the West face growing animosity, and Christians elsewhere are literally losing their heads for their faith, Bryan Wolfmueller has done us all a favor. Dipping deeply into the writings of Martin Luther, he has emerged with nuggets of truth and encouragement to help us for the facing of this hour.

In this essay you'll meet Pastor Henry who was martyred in the 16th century for his faith, and Saints Agatha and Agnes who met their demise in the early centuries of the church. Well, not really. As Pastor Wolfmueller poignantly reminds us, we'll really meet them "in the resurrection." Still, thanks to his careful research into Luther's gospel-drenched reflections on their suffering, our two sisters and brother in the faith provide us with courage and perspective on what it means to joyfully confess Christ no matter what.

Thankfully, not many of us face anywhere near the level of opposition with which these young forbearers in the faith had to deal. But our lives and theirs find deeper meaning as we join together with them in joyful confession of Jesus, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2).

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*Pastor Wolfmueller's book *A Martyr's Faith for a Faithless World* (CPH: August, 2019) explores these themes in detail.



“And Take They Our Life” Luther’s Theology of the Martyrs

Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller

Every Christian a Martyr, An Introduction

IT IS A GREAT WONDER that the grand moment of the devil’s triumph is the precise moment of his overthrow. It is the same great wonder that the death of God is eternal life for man. It is the same wonder that the profound humiliation and shame of Jesus’ cross is his glory and exaltation.

In the weakness of the cross, God overpowers sin, death, and the devil. In the foolishness of the cross, sinners are made wise unto salvation. In the suffering of Jesus, we are given eternal happiness. In his forsakenness, we are forgiven. In his death, we find life — an eternal life that never ends, that cannot end.

For where man’s strength ends, God’s strength begins, provided faith is present and waits on Him. And when the oppression comes to an end, it becomes manifest what great strength was hidden underneath the weakness. Even so, Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there He performed His mightiest work and conquered sin, death, world, hell, devil, and all evil. Thus all the martyrs were strong and overcame. Thus, too, all who suffer and are oppressed overcome. Therefore it is said in Joel 3:10: “Let the weak say, ‘I am strong’”—yet in faith, and without feeling it until it is accomplished (LW 21:340, On the Magnificat, 1521).

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This hidden victory of the cross extends to the Christian. The Christian follows Christ on the way of suffering. The first mention of the “cross” in the Scriptures is the cross the disciples take up in order to follow Jesus. Martin Luther famously understands “the holy possession of the sacred cross” as a mark of the Christian church.

They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord’s Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God’s word, enduring this for the sake of Christ ... In summary, they must be called heretics, knaves, and devils, the most pernicious people on earth, to the point where those who hang, drown, murder, torture, banish, and plague them to death are rendering God a service. No one has compassion on them; they are given myrrh and gall to drink when they thirst. And all of this is done not because they are adulterers, murderers, thieves, or rogues, but because they want to have none but Christ, and no other God (LW 41:164-165, On the Councils and the Church, 1539).

We could fill the world with the testimony of Scripture and quotations of Luther to the uncomfortable but undeniable truth that the Christian life is a life of suffering. If our God is a suffering God, we shouldn’t be surprised.

God’s word has relentless and energetic enemies, so the people marked with that word share those enemies.

The world, the flesh, and especially the devil bombard the kingdom of God. He was a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44), and, dear Christian, your death is his aim.

Because Luther understands the history of the world as the triumph of the cross and the preached word over the kingdom of the devil, he knows that every Christian is a martyr.

Luther, then, doesn’t have a “theology of the martyrs,” per se; he has a theology of the Gospel, a theology of the suffering of God, a theology of the crushing of the serpent’s head with the Messiah’s bruised heel, the biblical theology that binds the life and death of the Christian to the death and life of Christ. Martyrdom, then, for Luther, is the “pattern of the true Christian life” (LW 32:266, On the Burning of Brother Henry, 1525)!

The Christian treasures the word of God above all things. God’s word endures forever, and with and through that word we will also endure the judgment and come to eternal life. Faith clings to the word of God; we hold onto the word more tightly than we even hold our own lives. “Those who regard this light as a treasure hold all glory of the flesh to be nothing. This is what we see in the martyrs. By comparison with the word they spurned all things” (LW 17:312, On Isaiah 60:1, 1529).

Luther puts the martyrs before us as examples of faith at work. In distinction to the practice of the middle ages, Luther extols the martyrs not as champions of good works, but champions of faith. It is the Spirit and the word at work in the life, the preaching, the suffering, and the blessed deaths of the martyrs. They

were, first of all, “witnesses” to the Gospel.

Faith cannot hold its tongue. The Christian knows that the devil will attack the world, but it is impossible that the heart overflowing with the Lord’s mercy would not spill over through the Christian’s conversation.

If I earnestly believe that Christ is true God and that He became our Savior, I will never deny this but will proclaim it publicly against the Turks, the world, the pope, the Jews, and all the sects; and I will confess that it is true. I would rather forfeit my life or jeopardize property and honor than disavow this. Wherever faith is genuine, it cannot hold its tongue; it would rather suffer death. Such faith will also confess God’s Word before tyrants. To be sure, it will encounter all sorts of trials and temptations from the devil, as the martyrs amply experienced (LW 22:393, On John 3:19, ~1539).

It is not only that the martyrs are attacked and murdered, it is that they willingly let themselves be attacked and murdered. This is the fruit of faith, that overwhelming confidence in the promises of God. “For where there is such faith and confidence there is also a bold, defiant, fearless heart that risks all and stands by the truth, no matter what the cost, whether it is against pope or king, as we see that the dear martyrs did. For such a heart is satisfied and serenely sure that it has a gracious, kindly-disposed God” (LW 44:112, Treatise on Good Works, 1520). Faith gives us the confidence to suffer and the freedom to die, knowing that we have already passed from death to life (see John 5:24).

The martyrs also face their suffering with courage and joy. We’ll consider this extensively in the section on saints Agnes and Agatha, two of Luther’s favorite martyrs, but note here, in passing, that confidence in the Lord’s word makes the suffering of the martyrs seem like child’s play.¹ Luther often repeats the saying of Vincent that the torture of the saints was child’s play.

