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Jessica: Welcome to Tangible Theology Learned and Lived. We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life through conversations with the faculty here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. We will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordelow. I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection between faith and daily life when it's tangible theology learned and lived. Today we have Dr. Robert Kolb in the studio. Dr. Kolb is a world-renowned authority in Martin Luther and history of the Reformation. He is internationally recognized as, quote, one of the most respected scholars of the Reformation and one of the best historians of Luther at work today. He is professor emeritus of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and continues to spend half of his time teaching, researching, and writing in Western Europe. Today we're discussing your recently published book, *The Alien and the Proper*, which is a collection of essays about Luther's two-fold righteousness. You write in your book that our core identity comes from our righteousness before God and that what defines us as human is identified by the two kinds of righteousness. Tell me more about that.

Robert: The alien righteousness, as Luther called it, well, he didn't because he didn't speak English, but he called it *justitia aliena* and that's a little bit confusing. We think of aliens as people from overseas or outer space and alien simply means coming from outside us. And so, Luther distinguished the righteousness that comes from outside us, the gift of God, the gift of the merits of Christ, his death and resurrection, from our proper righteousness, that is in Latin, the word *propria* in this case means of what we do, what belongs to us. Luther suggested that this is really our core identity, our gift from God and our trust in God's promise that conveys the gift. I find the psychological insights of Eric Erickson, who was not a Christian, he was intrigued by Christianity, but a very prominent psychiatrist, psychological philosopher, a dogmatist in one sense of the word. And I don't know that much about his whole philosophical system, but he did say that at the heart of our identity is where we fall as infants on the trust and mistrust spectrum. And those who learn from a more trusting, trust encouraging environment

will probably be what psychologists would call a better adjusted personality. And that simply is a repetition of the whole biblical understanding of our fundamental humanity, to use Luther's words, consisting in our fearing, loving and trusting God above all things. And so that core identity comes from the object of our trust. In the Large Catechism, Luther says God is whatever we trust in ultimately and absolutely, because we trust in other things. We're trusting the technology to record, we're trusting the ceiling to not fall down on us.

Jessica: I hope.

Robert: Yes. So our trust just permeates our lives. And we have secondary identities to our identity and as spouses, parents, children, our identity in our occupational callings, our identity in our civic callings as citizens, and participants in a neighborhood and the like, and our churchly callings as witnesses and worshipers of God. Those fall into the realm of proper righteousness. But the core identity goes back to this fundamental trust in someone, something that's absolute and ultimate for us.

Jessica: And that's the alien righteousness, because it comes from outside of us.

Robert: Yes.

Jessica: From God.

Robert: Yeah.

Jessica: When does that alien righteousness apply to us?

Robert: Because it is God's gift. It comes in the form of a promise. A promise is unlike something that we can prove. It's something that has to be trusted. And that means we have to trust the promiser. And so long before, so far as I can remember, I had any concept of the word trust or any other word. When I was a tiny baby, my parents had me baptized and the promise came to me. And God said, you're mine. I'm your Father. You're my child. And I was just stuck with it. Just like I was stuck with the name Kolb and the DNA of my parents. It was total gift and it remains total gift. And in a sense, we can say God made himself accountable to us. He's a reliable God. And so his promise invites us to trust his person. And so that's where we acquire our alien righteousness. Sometimes, strangely enough, unexplainably, we disregard it. We run away from home and we can die on the streets of a foreign city. But our Heavenly Father is always there wanting us, holding his arms open, the parable of the prodigal son, looking for us, coming after us as he did in Eden, saying, where are you, to bring us back to himself. So it all rests on his promise.

Jessica: So then proper righteousness would be our works in response to that?

Robert: Yeah. I don't know many parents who, when a baby is born, say, we hope the baby never changes. They think the baby will mature. And they are hoping at least it will mature into a cooperative member of the family, an obedient child. And so God has his parental expectations of us. And they're laid out in the Ten Commandments and in the whole structure of human performance that's laid out. For instance, the commandments tell us specific things to do and not to do. But Paul, in his epistles, sketch a kind of character that underlies those actions, a character that is typified by kindness, gentleness, love, hospitality, concern. There are a number of lists of the characteristics that form the basic character that flows out of our trust in God. And out of that character then flow our dispositions that form specific attitudes that produce the actions. So in a sense, scripture gives us a complete description of the larger framework of the Christian life.

Jessica: You wrote in this book that God's law distinguishes two ways in which his human creatures are to be what he made them to be. And that the first was fulfilling love the Lord your God. And the second was love your neighbor. That you write, sinners cannot muster, make or manage this total love and trust. You tell me more about managing it. What does that mean?

