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In Praise of Prof. Dr. Robert Kolb On the Occasion of the Awarding of the Hermann-Sasse-Prize

Werner Klän

Highly esteemed Bishop, worthy Rector, honored colleagues, beloved students, ladies and gentlemen, beloved sisters and brothers, and last, but not least: dear Robert Kolb, brother, colleague, and friend!

The Question: What Can We Learn From History?

“Most people don’t want to be taught by history, but rather to teach history.” Robert Kolb wrote this to me just one month ago.¹ When I was given the honor to compose the Laudatio for his reception of the Herrmann-Sasse-Prize—he is by the way, as far as I know, the first to receive the prize who actually took a course under the Namesake of the prize (Winter Quarter 1964)—the following question immediately came to me: What does it mean “to learn from history?” For example, what happens when someone concerns himself academically with Martin Luther—indeed, above all with him,² but also with Philipp Melanchthon,³ Nikolas von Amsdorf,⁴ Cyriakus and Johann Spangenberg,⁵ Jacob Andreae,⁶ Martin Chemnitz, Caspar Peucer,⁷ and other leading figures of early Lutheranism? What happens when one gives an account of the Book of Concord⁸ and the assurance that its legacy was passed down from the first generation of Wittenberg theology to the second and third generations?⁹ What does “learning from history” look like when one understands Luther’s theology as a pattern for the church in today’s context?¹⁰ What can one “learn from history” when someone like Robert Kolb proposes a theology of evangelization,¹¹ or when one considers how Christian wisdom can serve the world?¹² What kind of project is being carried out in “learning from history,” when we investigate how the North American mindset is confronted by the Spirit and Mind of Christ?¹³ What might a young student in Hermann Sasse’s Seminar have heard about “learning from history?” Finally, what does all this look like when one undertakes to spell out the faith of Lutheran Christianity?¹⁴

Yes, what happens when a contemporary Lutheran theologian, like Robert Kolb, brings together and holds together history and theology? What results when a pastor and professor, who hails from Fort Dodge, Iowa and was raised and anchored in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, concerns himself with discovering, describing, and treating the world of Lutheranism, especially in its earliest decades? The first answer to our question: Robert Kolb has applied himself to the heritage of Lutheran theology

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and church. A second observation: Robert Kolb applies the majority of this heritage to the faith and church of today. Third: Robert Kolb understands such use of history and application to the present as a sending, that is, as mission.

Kolb Has Applied Himself to the Heritage of Lutheran Theology and Church

To this assertion belongs the fact that he has breathed the air of archives and libraries for weeks if not months on end, as if the “Dust of Centuries” was to him the fountain of youth. It is rather much more the content of the documents and printings of the ecclesio-theological origins of the past centuries which perhaps apply even more directly today, which attracts Robert Kolb’s academic curiosity, entices his nose for the historical and theological, and inspires his indefatigable reporting of the results of his research through conferences, in networks, commissions, and workgroups, in publishing, and through lectures and lessons. It is not without cause that Robert Kolb is considered “one of today’s best experts on the Lutheran theological history of the confessional time period in the English-speaking world.”¹⁵

A foundational knowledge of and work with sources is shown by the publications from Robert Kolb’s feather. For this reason, he never concerns himself merely with the reproduction of distant texts and long-forgotten subjects. Editions and the translations of historic texts through translations into American English establishes that Robert Kolb is not pursuing purely archival interests. Rather, what appeals to him is managing the transfer of the important heritage of the history of Christianity. His particular love is for the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation. In focusing on the sources he covers simultaneously the circumstances, times, contexts, people, relationships, and traditions, which have been deposited in the texts. For, a historical-contextual understanding of the texts and confessions¹⁶ of the sixteenth century is crucial.