The martyrs had courage, joy, and spunk. The martyrs had sass. It might be me, but I think Luther especially finds a special comfort in the boldness of the martyrs who would contradict tyrants and mock their accusers. They did not shrink back to destruction but were bold to the salvation of their souls. They were not intimidated or coerced, they were bold and free.

It must be a matter of the heart that a person can face death and every trial cheerfully and say: “Honor, goods, life and limb, and all that is earthly, begone! I am determined to remain here, right here!” Then it will become manifest whether or not a person is a Christian and remains constant by means of his thoughts (LW 23:145, On John 6:56, ~1531).

This boldness infuriates the devil, for faith is mocking the devil. These are not two different acts, but one and the same, two sides of the same

¹ Luther often repeats the saying of St. Vincent of Lérins (died c.445) that the torture of the saints was child’s play: “In this one way St. Stephen, St. Lawrence, Sebastian, Fabian, and men like them overcame death and all tortures. Because they kept the faith of Abraham and comforted themselves with these visible signs of grace, all tortures—as an often repeated statement of Vincent puts it—were amusement, pastime, and, so to speak, child’s play for them. (LW 3:125, On Genesis 17:8, 1539)

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coin. Believing the Lord is disbelieving the great liar. Trusting God is despising Satan.

We will turn the tables on him and learn to mock both the devil and the world. Then we will laugh gleefully at them, not they at us. The skill with which they want to make us sad, angry, and impatient will fail them; and they will consume themselves, together with their hatred and wrath; and when they see us, they will suffer great agony. They will see that we remain cheerful through it all and scorn them when they attempt to vent their anger on us so vehemently (LW 24:277, On John 15:19, ~1538).

“They will see that we remain cheerful through it all and scorn them when they attempt to vent their anger on us so vehemently.”

This confident, joyful, bold suffering of death looks like madness to the world (and even to our own flesh), but it is a fruit of the Spirit. The Christian thus is able to laugh at death, rejoice in suffering, shout for joy through the troubles of this life, and overcome the devil with an unintimidated faith and an unsurmountable joy.

In this great wonder, the Lord continues to overthrow the devil in the overthrow of the Christian. The blood of the martyrs is, truly, the seed of the Church because the word that the devil so furiously attacks is the sword of the Spirit by which he is overthrown. Thus Luther declares that the foot of Christ, with which he crushes devil and world, is the saints, though the trampling is not done without their suffering and bloodshed.²

In this essay we'll take a look at Luther's treatment of the martyrs. In part one we'll consider Luther's letter of comfort to the church in Bremen as they mourned the murder

of their pastor, Henry. Second, we'll let Luther preach to us using the examples of the young martyrs Agnes and Agatha. Finally, we'll make a few pastoral conclusions.

The Burning of Brother Henry: An Evangelical Approach to Martyrdom

On 4 December 1524, an Augustinian friar from Zupthen mounted the pulpit in Meldorf, a village in the region of Dithmarchen in north Germany. Henry was 36. He had studied at Wittenberg and embraced the Reformation doctrine. His master's thesis was a defense of the doctrine of justification.

He preached in Antwerp, but was arrested and exiled. He was on his way to Wittenberg but passing through Bremen the people asked him to preach, and after they heard him, they called him to be their pastor. He labored there for two years, and the Reformation doctrine came to that region through his work.

The people in a neighboring region, Dithmarchen, heard of his preaching and asked if he could come there and preach to them as well. He conceded, and in December of 1524 made his way to Meldorf. The opponents of the gospel flew into a rage. They bustled around attempting, above all, to prevent his preaching, but they failed, and on this second week of Advent, Henry was in the pulpit preaching to the people on the gospel lesson for *Populus Zion*. Rejoicing in the clarity of the gospel, the people asked for another sermon that day. He preached twice again on Tuesday (St. Nicholas' Day, December 6) and twice on the Day of the Conception of Mary (December 8). The people asked that he would

² See LW 10:340, On Psalm 68:23, 1512

stay through Christmas and preach two times a day every day.

The opposition of Henry worked quickly. They worried openly that, if he had time to preach, or if he had even time to defend himself in court, the people who heard him would be converted. They had sent monks to disrupt his preaching when he was in Bremen, and not only had they failed to disrupt him, many were converted! This was to be avoided at all costs.

A mob was gathered, about 500 men, armed and drunk. They set up a roadblock and proceeded to Meldorf. They attacked the parsonage, beat the pastor, captured Brother Henry, bound his hands behind his back, and drove him barefoot to Hemmingstedt (about five miles away). There they deposed him briefly, but as he answered kindly, the people shouted, “Away with him!” afraid that he might gain sympathy because of his answers.

He was driven another five miles to Heide. Weary and barefoot on the frozen road, he asked for a horse. They mocked, “Are we supposed to keep a stable for heretics?” At eight in the morning, December 11, a council was assembled in the square of Heide. Henry was accused of teaching against Mary and the church and sentenced to be burned. As they beat and stabbed, Henry prayed, “Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do. Thy name alone is holy, O heavenly Father!” (LW 32:385)

They tried to light the fire, but could not. The beating continued with pikes, maces, and other weapons. They tied him to a ladder to place him on the coals. Henry began to confess the creed, but they struck

him in the face, and then tied his neck to the ladder so tightly that he could not speak. Blood ran from his mouth and nose. They lifted the ladder, but it fell to the side, and a halberd went through Henry.

Still alive through so many wounds, and still unable to light the fire, they at last killed him with repeated blows to the chest with a mace. His body was roasted over the coals.

Henry of Zütphen, age 36, martyred on December 11, 1524 in Heide, Germany, less than 300 miles from Wittenberg. We’ll meet him in the resurrection.

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When we think of the great Christian martyrs we think of the ancient world, of the pagan Roman emperors demanding the Christian’s worship. The worst of all Christian persecutions, the appropriately named “Great Persecution” under Diocletian (begun in 303) ended with the Edict of Milan (313). This marked the end of official persecution, and the beginning of a generally martyr-less millennium (at least in the West).

But martyrdom was reborn in the Reformation.

Luther was certainly paying attention to this development. He was outlawed at the Diet of Worms, condemned to die for his teaching. Luther expected to be martyred. He knew of others,³ and wrote, “The one who shines most brightly among all

³For instance, Luther composed hymn, “A New Song Here Shall Be Begun” (LW 53:211-216, two verses of which are found as “Flung to the Heedless Winds,” TLH 259) on the occasion of the martyrdom of Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes.

these saints is surely your Henry of Zütphen” (LW 32:266).

