

Consensus

Volume 16
Issue 2 *Lutheran Pietism*

Article 16

11-1-1990

Luther in context

Robert A. Kelly

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Robert A. (1990) "Luther in context," *Consensus*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol16/iss2/16>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

developments and issues that have not received the attention they deserve. As an essentially revisionist treatment, the book is no doubt intended to be challenging rather than definitive. It deserves to be read and pondered.

John W. Kleiner
Lutheran Theological Seminary

Luther in Context

David C. Steinmetz

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986

140 pp. + index, paper

Books and articles about Martin Luther abound today as much as anytime since the beginnings of modern Luther studies in 1883, yet most are disappointing at best. We too often meet only the Luther of legend, either the angelic Luther or the demonic Luther depending on the ideology of the writer, and very seldom are enlightened about why this particular professor of sacred scripture in a backwater German university has had such an impact on theology and church. Even lifelong Lutherans—dare we say, even Lutheran pastors—deal with Luther through a haze of stereotypes.

David Steinmetz has already established a reputation as one of the best historians of Reformation theology working in North America today. He has also shown himself to be a careful and accurate student of Luther's theology in articles and his book *Luther and Staupitz*. With such a reputation, expectations for new books will always be high. In *Luther in Context* Steinmetz does not disappoint.

The book is a series of essays which began life as lectures, delivered mostly during 1983, the 500th Anniversary year. These are not the usual jubilee year pabulum, though, but meaty explorations of various themes in Luther's theology. Steinmetz is especially strong, as the title implies, in showing Luther in the context of other late-Medieval and Reformation era theologians.

One of Steinmetz' ongoing research interests has been Reformation hermeneutics. That topic appears in essays on Romans 9, Abraham, the Lord's Supper, and Noah. "Luther and the Drunkenness of Noah" is typical. In that essay Steinmetz compares Denis the Carthusian (died 1471), young Luther, old Luther, and modern exegesis. Because the comparison is Denis rather than an author whom Luther cites (such as Nicholas of Lyra or St. Augustine), we see where Luther is typical of his times and where different. In this way an accurate view of Luther the exegete is portrayed.

Steinmetz provides an excellent summary of one of Luther's central theological themes, the hidden God, in an essay by that title. Speaking

of Luther's distinction between the hidden God and the revealed God in *Bondage of the Will*, Steinmetz says:

... [T]he central theological problem for Luther remains the problem of God. The mercy and compassion of God are always set against the background of God's hiddenness. There is a God who wills and does not will the death of the sinner, whose life-giving promises in the Gospel are hidden under the death-dealing prohibitions of the Law. The thought which terrifies Luther is not that the devil is his enemy but that God might be. Therefore, Luther clings with both hands to the revealed God against the hidden God, to the Gospel against the Law, to what is heard against what is seen (31).

Exactly. Which is why those who are uncomfortable with Luther's existential combination of honesty and *angst* will never be able to grasp his theology as they attempt to domesticate these fears which all of us have but few of us are willing to express. Here are Luther studies which open our ears to the voice of the real Luther and which express Luther's theological genius. Read Steinmetz and you will know why Luther's work forever changed the course of theology.

Robert A. Kelly
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Justification: The Article By Which The Church Stands or Falls

Carl E. Braaten

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990

\$16.25

What does it mean to be Lutheran today? What "distinguishes" our theology from all other theologies loose in the marketplace today? "Justification by Grace through Faith" (God's unconditional acceptance of each of us) is THE ARTICLE that enables and empowers, or to use Braaten's words, "gives shape and direction to the theology of the Lutheran movement." Taking a cue from Tillich and the reformer, Martin Chemnitz, Braaten reminds us of "the radicality of Justification". "Justification by faith alone is *the* article by which the church stands or falls, and (is) not merely one criterion among many concerning Christian authenticity," writes Braaten. "Justification is *prior* to faith," says Braaten. "The fact that God accepts us as we are, simply as sinners, is the creative ground of our acceptance of God's acceptance, of receiving the forgiveness of sins. Justification as an objective event precedes the subjective side of receiving by faith what God offers" (42). Faith *follows* justification.