To get more to the point for which Robert Kolb is receiving the Hermann-Sasse-Prize today (i.e., *Luther and the Stories of God*¹⁷), Kolb interprets Luther’s writings in all their breadth from the perspective that the Wittenberg Reformer comprehends the lines of biblical narrative as the grand explanation of God concerning the world and time, the Christian life, and also his own life. Thus, today’s recipient of the Sasse Prize commends for elevation and presentation the findings of his exegetical and systematic theological study of narrative theology. In this way, he situates himself methodologically as up to speed. He also shows himself as a knowledgeable observer of methodological developments and a productive recipient of the beginnings of this movement.¹⁸ He does not by any means omit the inevitable discussion of Luther’s message within its then contemporary context. Neither Luther’s striving for a new formulation of the Christian life,¹⁹ nor the real world situation of the addressees in the sixteenth century,²⁰ nor the difference between the worldview of the Reformation era and our day²¹ get past this author.

Robert Kolb assumes that Luther’s *theologia crucis* is the “over-arching concept needed to understand the following: God’s revelation and the trusting in it which only first becomes truly possible with human life, the atonement against the background of Christ’s death and resurrection, and the Christian life.”²² For Luther, it is only under

the cross that one can know: 1) who God really is, 2) how a person should behave in relation to God, 3) what happens to people without God and what God inflicts on such a *conditio humana*, and 4) what the life of a disciple who trusts in Christ looks like in the day-to-day.”²³ Further, he sees Luther’s concept of “two kinds of righteousness” as the actual prime discovery of Lutheran theology and thereby the actual theological program of the Wittenberg Reformation. This concept is laid out in his *Sermo de duplici iustitia* from the year 1519.²⁴ With the word of God comes not only performative speech, but rather creative, especially re-creative speech.²⁵ This re-creative action of the word of God, in its different ways of application, grants to the sinner who is in rebellion against God and categorically separated from him, a new identity, namely as child of God.²⁶

According to Kolb, there are three different dimensions to distinguish in Luther’s hermeneutic: what God says to his creatures (in the distinction of law and gospel), the point of being human (in the distinction of the two kinds of righteousness), and the two relationships in which God’s speech takes place and human identity is portrayed (in the distinction of the vertical and horizontal dimensions).²⁷ In view of Luther’s formation of these distinctions, Kolb pleads that the ongoing discussion and research on Luther move from talk of a “reformation breakthrough” to the concept of an “evangelical maturation.”²⁸ Such a description of the historical and biographical events in the formation of Luther’s theology actually provides a much better account than the fixation on the barely graspable, grandiose moment of the “Tower experience (Turmerlebnis),”²⁹ quite apart from the challenges of dating that event.

Not only should Robert Kolb’s emphases be highlighted as a deep perspective on Luther’s theology itself, but much more also as a profound recognition of Luther’s reception in his lifetime and in the first decades after Luther’s death. In differing pictures and their respective emphases, Luther was perceived in his own time as a prophet, a teacher, or a hero. It is difficult to give a more direct description of Luther’s image for his time and his contemporaries.³⁰ This also occasionally led to the situation that Luther’s persona was honored, especially in German lands, as “Saint Martin of Wittenberg,” a moniker previously reserved only for officially canonized saints.³¹ In its outcome, Kolb’s thesis is decisive, that by the end of the sixteenth century Luther’s personal authority and the glorification of his persona almost to the point of apotheosis was replaced by the scripturally-derived and scripturally-connected application of the confessions of the church, which last but not least came from Luther’s own works.³²

The church historian works from within the confessional hindsight that the following statement is a specific viewpoint of the Lutheran Church: “The church is defined by a confession of faith which is laid down in a confessional document.”³³ Along these lines, he does not overlook the fact that with the arguments in the camp of Wittenberg theology, in spite of all their violence and personal attacks which built a culture of controversy,³⁴ there was still a foundational closeness among all these controversialists: “All had been students of Luther and almost all had been students of Melancthon.” Luther was for them the special tool of God,³⁵ and the preceptor sharpened their instincts through questions and thoroughly formed their theological