Luther learned of Henry’s death through a letter from Jacob Probst, and in response wrote a letter of consolation to the congregation at Bremen, comforting them at the death of their pastor.⁴ This letter had three parts: (1) a letter of comfort to the congregation in Bremen, (2) a short exposition of Psalm 9, and (3) the history of Henry, with a detailed account of his death.

Luther’s letter gives us tremendous insight into an evangelical approach to martyrdom. We’ll consider Luther’s letter together, and see what wisdom there is for us, but I would commend this text to you. It is full of courage and comfort.

Luther begins with the Christian premise that the Lord is working, busy, and active in the church.

Luther begins with the Christian premise that the Lord is working, busy, and active in the church. Jesus ascended into heaven not to sit idly by, but to govern all things for the sake of his body, the church (see Eph 1:22-23). The martyrdom of Brother Henry was not an indication that the Lord has lost control. Quite the opposite. The martyrs are the Lord’s way of governing the church.

Second, martyrdom is normal. Luther calls it “the pattern of the true Christian life... suffering and persecution.” “The Christian is a martyr,” Luther says elsewhere (LW 46:39, Admonition to Peace, 1525). He considers the “holy cross” to be a mark of the church (LW 41:164-165, On the Councils and the Church, 1539), and he knows that “all who desire to

live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). Persecution and death are the Christian life.

There was a theology of suffering in the monastery, a theology of the cross, but it was a self-inflicted suffering to purge sin and earn God’s favor. Luther and the other monks would beat and whip themselves, expose themselves to the cold, endure extended fasts, torturing themselves toward purity. When the gospel came clear Luther realized that this excessive affliction was not helpful, even blasphemous. He does understand the benefit of moderate discipline in humbling fleshly desires, but recognizes that the chief affliction of the Christian comes from outside. We don’t afflict ourselves to be holy. We don’t need to whip ourselves; the devil does that for us. The world, the flesh, and the devil afflict us because we are already holy by the blood of Jesus.

Third, martyrdom is noble. The martyrs are heroes. They were courageous, and their suffering and deaths are great feats accomplished in the name of Christ. Those who suffer for the word of God are doing “great and mighty deeds” in the pattern of the saints in Heb 11:33-38. This is a particular mark of the kingdom of God. The great and heroic deeds in this kingdom are the works of confession and suffering. Following the pattern of Jesus, the Christian is ready to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from the confession of Christ’s holy name.

I once heard someone say, “You can learn everything you need to about a person if you know who their heroes are.” This is tremendously insightful, and important for our Christian life. Who are our heroes? Who do we look up to, admire, and want to emulate?

⁴ “The Burning of Brother Henry” is found in Luther’s Works 32:261-286. It was also translated in the Philadelphia Edition of Luther’s Works without the exposition of Psalm 9. The text and audio of that earlier translation is available here: www.wolfmueller.co/henry.

Jesus is much more than our hero, but he is also our hero. And Jesus suffered and died.

The martyrs are also the Christian's heroes. They are the ones who confessed the faith with their words and their life. This was the case in the ancient world, and it is no different for the Reformers.

The Christian hero suffers and dies.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit strengthens the hearts of Christians to endure suffering and death. The Holy Spirit, says Luther, “has given us brave and bold hearts, so that in many places both preachers and hearers are daily being added to the number of the saints. Some have shed their blood...”⁵ This bravery and boldness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). The difficulty in saying “Jesus is Lord” is not in the pronunciation, but in the cause and the consequence. Our hearts are full of unbelief; only the Holy Spirit converts and gives us faith. He also is the cause of our confession. But more than this, there are consequences of making the good confession. The martyrs of the early church were required by the state to deny Christ and confess “Caesar is Lord.” They refused. Instead, they confessed “Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord,” and consequently they were fed to the lions or tied to the burning stake. This is the difficulty of confessing the name of Jesus, and why bravery and boldness are needed in the Christian heart.

Fifth, by the Holy Spirit, the Christian recognizes the glory of God in the suffering of the cross. One of the devil's assaults on our faith is “turning our glory into shame” (Ps 4:2).

⁵ LW 32:265-266

The things most precious to us: Jesus, his blood, suffering, and death, his word and the eternal life that he gives, of these we are ashamed. We hide these things that matter most, and we glory in our strength, our accomplishments, our riches or whatever. We should be boasting in our baptism; we should find glory in our suffering for the name of Jesus. The devil tempts us to be ashamed of these things.

Luther flips this on its head.

...the true Christian life has reappeared, terrible in the world's eyes, since it means suffering and Persecution, but precious and priceless in God's sight. As the Psalter puts it [Ps. 116:15], “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints,” and again in Ps. 72[:14], “Precious is their blood in his sight” (LW 32:266).

One of the themes running through Luther's writing is the contrast of vision. The Lord sees things differently than we do. The death of the martyrs seems terrible in the eyes of the world, but it is glorious in God's eyes. The Lord is giving us his eyes; we begin to see things from God's perspective. By the Holy Spirit we see the blood and death of the martyrs as precious and priceless in God's eyes.

Sixth, then, we see the suffering of the Christians and the death of the martyrs as the Lord's work to demonstrate and confirm his word. False teaching is overthrown by the martyrs' deaths. These deaths were part of God's work of sustaining the church and the preaching of the pure gospel.

Seventh, not only did the martyrs confirm the truth of their preaching, their blood also fights against error.

Luther thus writes of the martyrdom of Henry and others:

It is doubtless out of grace that God allows them to die and shed their blood just at this time, when so many falsehoods and factions are arising, so that he may warn us and through them certify that that [doctrine] is the right doctrine wherein the right Spirit is given, which [is the doctrine] they taught, believed, died for, and by their martyrdom confirmed; just as the holy martyrs long ago died for the sake of the gospel and with their blood sealed and certified it for us (LW 32:266).

Here is Luther's evangelical approach to martyrdom. The old accounts of the martyrs were tempted to see these deaths as purifying, even salvific, as if the martyrs were earning their own salvation. Luther knows that the only blood that washes away sins is the blood of Jesus. The blood of the martyrs does not save, but rather "seals and certifies" the preaching of the gospel.

