

Preface

The story behind the writing of this book is not as complicated as the story of its subject matter, but it is unusual. When Timothy Lull died very unexpectedly in May 2003, he left behind a shocked and mourning family, a grieving community, and untold numbers of in-the-works projects and plans. Some of his papers were collected and published as *On Being Lutheran* by Augsburg Fortress in 2006. But his biggest project was this one—an intellectual biography of Martin Luther. In various ways, he had been working on it for twenty years. I had the pleasure of being his research assistant for the project, and delighted in many conversations about the crucial decisions any interpreter of Luther must make, the paths taken by predecessors, and the needs and interests of present readers.

His widow Mary Carlton Lull and sister Patricia Lull entrusted the project to me to carry forward, and I am deeply grateful for their trust and support. Tim had finished most of the research, much of the outlining, and about half of the writing of this text. I hope that I was able to approach the inimitable style of his lively prose and to remain faithful to his general commitments and interests. In patterning myself after his voice, I gradually found my own. The first time we discussed the book, he proudly announced that he was going to call it *Luther: Six Crises*. He was shocked when I alerted him to

the fact that *Six Crises* was the name of Richard Nixon's first memoir, and Tim, no sympathizer with Nixon's politics, quickly resolved to find a seventh crisis. The book's present title highlights, instead, the character traits of Luther that led him through so many crises.

The world is already filled with Luther books, and one feels slightly uneasy about presenting another. But it is an endless and joyful task to introduce Luther to new generations, and especially to general readers and beginning theological students. They will appreciate the gains of recent scholarship but may not find there the book they had been seeking. We are grateful for all the books that we have read and taught by other scholars that make this book possible. But despite their excellence, we found we also had something to say.

Often I have asked professors and others who know the Luther story well what the best *first* book on Luther is that people should read. There is no consensus, and in fact there is often confusion. Many books "tell the Luther story" as the compelling drama it is. Many books interpret Luther's theology, often in extraordinary detail. Yet it is hard to think of a book that tells the dramatic story *as* a theological story, giving due attention to both Luther's work and his context. And we have chosen *resilience* (modern popular psychology might say "grit") as the best way to understand both.

This version of Luther's life and thought reflects several of our convictions about the man. While he was a flawed thinker and leader ("sinner and righteous at the same time," as he taught us all to think about ourselves), he was also a wonderfully productive person over three decades, living for the last twenty-five years of his life under papal excommunication and imperial threat of death. Yet he found resources to keep rising to new challenges. There is inspiration for us all in such a life. But it means the whole story needs telling, not just the familiar and exciting early years but also the achievements and

disasters of the older Luther. Only with a survey of the whole life can resilience be even partially understood.

We also came to believe that Luther was able to be Luther because he was surrounded by extraordinary people. These were not simply a circle of friends, but also a talented group of coworkers. They did not always work together easily or well, but they stuck together as long as Luther lived, continuing to remember their common purpose, and were held together in large part by Luther's own need for them and his ability to draw out the particular gifts of each. Hopefully, this introduction to Luther's life and thought has slighted neither Melanchthon nor Bugenhagen nor Spalatin at the court, nor the Cranachs in their studio, nor even the difficult but necessary Nicholas von Amsdorf. The princes of Saxony are here—Frederick and John and John Frederick—because, in the end, their support was decisive. Katherine von Bora Luther is here too, not only in the kitchen and the bedchamber, but also as the theological advisor and friend to her husband that she became.

We write as theologians first and historians second. We keep coming back to Luther because we continue to find in him fresh material for theological reflection in our time. That means writing with a bias and agenda, but readers have learned in recent decades to suspect that all biographies of Luther are “up to something.” Luther by no means has all the answers, and in this self-critical ecumenical age we should be able to tell his story with great honesty. But the issues on which he was working are of continuing interest not only to Lutherans, but also to all Christians who wonder how an ancient faith can have current credibility, especially given the flaws and failures of every church. Those were by no means rooted out once and for all by the Reformation but continue to haunt us to this day.

We have not yet exhausted what we can learn from Luther about the grace of God, Christian freedom, the priesthood of all Christians,

and especially the theology of the cross. Tim's work on Luther for twenty years was done less with a historical microscope (though this work is important, has been done well by many, and we have benefited from it) and more with the binoculars of theology and the life of the church. In other words, he sought to highlight both what was timeless about Luther and what was timely to say. Readers who, after finishing this book, want to know more about the debates over how to conceive of the Reformation and how Luther fits into it will find many resources here to guide their reading.