method.³⁶ Kolb shows how emphatic, and also relentless, the controversies became with the example of the critique by the younger generations of theologians of Melanchthon's teaching on the Lord's Supper.³⁷ With this controversy, Kolb grasps simultaneously—and I also happen to agree—both the moment and the motive of the “continuing development of Wittenberg theology.”³⁸ These two paths laid out by Luther and Melanchthon and in spite of them their inherent points of conflict, which accompanied, defined, and in a certain sense even arose out of theological education, can be understood according to Kolb, as the definition of the Christian faith through “delivery of the knowledge of true doctrine, combined with the theological competence in understanding and interpreting the holy Scripture with the pastoral application since the two were closely, inseparably, wed to each other.”³⁹ The lengthened confession due to the challenges of the time, not least under the conditions of persecution and in the face of controversial questions, which in the view of the participants threatened the essence of the evangelical faith,⁴⁰ became especially in the (Lutheran) late Reformation a habit characteristic of theologians, princes, pastors, and members of congregations,⁴¹ indeed even a Lutheran way of life.⁴²

In the second generation of Lutheran theology, it becomes a “reception” of the theological attempts, impulses, and results, the shape of which the first generation of Wittenbergers had developed and established. In this way, one cannot deny the different accents between Luther and Melanchthon.⁴³ Such acquisition is however always a critical enterprise, never a mere reproduction nor even a repristination of that which was long ago spoken and understood;⁴⁴ therefore, this approach is also almost necessary in connection with controversies which amount to family feuds.⁴⁵ It is along these lines that the formation and shaping of the specific Lutheran “tradition” develops, in which the heirs of Luther's (and Melanchthon's) developing new way of thinking undergo a critical examination and evaluation, and the result is that they are not mere “epigones.”⁴⁶ For this reason, Kolb also energetically challenges talk of the “end of the Reformation” and pleads for the (re-) introduction of the term “Late Reformation” to describe the period leading up to the close of the Lutheran Concordia project, moreover as a much stronger recognition of the continuities in the confessional era after 1580.⁴⁷ In addition, he observes that the description of such Lutheran traditions and cultures is not just about assessing socio-cultural mechanisms and behaviors. Instead, those generations following the first generation of Lutheran theology offered a framework for the preaching of the new faith which was “a unified universe under one Creator God” and thereby a worldview in which the solution to all of life's problems could be entrusted to God, “whose love had displayed itself in his own incarnation and death on his people's behalf.”⁴⁸ All the more, we must keep in view the specific theological implications of the formation of Lutheran churchmen and their influence on the greater relationships in which they originated. This was and is about nothing less than the center of the biblical message and what is thereby so intimately connected, the deciding questions of human existence.⁴⁹ Along with this, a highly important assignment for the work of historical theology in the twenty-first century is described.⁵⁰

Kolb Applies the Majority of This Heritage to the Faith and Church Today

What makes Robert Kolb's reflections in his account especially of the history and theology of the first decades of Lutheranism so poignant is their connection to the present day life of Christianity, not just the Lutheran Church. Instead of somehow regretting as shameful the uniqueness of the Lutheran Church, in that it wrote down its understanding of the gospel and its own self-understanding in a *Corpus Doctrinae* with the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord, Kolb values this approach as a contribution to the ecumenical work in our modern day. This is so since Christianity in the twenty-first century is still about proclaiming the word of God and further speaking the message of justification in Jesus Christ.⁵¹ Throughout, he conducts his church history work in a theological manner and expands the results of historical theology in its systematic and pastoral perspective. "The sixteenth-century confessors) placed much, including their lives, on the line to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to his church and their society. In this they provide a model for Christian life and witness in our time as well."⁵² And, for exactly this reason, the "Wittenberg Way of Thinking" is fruitful for the church in the present day.⁵³ Luther almost becomes a conversation partner for Christians in the twenty-first century, not least in relation to developing crisis situations.⁵⁴ Last but not least, such an approach is a way of translating the historical gap of centuries and across cultural barriers.⁵⁵