Now, Luther also knows that some people had died for error, not for the truth. These are not true martyrs, but rather the "devil's martyrs," a German proverb frequently used by Luther. In fact, there is an important and helpful distinction made by St. Augustine on this point. "Men are made martyrs not by the amount of their suffering, but by the cause in which they suffer."⁶

But those killed for the preaching of the true gospel were, in fact, confirming this preaching. In this we

⁶ St. Augustine, Letter 68, To Festus, 2. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf101.vii.1.LXXXIX.html> (accessed 1/10/19). Luther knew this wisdom from Augustine and applied it to Zwingli. For example, see LW 16:103, 38:303.

hear echoes of the famous Tertullian remark, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" (Apologistic, Chapter 50). Luther knew this saying. It had already become something of a proverb. Far from diminishing the church, the death of the martyrs expanded the kingdom of God.

Eighth, this understanding of martyrdom as God's gracious provision for the church should inform the mourning Christians in Bremen how they should react to the murder of their pastor. Luther encourages them not to mourn for Henry, nor to be angry with the murderers, but to be thankful, and to understand that the martyrdom of Henry would be a blessing to the Dithmarchers.

Here's what Luther writes, stunning both in its theology and pastoral application:

There is really far more reason to weep and lament for [Henry's murderers] than for the sainted Henry, and to pray that not only they, but the whole land of Dithmarschen, may be converted and come to the knowledge of the truth. It is to be expected confidently that this will indeed be the fruit of Henry's martyrdom, especially since many in that region are even now turning eagerly to the gospel and are sorry that such a murder was committed among them. For God, who allowed the sainted Henry to suffer there, surely has it in mind not only to punish the godless if they do not repent, but to use this murder for the benefit of many in that land and by it lead them to eternal life (LW 32:267-268).

Moses taught us that "'Vengeance is mine' says the Lord" (Deut 32:35). Paul reminds us of this. "Leave room for wrath" (Rom 12:19). Just as the

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Lord was working in Henry’s martyrdom, so the Lord will work out justice and mercy in the wake of that murder. The Christian work is to recognize the work of God, be thankful for it, and love their neighbor.

Ninth, one of the themes of the accounts of the martyrs is the mercy they have for their murderers. Just as Jesus prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing,” (Luke 23:34) so St. Stephen, the first martyr, prayed “Lord, do not charge them with this sin” (Acts 7:60). We see time and again this absolution on the lips of the martyrs, including Henry.

When he came to the place where the fire had been prepared, he sat down on the ground completely exhausted. Then came the magistrate, Schoesser Maes, who, as it is credibly reported, was bribed to take this part. He condemned Brother Henry to the fire, pronouncing sentence in these words, “This scoundrel has preached against the Mother of God and against the Christian faith, wherefore, on behalf of my gracious lord, the bishop of Bremen, I condemn him to the fire.” Brother Henry replied, “I have not done this, nevertheless, thy will be done, O Lord!” [Luke 22:42]. And lifting his eyes to heaven, he said, “**Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do** [Luke 23:34]. Thy name alone is holy, O heavenly Father!” (LW 32:285).

If Henry dies with mercy for his murderers, then surely those who mourn for Henry can have mercy as well. Through prayer and thanksgiving, faith replaces rage in their hearts.

Luther then commends Psalm 9 to the Christians in Bremen. In his ap-

plication, he first turns the people’s attention to the word of God before he tells them of Henry’s brutal death. Knowing that everything is sanctified by the word of God and prayer (1 Tim 4:5), Luther brings both to the people in his letter to bless and sanctify them.

The kingdom of God is established by the blood and suffering of Jesus, and it is expanded by the blood and suffering of Christians. Luther knows this and he comforts and encourages the people with this truth. “Encourage” is probably the most important word here. Luther knows that the Christian life of suffering required courage, steadfastness. He ends his comments on Psalm 9 with this encouragement:

May God strengthen them and all of you and grant you grace to hold fast to the doctrine sealed by Henry’s blood and, if God should demand it, to follow gladly in his footsteps. Amen. All our brethren greet you in Christ. Pray for us. The grace of God be with you. Amen (LW 32:272).

After the exposition of Psalm 9, Luther tells the story of the life and death of Brother Henry.

The narrative of Henry’s arrest and death brings to light what Luther saw as the chief argument at the time: would the Romanists debate the Scripture? There was a conspiracy to murder Henry *before* he could preach and *without* a trial. Henry’s murderers knew that if people heard him preach, they would be converted. Before his last sermon in Meldorf, they had already sent monks to disrupt his preaching there, but they instead heard the word and confessed the truth. They considered writing against him but feared more

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conversions from the debate. The safest course in the enemies' council was Henry's murder.

Martyrdom, then, was a matter of doctrine, a matter of teaching. The devil's murder of the saints is an attempt to silence the voice of the gospel preached. But, through the blood and suffering of Henry, the gospel is preached. And, through the publication of his death by Luther, the gospel is preached.

Now when Almighty God saw that the time had come for the good Henry to bear witness with his blood to the truth he had proclaimed, He sent him into the midst of the murderers whom He had raised up for this purpose (LW 32:276).

We, too, have the gospel. We, too, know that God forgives our sins. We, too, know that Jesus is preparing a place for us, that he has us, that eternal life is sure, that his promises stand. We know that to live is Christ, and to die is gain. We know that we are set in this world to suffer, that we, like Jesus, have enemies who hate us. We, too, are ready to bleed with Henry, and if it be the Lord's will, to die with the martyrs.

Dancing to Death: Saints Agnes and Agatha and the Humble Fearlessness of Faith

Saints Agnes and Agatha were two of Luther's favorite martyrs.

Agnes was born in Rome in 291 to a wealthy Christian family. She was a beautiful young girl, and many of the men of Rome sought her, but she refused, having committed her life to prayer and study of Scripture. Rebuffed, these men reported her to the authorities as a Christian.

She was dragged naked through the streets, forced to live in a brothel for a month, and then beheaded in a spectacle.

Agnes of Rome, age 12, martyred on 21 January 304, in the Great Persecution of Diocletian. We'll meet her in the resurrection.