Robert: That's a fancy way of saying it's God's work not ours. In other words, there's no way in which we fashion our faith. And that's not to deny that we don't experience our own fashioning of our faith as we read scripture, as we learn the catechism, as we discuss with our Christian friends and family how to live as a Christian or how to be able to trust and why we should trust. Those are all functions of our mind and our will and our emotions. And Luther talks about experience making the theologian. So there's this holistic view of us that takes seriously the fact that we're human creatures created in the image of God and therefore having functioning mind or reason and will and emotions, feelings. The Lutheran picture of what it means to be human is really holistic in that it embraces us. But finally, our experience of managing our faith or building our faith or edifying others, that's all the work of the Holy Spirit who likes to be anonymous. And so he likes to use us as the agents of his bringing the faith to other people and of our devotion,

our meditation, our thinking about scripture, our reading scripture, our hearing the word of God preached and receiving the promise in the sacraments. All of that comes together as a Holy Spirit very anonymously works through our mind and our will and our emotions.

Jessica: So the alien righteousness and the proper righteousness both have their core then in Christ in the movement of his spirit?

Robert: Yes, that's a very, very good way of saying it. Luther's theology is also totally Trinitarian because he's always conscious of God's creative power and recreated power and that God's word is managing literally the whole universe. And that sense of creation then permeates how he sees the incarnation. Christ became a human creature. He went to the cross. He died. He rose again in the body. And the Holy Spirit then takes what is known as the Holy Spirit then takes what Christ has done and brings it to us so that we can trust in him and our mind, will and emotions place ourselves in his hand but only through the power of the Holy Spirit. And so there's this mystery really I think of what it means to be human because the God who is totally responsible for everything in the universe holds us responsible for being the human creatures he made us to be. There's no way you can reconcile those. The way that Lutherans do it to kind of bring it into practical terms is the distinction of law and gospel. The gospel gives us the gift of alien righteousness and empowers our proper righteousness. The correlation of that gift then is that we function as human creatures as God designed us.

Jessica: It seems like Lutheran theology is full of distinction.

Robert: Distinctions and a sense of mystery. There are all sorts of mysteries that he didn't use the word very much. Luther didn't. Melancthon doesn't really either in our confessions. But there's this sense that there are places where our speculation ought not go. And he concentrates on really what believers experience or what human beings experience in daily life.

Jessica: So you compared the distinction between alien and proper righteousness to distinction between law and gospel. What about its relationship to the distinction between sanctification and justification?

Robert: In a sense one of the pieces of writing that Luther did that orients my thought is his sort of his great statement on the doctrine of justification

we say which was written in 1520. It's called On Christian Freedom in Latin and the Freedom of a Christian in German.

Jessica: I have that book. You just translated it into English and you gave it to me.

Robert: Yeah I did. Yeah the German. There's a very good Latin translation in the Fortress Press annotated Luther. It has more up-to-date scholarship than the older translation although that's a good translation. But in that Luther talks about the gospel as liberation, as freedom from sin, death, the wrath of God, the judgment of the law, the condemnation of the law. And then it's although he says we are freed then to be bound to our neighbor, we might say bonded to our neighbor, I think you can also see that as a freedom for living as a human being as God created us to be. And that living for part is also detailed particularly in the Latin On Christian Freedom and it's a life of true good works. Luther rejected a lot of the religious sacred good works of the Middle Ages because he said they were human inventions. So he rejects those but he's cultivating in On Christian Freedom. He's cultivating the life of obedience that is a life of service and love. I think it's important to realize that we're at a little disadvantage with English because obedience and hearing are they don't sound alike at all. But in Hebrew the word Shema refers both to hearing and to obeying. In Greek you have a kuo, to hear, and hippakuo, sort of an intensive to obey. And in German for instance you have heuren and gehorchen for a hearing and obeying. And so obedience is really nothing then, listening to your Heavenly Father and given the fact that he's our Heavenly Father we want to do what we hear from him. And so there's that sense of being always the listening child who then acts on what he's or she's heard.

Jessica: Something I'd like to understand more and you've started talking about our identity as humans and you wrote in your book that Luther's distinction of the two kinds of righteousness sets forth the biblical view of what it means to be human. Being human and opposed to what?

Robert: I think it's an important part of the Lutheran affirmation of the definition of original sin in the formula of Concord that even those who don't trust in Christ are human. And it's particularly important after a century of genocide and all kinds of contempt for one another