It is nearly self-evident that this happens apart from presuppositions neither for Luther (and Melancthon) nor for us.⁵⁶ Two presuppositions here must be made clear: the first one posits that God formed human existence in a twofold manner, the second, that God works through his word and at that, in many different modes of application. The anthropological presupposition means first, that human beings are truly human, i.e., God's creation, because of God's goodness and favor alone, and second, that humanity demonstrates its relationship to other creatures in the form of acts of love. The theological presupposition posits that the application of the Word of God in its oral, written, and sacramental forms⁵⁷ does not only inform concerning God's heavenly disposition, but much more on the basis of the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, it really effects and delivers actual new life.⁵⁸ Indeed it is possible, so argues Robert Kolb, to make a bridge between on the one hand, Luther's (and Melancthon's) approach to questions of the meaning of humanity and of the self-revelation of God, and on the other, a similar approach in our time and for our questions.⁵⁹

To bring the discussion more directly back to the book for which our prize-receiver is being honored today: when Luther comprehends God always as the God in relationship to his human creatures and when he sees, in agreement with the biblical narrative, an unfolding of God's narrative at play⁶⁰ in space and time, i.e., in history, yes even human history, then such a narrative is applicable for today's understanding and meaning. When God's revelation is consummated in history, as it is portrayed in the Bible from the Creation to Christ's return as Judge, precisely then is the development of human history swept up in the narrative.⁶¹ Luther points himself and his hearers and readers to the Bible, since he is able to find himself in the holy Scriptures as the word of God; in this way, the Bible is not just a "book" as a product of a writ-

ing process, but much more the tender care of God for his people and likewise a communication process.⁶² This situation describes the communicative reality of God himself. This reality is condensed in the incarnate word of God, Jesus Christ, who reestablishes such reality by delivering people from the uproar of a destroyed relationship with God; from this center all other forms of God's self-revelation receive their place and rank.⁶³

This recognizable discourse which is contained in the biblical narrative, it is Luther's conviction, is repeated in the daily life of God's people;⁶⁴ this is also the reason why the Word of God does not fail to address its audience.⁶⁵ It accomplishes this new reality, in which its hearers and readers apply it to themselves, so that they in faith, in which they fear, love, and trust in God above all things, are led back to the true purpose of their humanity.⁶⁶ Thus, this new creation cannot and will not remain unproductive. This especially applies in light of the reality that God's people were, are, and will remain vigorously challenged in the course of history and in their own lives by the troubles of powers which are hostile to God and enemies of people.⁶⁷

Endnotes

¹ "Die meisten wollen nicht von der Geschichte lernen, sondern die Geschichte belehren." Email to the author, September 10, 2013.

² Robert Kolb, *Luther: Pastor of God's People* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991); *Ibid.*, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); *Ibid.*, *Luther's Way of Thinking. Introductory Essays* (Trivandrum: Luther Academy India, 2006); *Ibid.*, *Martin Luther, Confessor of Faith* Christian Theology in Context series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Ibid.*, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

³ Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, Nicole Kurojka, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *Philip Melancthon: Theologian in Classroom, Confession, and Controversy* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

⁴ Robert Kolb, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565): Popular Polemics in the Preservation of Luther's Legacy* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1978).

⁵ Robert Kolb, ed., *Johann Spangenberg: A Booklet of Comfort for the Sick & On the Christian Knight* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007).

⁶ Robert Kolb, *Andreae and the Formula of Concord: Six Sermons on the Way to Lutheran Unity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977).

⁷ Robert Kolb, *Caspar Peucer's Library: Portrait of a Wittenberg Professor of the Mid-sixteenth Century* (St. Louis, Center for Reformation Research, 1976).

⁸ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Context of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

⁹ Robert Kolb, *For all the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987); *Ibid.*, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530–1580* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991); *Ibid.*, *Luther's Heirs Define His Legacy: Studies on Lutheran Confessionalization* (Variorum: Aldershot, 1996); *Ibid.*, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); *Ibid.*, *Die Konkordienformel: Eine Einführung in ihre Geschichte und Theologie* (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2011); Robert Kolb, Charles P. Arand, James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012); Robert Kolb, ed., *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture: 1550–1675* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

¹⁰ Robert Kolb and David A. Lumppp, eds., *Martin Luther: Companion to the Contemporary Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982); Robert Kolb, *Teaching God's Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther's Catechism* (Hutchinson, MN: Crown Publishing, 1992); Robert Kolb and Christian Neddens, *Gottes Wort vom Kreuz: Lutherische Theologie als kritische Theologie* (Oberursel: Oberursler Heft 2001); Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