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Agatha was born in Sicily in 231. Like Agnes, it is thought that Agatha was born to a wealthy Christian family and, at a young age, took a vow of virginity, committing her life to prayer and study of the Scriptures. (Luther understood Agatha to be an example of how the monasteries had begun well, as schools of the Scriptures.) A certain Quintianus, provost of Sicily, desired to marry her, both for her beauty and her wealth. He brought Agatha to make a sacrifice to idols, but she refused. Here began an escalating series of tortures, first to convert, and then to destroy Agatha. He put her into the custody of a foul mother and nine daughters for thirty days to dissuade her from her faith. He then began a trial, urging her to choose between idolatry or painful torment and, when she refused, imprisoned her for the night – to which she went with a good will as if to a wedding. In the ensuing days as she remained steadfast, Quintianus ordered her drawn and stretched, her breasts cut off, then imprisoned again. Accounts relate that she was miraculously healed, inciting Quintianus to have her rolled naked on burning brands, then imprisoned again:

When she came into the prison she joined her hands, holding

*We know
that to live is
Christ, and to
die is gain.*

them up to heavenward, and said in praying, “Lord God Jesu Christ which hast created me of nought, and sith my youth hast kept me and hast suffered me to live well in my youth, which hast taken from mine heart the love of the world and hast made me to overcome the torments, and hast lent me patience among the pains, I pray thee that thou take my spirit, for it is time that thou make me to depart from this world and to come to thy mercy.”

This orison and prayer made she on high tofore many persons. And anon after she gave up the ghost, and rendered her soul, the year of our Lord two hundred and fifty-three in the time of Decius, the emperor of Rome.⁷

Agatha of Sicily, age 22, martyred in 253, in the persecution of Decius. We'll meet her in the resurrection.

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In the 54 volumes of the American Edition of Luther's Works, he mentions Agatha about 31 times, and Agnes 41 times, often mentioned together. Luther understands their joyful confidence in the midst of suffering to be a work of the Holy Spirit and the mark of a Christian. He brings these martyrs into his teaching as the prime examples of how the Lord overcomes the world and the devil through the victory of faith.

Luther is moved by their cheerfulness in the midst of such mistreatment and torture. They surpassed courage. They rejoiced in the midst

of terror. They danced to death. This is the work of faith giving the martyrs a different heart, mind, and courage. They are new creations, recreated by the Holy Spirit who both led Jesus to temptation and raised him from the dead. They are not of this world, not bound to this life, but free to live and free to die. Eternal life has taken hold of them, and the grip of life is so tight that the grip of death does not frighten them at all.

Agnes and Agatha treasured the Lord's word above all things, resulting in a corresponding disdain for “life, limb, nobility, friendship, and possessions” (LW 35:370, Preface to the Epistle of the Romans, 1546, quoted in the Formula of Concord, IV:10,12). Thus, their dance to death was not a manufactured joy or a coerced contentment. Christ was truly set apart in their heart, their treasure was in heaven, and the summons to death's sleep was truly sweet.

Suffering helps us lift our eyes “to the life beyond,” to eternal life where true joys are found, where Jesus is preparing a place for us. Because death brings us into the kingdom of Christ, and because suffering brings us closer to death, the troubles of this life lead us to eternal joys! The devil cannot help but serve our Lord Jesus. He tempts us, troubles us, threatens us, tortures us, and takes us by the hand and leads us to our Bridegroom Christ! Glory! Lord, give us the eyes to see what Agnes and Agatha saw!

Just as the devil brought ruin on himself and his kingdom by driving Jesus to the cross, so now he continues to work his own destruction through the crosses and troubles he brings to the Christian. Because the Christian is forgiven, filled with the Holy Spirit, and joyful, the devil's at-

Christ was truly set apart in their heart, their treasure was in heaven, and the summons to death's sleep was truly sweet.

⁷ Jerome, *On Martyrdom*, 2:5-9. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.vii.ii.ii.html> (accessed 1/10/19).

The strength and might of God is wrapped up in humility; the victory of faith is hidden under the suffering of the martyrs.

tacks confirm the mercy of God, and culminate in the great gift of death, our heavenly birth.

The Christian might be lowly in every way: small, weak, poor, foolish, but the word that dwells in us is indestructible. The strength and might of God is wrapped up in humility; the victory of faith is hidden under the suffering of the martyrs. Faith sees this and rejoices and grows more and more courageous.

This courage and joy in the face of death is so strange Luther considers it a kind of spiritual drunkenness — drunk with joy. There is a sanctified madness to the Christian's approach to suffering.

[Agnes and Agatha] not only boldly and confidently conquered the devil and the world through their deaths, but were also cheerful with all their hearts, just as if they had been drunk with great joy. And it does vex the devil beyond measure when one can so confidently despise his great might and guile. In our times, too, many have died cheerfully because they have confessed Christ (LW 12:177, On Psalm 23:5).

Remembering that the devil's great "might and guile" is the fear of death (Heb 2:14), we see that the joy of Agnes and Agatha was not only conquering the devil and the world, but vexing the devil beyond measure. The devil hates it when we are not afraid.

Now, what if we are not ready to die like the martyrs? What if we are afraid, and tremble rather than dance to our deaths? Luther has four pieces of advice (see LW 12:178, On Psalm 23): 1) don't despair, 2) consider Paul and David who had the same struggles (see Psalm 130,

1 Cor 2:3, Rom 7:24), 3) know that the flesh and the spirit are battling in you, and 4) pray that you would remain in the word and grow in faith and the knowledge of Christ.

Readiness to die is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Lord will give readiness and confidence, and even joy (!) at the right time, when it is needed. The martyrs are not examples of superhuman faith; they are examples of the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Cheerfulness in the face of death is not accomplished by our own strength, but by the Holy Spirit working through the word of God.

Luther knows that this dying — joyful dying! — is not easy. But Christ is risen! Christ has triumphed! The kingdom of darkness is overthrown. The battle is over, there is no fighting left for us to do. Our work is to accept the victory of Jesus, sing about it, glory in it, make a show of it, and be of good cheer.

When Agnes and Agatha dance to death, they are celebrating the resurrection. When they suffer with such good cheer, they confess the empty tomb.