This introduction to Luther's life and thought is written in a traditional narrative form. For all the compromises that involves, it still seems closest to what readers of a Luther book might be seeking: to understand what happened to Luther in the course of his life and how he responded. We have tried especially to use Luther's own words when possible, for those wonderful (and sometimes terrible) words are still the reason that we read Luther today. He had a great gift for getting the attention of such a diverse range of people—not only fellow academics and religious leaders, but also those ordinary Christians whose presence he noticed, whose part in the church he celebrated, whose aspirations he understood. We have relished the opportunity to reread (and even read for the first time) much of what Luther wrote, and we hope this biography will point many readers back to direct engagement with Luther himself. The notes indicate many places where readers interested in finding more can begin, both in Luther's fifty-five-volume English translation *Luther's Works* (LW) from Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House (with more volumes on the way from Concordia), and in the widely accessible single-volume *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (MLBTW3), edited by Timothy Lull, now in its third edition with Fortress Press. References to Luther's German and Latin writings are minimal because they are less widely available.

Much of this book was written in the first three months of 2001 while Tim and Mary Carlton were on sabbatical leave at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. Tim registered his gratitude to that school for doing everything possible to provide a comfortable and stimulating place for writing, and to Professor Dirk J. Smit, the faculty secretary Mrs. Wilma Riekert, and the library staff for their help in so many ways. Professor Smit was a good friend and most important colleague for twenty years. Special thanks also go to the management and staff of the Java Café for providing a wonderful home away from home, doses of caffeine, and access to the Internet.

Tim also thanked Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, its faculty, and its board of directors for granting him a sabbatical and for their support in his attempts to be a teaching and writing president. Pastor Steve McKinley, a member of the board of directors, took a leave from his own congregation to serve as acting president during the sabbatical, thus making him a kind of godfather to this book. Administrative colleagues Sharon Gruebmeier, Paul Evenson, Ellen Peterson, and Dean Michael B. Aune deserve special thanks for extra burdens they carried during this absence.

The rest of the book was written while I was teaching at Wabash College and earlier at Thiel College, and I am glad to thank the administrations of both, especially Dean Gary Philips at Wabash, for their generous support. Oxford University and its Faculty of Theology and Religion graciously welcomed my wife Kelly and me for Trinity Term 2013 to use their wonderful libraries and benefit from lively conversation. St. Cross College, its Master Mark Jones, and Professor Diarmaid Macculloch helped arrange an ideal place in which to finish writing the book, and Johannes Zachhuber, Simeon Zahl, and Bill Wood were cherished conversation partners.

The cover art is a new portrait of Luther, specially commissioned for this biography, and created by acclaimed painter Brad Holland. Before achieving fame in the art world as illustrator for the New York Times op-ed section, Brad was Tim Lull's childhood friend in Fremont, Ohio. We are grateful for his contributions to this book, and to Tim's memory.

Many readers of the manuscript offered suggestions that made this a better book. These include Sharon Gruebmeier, Mark Fisher, Daniel Peterson, Rob Saler, Lynne Miles-Morillo, David Blix, Kelly Nelson, Lowell Anderson, Martin Roth, and two anonymous readers. Students in courses at Wabash College and Thiel College read drafts of portions of the book, and I benefited from their good-heartedness in examining the argument: Stephen Batchelder, Joe Mount, Matthew Michaloski, Drew Breuckman, Patrick Wright, Grant Klembara, Kevin Kennedy, Sam Vaught, Cole Chapman, Ethan Groff, Abraham Hall, Harrison Schafer, Ashley Chase née Ahrens, Monica Smith, Ian Meakim, Abby Kusserow, Jamaal Dorsey, Marica Turan, Meredith Toth née Nagle, and James Beach. My thanks also go to Abraham Hall for his help in preparing the index. The team at Fortress Press, especially Will Bergkamp and Lisa Gruenisen, have been incredibly patient and helpful in bringing this book to the public. Tim's long-term conversation partner Mary-Carlton Lull once again accompanied him on this long and surprising journey, and her great spirit is probably evident wherever this book comes to life. My wife Kelly and I were blessed with the birth of our daughter Madeleine during the writing of these pages, which helped me understand Luther's writings on parenthood and Christian vocation.

This book is dedicated to Tim's parents, Raymond Robert Lull and Ruth Cole Lull and to my parents, Rodney and Mary Nelson

in thanks for their strong faith and wonderful support all along the way. Both Tim and I had our parents' blessings to study theology, even though something a bit more lucrative might have been more attractive. That was one battle Luther fought that we are happy to have been spared.

For the Lull Family,

Derek R. Nelson
Oxford and Crawfordsville
May 20, 2015