- ¹¹ Robert Kolb, *Speaking the Gospel Today: A Theology for Evangelism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984); *Ibid.*, *Make Disciples, Baptizing: God's Gift of New Life and Christian Witness* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 1997).
- ¹² Robert Kolb, *Christian Wisdom in Service to God's World* (St. Paul, MN: Concordia College, 1984).
- ¹³ Robert Kolb, ed., *The American Mind Meets the Mind of Christ* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2010).
- ¹⁴ Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993).
- ¹⁵ Thomas Kaufmann, "Zur Einführung," in Kolb, *Konkordienformel*, 10.
- ¹⁶ Robert Kolb, Charles P. Arand, Timothy J. Wengert, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 281.
- ¹⁷ Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 11.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xi–xiv.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv–xvi.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii–xix.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, xix. Cf. Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 225.
- ²² This quote translated here is from: Robert Kolb, "Deus revelatus—Homo revelatus: Luthers theologia cruces für das 21. Jahrhundert" in Robert Kolb and Christian Neddens, *Gottes Wort vom Kreuz. Lutherische Theologie als kritische Theologie, mit einer Einführung von Volker Stolle und einem Ausblick von Werner Klän Oberurseler Hefie* 40 (Oberursel, Taunus: Lutherische Theologische Hochschule, 2010), 14–15.
- ²³ Kolb, "Deus Revelatus," 20.
- ²⁴ Sermo de duplici iustitia, WA 2,145–153; also Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology" *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999), 449–466.
- ²⁵ Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*, 11.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ²⁹ This term (*Turmerlebnis*) is still used on the official website of the state-sponsored "Luther 2017": <http://www.luther2017.de/schlagworte/turmerlebnis> (accessed 10 April, 2014).
- ³⁰ Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, Hero*.
- ³¹ Kolb, *For all the Saints*, 103–138; 157.
- ³² Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, Hero*, 230.
- ³³ Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 13–25; *Ibid.*, *Konkordienformel*, 13–24.
- ³⁴ Kolb, *Konkordienformel*, 40; cf. Kolb, Arand, Nestingen, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, 171, esp. the chapter title, "The Culture of Controversy."
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ³⁷ Robert Kolb, "The Critique of Melancthon's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper by His 'Gnesio-Lutheran' Students," in Dingel, Kolb, Kuroпка, Wengert, *Melancthon*, 236–262.
- ³⁸ Robert Kolb, "Melancthon's Doctrinal Last Will and Testament," in Dingel, Kolb, Kuroпка, Wengert, *Melancthon*, 158.
- ³⁹ Robert Kolb, "The Pastoral Dimensions of Melancthon's Pedagogical Activities for the Education of Pastors," in Dingel, Kolb, Kuroпка, Wengert, *Melancthon*, 40.
- ⁴⁰ Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 63–98.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 99–131.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 132–140.
- ⁴³ Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 278–281; Kolb, "Melancthon's Doctrinal Last Will and Testament"
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 272; Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 132–140.
- ⁴⁵ Kolb, *The Critique*, 257; Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 281–290.
- ⁴⁶ Kolb, *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture*, 13.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10–12; Cf. Thomas Kaufmann, *Das Ende der Reformations. "Magdeburgs Herrgotts Kanzlei" (1548–1552)* (Tübingen, 2003), 485–492.
- ⁴⁸ Kolb, *For All the Saints*, 150.
- ⁴⁹ Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 276, 290.
- ⁵⁰ Kolb, *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture*, 5, 12–14.
- ⁵¹ Kolb, *Konkordienformel*, 181.

⁵² Arand, Kolb, Nestingen, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, viii.

⁵³ Kolb, Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁵ Kolb, *Speaking the Gospel Today*, 13; Kolb, Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 19.

⁵⁶ Kolb, Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 12.

⁵⁷ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 131–151; Kolb, Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 175–203.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁰ Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13, 15.

⁶³ Kolb, Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 166.

⁶⁴ Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*, 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 65–97.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 99–123.