There are other philosophies that have attempted to set people free from the fear of death (LW 8:191, On Genesis 48:21). Epicureanism, for example, teaches that there is no judgment after death, and therefore death is not to be feared. This is not a Christian fearlessness. Death is not the end, but the beginning. Death, for the Christian, is the doorway to life eternal. Where is death's victory? Christ is risen. Death is swallowed up by life. How can death devour us when it has already been chewed up and spit out by Jesus?

Faith brings the objective truth of the resurrection of Jesus into the

Christian heart and conscience. It changes who we are and, in turn, it changes how we see the world. We are a new creation, and when we are made new, “all things are made new!” (2 Cor 2:17). God is our friend. Life is a gift. Death is a sleep. Trouble is a joy. Persecution is a dance:

When the heart is cheerful, everything looks happy, even the cross and persecution. Thus St. Agnes, led to the sacrifice, was in her heart being escorted to the dance. Thus all the godly regard all things as happy in inner peace and happiness and rejoicing in the Spirit. Here you see that all Christians are joyful because peace is a fruit of the Spirit, and so is joy (LW 17:258, On Isaiah 55:12).

To the pure, all things are pure. Even the devil is a servant of God to bring us to Christ and help us on the way to eternal life.

This is a very practical theology. It was practical for Luther. The pope and the emperor were raging against him. Many preachers of the gospel were being martyred. Luther expected martyrdom himself. What do you do in these circumstances? Or, perhaps a better question, what is the Lord accomplishing through these circumstances?

Thus by not turning away evils or enemies but by turning them loose, the Lord causes us to feel safe, to rejoice always, not to be overcome by any evil, even though the whole world may bare its fangs against us. Let the pope rage. Let the emperor and his princes threaten us with evil. We shall sit in the beauty of peace, even though they throw us into prison. If they are allowed to give themselves over to their wrath, if

finally they even slay us, we will rejoice no less than if we had been invited to a wedding. This is the response St. Agnes gave to the tyrant who was about to kill her, etc. (LW 20:25, On Zechariah 2).

The Lord lets the evil loose on us so that we would feel safe and rejoice! This seems counter-intuitive, but the Lord teaches us joy *in* tribulation. He teaches us the beauty of peace in prison. The Lord overcomes the strong through the weak, and he gives us that victory, even if we are slain (see LW 24:277, On John 15:19).

Luther also knows that the target of persecution is Christ and his word. We are attacked because we are in Christ and Christ is in us. This gives us even more confidence. Jesus cannot be overthrown. He holds the field forever. The devil attacks our body, but he really desires our “tears and heart blood,” that is, our sadness and despair, our fear and worship, but these belong to Christ. We are the redeemed, the baptized, the children of God. We are forgiven and given eternal life, and therefore we are joyful and free.

As we rejoice in suffering and are cheerful in death, we “turn the tables” on the devil, we mock and sing and laugh gleefully at him. The joy of the Lord is our strength, and faith in God’s promises is the shield that stops all the devil’s darts from reaching their target.

One of the ways the devil attacks the church is by laughing at her. We feel the scorn of the world. We know that our culture despises the church and her doctrine. Luther would “turn the tables:” we are laughing at the devil, despising the world, defying the rage of the persecutors with courage,

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comfort, and joy. Scowl fierce as they will, they can harm us none, neither will they steal our joy.

With this confidence, the enemies of Christ “will consume themselves” (LW 24:277, On John 15:19). The devil wants us to fear. Our fearlessness enrages him. The devil wants us to doubt. Our faith makes him angry. The devil wants us to be sad. Our cheer drives him mad. He exalts himself above God. We see his foolish pride for what it really is, and laugh, and our laughter reminds him of his lowly place. The confidence of our faith is the devil’s agony.

The Lord uses the devil’s own works to undo the devil’s kingdom. This understanding is fundamental to Luther’s preaching. The Lord works in hidden ways. It must be. The Christian is immortal, born again by the word. We are undying, but this immortality is hidden in our dying flesh, cloaked in our weakness. There is a trick the Lord plays on the devil; he hides his strength in weakness. He covers life with death. And in this he enlists the devil into his service. The Christian is in on it. We know that our momentary suffering is working in us the weight of eternal glory. We know that suffering produces hope (Rom 5:3). We know that Jesus is preparing a place for us (John 14:2), so that even though we have trouble in this world, we have good cheer (John 16:33) in the confidence that Jesus has overcome the world, and that he is crushing the devil under our feet (Rom 16:20).

St. Agnes makes it into Luther’s last sermon, preached on 15 February 1546 in Eisleben, three days before his death. He preached about the rest and light yoke Jesus gives. Jesus gives us the strength to endure suffering. Jesus gives us the confidence

to die with joy. Jesus gives us his Spirit who carries the heavy burdens for us. The hot coals we walk on will be like a bed of roses. When we suffer for Christ’s sake, he is pleased with us, and we are confident in him.

Christ says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden” [Matt. 11:28], and it is as though he were saying: Just stick to me, hold on to my Word and let everything else go. If you are burned and beheaded for it, then have patience, I will make it so sweet for you that you easily would be able to bear it. It has also been written of St. Agnes that when she was led to prison to be killed, it was to her as if she were going to a dance. Where did she get this? Ah, only from this Christ, from believing this saying, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” That is to say: If things go badly, I will give you the courage even to laugh about it; and if even though you walk on fiery coals, the torment shall nevertheless not be so severe and the devil shall nevertheless not be so bad, and you will rather feel that you are walking on roses. I will give you the heart to laugh even though Turk, pope, emperor, and everybody else be filled with horrible wrath and rage. Only come to me; and if you are facing oppression, death, or torture, because the pope, the Turk, and emperor are attacking you, do not be afraid; it will not be heavy for you, but light and easy to bear, for I give you the Spirit, so that the burden, which for the world would be unbearable, becomes for you a light burden. For when you suffer for my sake, it is my yoke and my burden, which I lay upon you in grace, that you may know that

this your suffering is well pleasing to God and to me and that I myself am helping you to carry it and giving you power and strength to do so (LW 51:391-392).

They Loved Not Their Lives Unto Death: Martyrs for Pastors

Hope Lutheran Church in Aurora, Colo., doesn't have air conditioning. (This should not dissuade you from visiting when you're in town.) One particularly hot summer Sunday morning, the people looked wilted. They had melted, and their faces, as I made the announcements after the service, were full of expectant suffering. So I told the story of Romanus.⁸

“Romanus went to Antioch to encourage the Christians who were suffering there. He was arrested and beaten. He preached to the proconsul, who was so enraged that they had his skin scraped off with the side of a sword. He still preached, so the soldiers struck his face, knocked out his teeth, tore out his beard, and scratched his eyelids. Still he preached and confessed Christ. The proconsul ordered them to cut open his cheeks. They did, and Romanus said, ‘I thank you, sir, for giving me more mouths to praise my God!’ They tried to set him on fire, but the fire wouldn't start, so they threw him in prison where he died a few days later. If our brother Romanus can endure all that,” I concluded, “we can make it through a hot service.”

Nobody complained about the heat.

I'm pretty sure that is a *bad* use of the martyrs, but I do think it sets us off in the right direction. The martyrs give us courage.

Hebrews 12 reminds us that we are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses. They are cheering us on as we labor to finish our race. The martyrs remind us that we have not yet suffered to the point of shedding blood. They are singing the distant triumph song whose conquering strains strengthen our hearts and bodies.

The martyrs remind us that we are not alone in the struggle, that we do not suffer by ourselves, that we are not the first to walk this narrow path.

Thereupon we should encourage and arouse ourselves by such examples to bear any difficulties, dangers, and griefs. But if we are killed, it is certain that by this means we are truly liberated and rescued from all evils, just as no evil at all befell the martyrs in former times, but they obtained the end of all their troubles. But if we are preserved, we should persevere and wait in hope and faith; for God does not hate us or turn us away in hostile fashion, no matter how He may conduct Himself toward us otherwise. Let us rather conclude: “I know that I have been baptized, that I have eaten the body and drunk the blood of the Son of God, that I have been absolved by divine authority, that all my sins have certainly been forgiven me, and that victory over the devil, death, and hell has been promised me. What more should I ask for?” (LW 7:131-132, On Genesis 41:1-7)

Our Lutheran theology is rightly cautious about the cult of the saints, the superstitious and idolatrous practice of elevating the saints to an office and glory they do not have. The martyrs did not save themselves, and they cannot save us. They were

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⁸ More about Romanus here: <https://wolffmueller.co/martyrmondayromanus/>

Our heroes stand before our minds and imaginations as pictures of lives well-lived.

sinner rescued by Jesus, like us. We do not look to them for help or intercession. We look *with* them to our Lord Jesus for help and intercession.

We want to approach our consideration of the saints and martyrs with caution, careful to avoid giving to them the glory due to Jesus. But we are also careful to not forget them, to remember that the Lord gave the martyrs as a gift to the church.

The Lutheran Confessions outline a three-fold honor due the saints.

Our Confession approves giving honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we should thank God for showing examples of his mercy, revealing his will to save men, and giving teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are his greatest gifts, we should extol them very highly; we should also praise the saints themselves for using these gifts, just as Christ praises faithful businessmen (Matt. 25:21,23). The second honor is the strengthening of our faith: when we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we are encouraged to believe that grace does indeed abound more than sin (Rom. 5:20). The third honor is the imitation, first of their faith and then of their other virtues, which each should imitate in accordance with his calling (Ap XXI:4-6).

First, then, we thank God for giving the gift of martyrs to the church and preserving their history for us. Second, we are encouraged when we hear of the martyrs suffering such great things for the name of Christ. Third, we follow after the martyrs, both in their believing and in their living and dying. They are our heroes.

We need heroes.

Our heroes stand before our minds and imaginations as pictures of lives well-lived. Knowingly or unknowingly we act, talk, and think like our heroes, or at least we try. Part of our Christian life is being aware of our heroes, and part of pastoral care is cultivating the right heroes for the congregation. This is especially important in our modern context.

We live in an anti-heroic age. There is a systematic dismantling of any hero. Our culture is hell-bent on tearing off the pedestal any person of greatness. We want to look down on rather than look up to. (Consider, as an example, the refrain concerning the American founders. They were all slave-holders. Progressivism attacks history. The future must be exalted, and the past, therefore, must be brought low.) This is dangerous. We all need heroes; we all need champions. The martyrs and confessors are the Christian heroes. They are the race-finishers. They have that for which we still endeavor.

Their stories help us make sense of our own troubles. The histories of the martyrs teach us wisdom to face our own suffering. They remind us that our suffering is not in vain. The courage and joy of the martyrs remind us that there is a better way to die.

But the martyrs can also be intimidating. When we hear of Agnes and Agatha dancing to the fire we think, "I could never do that. I'm afraid. My faith is weak." The martyrs were not superheroes. They, also, were afraid. They, also, were weak. It was the Holy Spirit who gave them the strength they needed when they needed it, and not before. And the same Holy Spirit is at work in us.

We should not be afraid of the hour of death. The martyrs are not ex-

amples of great people with great strength. The martyrs are examples of God’s great provision in time of need.

Here is how Jesus comforts us:

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt 10:16-20).

“Do not be anxious.” The Holy Spirit provides the faith and the wisdom for such an hour.

The martyrs help put things in perspective.

I often hear people say, “It helps me to remember that someone is always worse off than me.” I suppose that is true. The martyrs were bad off. We might be ridiculed at work or school for our faith, but at least our heads are still attached. But I think there is something more. The suffering of the martyrs is not put before us to engender sympathy. They certainly wouldn’t think so. They are blessed. The martyrs consider themselves blessed, both in their suffering and in their death.

The martyrs glory in their tribulation (Rom 5:3). They have counted it all joy to have fallen into various trials (Jas 1:2). All joy! The martyrs follow the footsteps of the apostles who

left their beating by the Sanhedrin “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41).

Peter says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But *rejoice* insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also *rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed*. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, *you are blessed*, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him *not be ashamed*, but let him *glorify God* in that name” (1 Pet 4:12-16).

The martyrs are boasting in their death. They are glorying in their weakness. They are praising God with their blood. They leaned into their suffering because they knew the mercy of Christ would catch them.

It’s true, sometimes the martyrs seem a little too excited to die. We wonder at Perpetua guiding the sword to her own neck. The cross will come, we don’t need to go looking for it. But the martyrs were right in confessing that the best is yet to come, that death is the last enemy to be conquered, and that the gloomy portal leads to bliss untold.

The martyrs knew that to suffer in the name of Christ was good. They knew that to die in the name of Jesus is good and blessed. This is something we need to remember.

Paul writes to the Philippians, “For me, to live is Christ, to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). This is true for all the baptized. Our death is gain.

The cross will come, we don’t need to go looking for it. But the martyrs were right in confessing that the best is yet to come, that death is the last enemy to be conquered, and that the gloomy portal leads to bliss untold.

This is the right perspective the martyrs teach us. They remind us that we are free to suffer, free to die, free from the fear of death.

In an astonishing passage in Hebrews 2 we hear, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb 2:14-15).

If we begin at the end of that verse, we notice that the fear of death makes us slaves to the devil. This should be noted well and preached often. When we are afraid of death we are bound, subject to lifelong slavery.

The obvious example of how this works is put before us in the persecution of the church. The Christians were brought before the proconsul and given the option: idolatry or death. Offer this little pinch of incense or we will set you on fire. Say, “Caesar is lord,” or we will throw you to the lions. Idolatry or death, and the fear of death would push the Christians into idolatry. Not the martyrs. The fear of death had been crucified with Christ.

Jesus (back to Hebrews 2) in his death destroyed the one who had the power of death. The strength of death is the law and sin, but the death of Jesus forgives sins, and in this forgiveness, death loses its strength, the devil loses his power. Where the forgiveness of sin is, there also is life and salvation.

Freedom from the fear of death is freedom from the devil’s tyranny. And more. Freedom from the fear of death is a triumph over the devil.

Revelation 12 shows us the vision of the saints and martyrs triumphing over the devil. “And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev 12:11). “In this manner the saintly martyrs overcame death and all dangers; for they were sure that God was kind to them” (LW 3:264, On Genesis 19:11).

In this world we will have tribulation. It is appointed for each one of us to die. How do we suffer and die well? How do pastors teach their people to suffer and die?

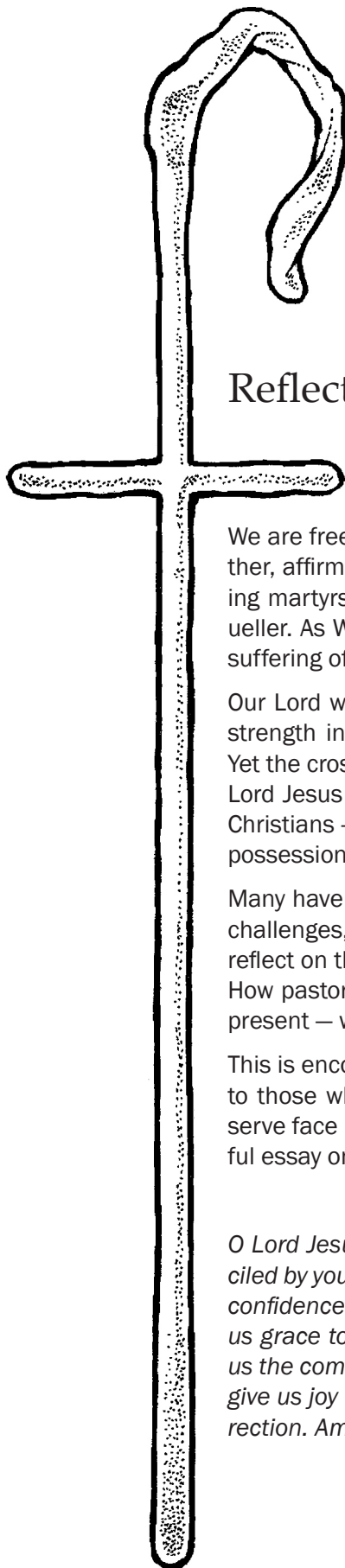
The martyrs remind us to keep our eye on the prize. Jesus waits on the other side of death. Our race ends in his arms. This light and momentary affliction will soon give way to an eternal splendor.

The martyrs are part of that great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on, “Keep the faith!” “You can make it!” It might soon be time for us to suffer and die, but Christ has suffered and died for us, and our martyr’s confidence is in him. Christ is our Savior. He is risen, and he will welcome us into his kingdom. May God grant it for Christ’s sake. Amen.

It is high time that we earnestly pray God that he hallow his name. But it will cost blood, and those who enjoy the inheritance of the holy martyrs, the inheritance which was won with the blood of the martyrs, must in their turn take on the role of martyr (LW 44:54).☩

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Reflection

We are free to live in Christ; we are free to die in Christ. This is Scripture. This is Luther, affirming sola Scriptura. And this is the great Reformer’s assertion — concerning martyrs and martyrdom — from the word as examined by Pastor Bryan Wolfmüller. As Wolfmüller writes, “The kingdom of God is established by the blood and suffering of Jesus; it is expanded by the blood and suffering of Christians.”

Our Lord works in hidden ways. He even tricks the demonic trickster by hiding his strength in apparent weakness, especially in his own incarnation and crucifixion. Yet the cross is not merely a relic, but a reality. Luther asserts that the church of our Lord Jesus Christ has “the holy possession of the sacred cross.” And 21st-century Christians — those still marked with the cross at the baptismal font — hold this holy possession.

Many have observed that the church now lives in a post-Christian age. It is, with its challenges, closer to the time of the early Christians. How good and necessary to reflect on the martyrs — past and present — who witnessed in their lives and words. How pastorally good and pastorally necessary to reflect on the martyrs — past and present — who witnessed with their sufferings and their deaths.

This is encouragement and comfort to the soul. This is encouragement and comfort to those who care for souls. This is encouragement and comfort as the souls we serve face uncertain times and unknown challenges. I commend to you this insightful essay on suffering and dying with Christ and for Christ.



O Lord Jesus Christ, grant to your holy Church, redeemed by your suffering, reconciled by your death, and revived by your third-day victory, confident hope and hopeful confidence as she lives and suffers and dies in you. In the face of uncertainty, grant us grace to cling to your strong and certain word. In the midst of unknowns, grant us the comfort that the gates of hell will not prevail against your precious bride. And give us joy in the anticipation of meeting Henry and Agnes and Agatha in the resurrection. Amen.

Pastor Mark Barz