that we have in our society that we affirm the humanity, the creatureliness of every human being. We all belong to God even if we turn our backs on him. We are still his creatures and given that created dignity and worth. And so we dare not only send no one to the gas chambers but not have contempt for anyone just because they're outside the faith. But maybe the best way to say it is the full enjoyment of our humanity is possible only when we live a life of fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things. And we experience that ourselves when we realize that we haven't been trusting God in a particular situation and the substitutes for him don't produce the results we wanted. So to be human is to be, first of all, one who fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things, the first commandment. But Luther's explanations to the rest of the commandments all begin with we should fear and love God. Why he didn't repeat the trust I think maybe because fear and love embrace parts of trust. Trust brings that sense of awe and wonder at God's being along with the love for God as a loving father. And so what we have then as the gift of our humanity is first of all of loving and trusting Him, but because of that fear and love we respect His name, use His name properly, we sanctify the holy day and dedicate ourselves to a life of study of scripture and the like, we obey our parents and other authorities, we respect the lives of all, we practice our sexuality in a responsible way, we respect the property of others, and we respect our own property by giving it away as much as we can, we respect the reputation of our neighbors and so forth, and we don't want to let our inwardly turned desires, Luther might say, our inwardly turned desires pervert us in any way, we don't covet in other words. So Luther sees that trust in God is the center of our humanity, or we might say there's this from one angle, we remain totally human, but we're not enjoying the fullness of it because we don't have its functioning core.

Jessica:

How comforting is that because I think a more common perception of Christianity and fulfilling righteousness is that you need to squelch anything human in you, it's something that needs to be gotten rid of instead of our sinfulness is holding back our humanity, and we can be more fully human in God's righteous and makes us more human instead of less human.

Robert:

I think that's an important point because there are people

in our day who talk about justification as divinization, as becoming divine in some sense or other, and we become godly, but we don't become in any way divine. The ancient fathers used that term and within their cultural context it perhaps could be understood as simply godliness. But in our day and age where, for instance, our Latter-day Saints, fellow citizens, believe that we become gods, I think the language is dangerous. Actually, justification means humanization, it means a return to being the children of God that he made us to be. And there were people in New Testament times who thought that salvation was escape from the body and being absorbed into the great spirit in the sky or something, and St. Paul does a hit on that. He says in 1 Corinthians 15, we will spend eternity in our bodies, our transformed bodies, but in our bodies, and as individuals. We won't lose our individuality, and that's part of being human and being in the image of God. And so that whole idea is really a very important idea.

Jessica: And one that we skip as Christians, I think when we talk about when we die we will go to heaven, and we don't finish the rest of the sentence that we will die and go to heaven and live forever a physical life in the bodies that God gave us.

Robert: Yeah, because my conception of heaven is that it will be an ongoing seminar and you need your vocal cords and all to take part in a seminar. So that's only a pious opinion, that's not in Scripture.

Jessica: And I like to think that it's a huge garden so that I can use my hands and help things grow.

Robert: I could share that too. Yeah.

Jessica: In one of the essays in your book written by Dr. Schumacher, it is civic participation by churches and pastors. And so there's another distinction of the two kingdoms that we live in, the left and the right, and how does alien and proper righteousness fit into that?

Robert: Luther actually used the term kingdoms both for gods and satans and for what we might call the vertical dimension of our lives and the horizontal dimension. And so I like to talk about, I like to preserve kingdoms for God versus Satan and use the word realms for the vertical dimension of life and the horizontal dimension of life. But in a sense, if we use that as our basic scheme, I'm thinking of writing on a blackboard now I've got my vertical and horizontal line. In the vertical relationship, there is the gospel. The gospel says you are my child. There is also law, it says

pray, praise, and give thanks to God. That's in the vertical relationship with God. So there's law and gospel in that vertical relationship. And there's alien righteousness, that's God's gift of my identity as His child. And there's proper righteousness in my praying, praising, and giving thanks. I used to mush them together. And Makeda Masaki, who just retired as president of Kobe Lutheran Seminary in Kobe, Japan.

Jessica: And I hear he's staying in your house right now. He is. He's come to Concordia Seminary to do research and some writing and is enjoying our library. But he, that was an act of courage, I think, for a Japanese doctoral student to say, you're confusing. And I insisted I was not and he convinced me I was. So there really is a sense of both alien and righteousness being part of the vertical relationship, but it also establishes our identity as a child of God in relationship to God's creatures. And there's proper righteousness in our praying and praising. And there's proper righteousness in loving our neighbor and serving the whole of creation. So the three distinctions need to be kept distinct from each other, I think, too. But the whole of human life really is captured. But what that means then is in terms of Will Schumacher's essay, that we recognize that we have responsibilities in the horizontal realm to be the children of God, but to recognize at the same time that there are others who are not oriented by faith in Jesus Christ, and who will come to different conclusions about public order, for instance. That means I think that Lutherans make very good citizens of a democracy. As my colleague James Voelz likes to say, the perfect is the enemy of the good. And so when we insist it's got to be perfect or it's not going to be, we lose out on a good deal of goodness. And so I can't make the perfect soup to feed my neighbor, and so I'm going to let my neighbor starve because my good soup is never going to get to her. Schumacher is pointing out in his essay is how responsibilities in the horizontal realm and in the realm of society will take on a different shape, first of all because the gospel can't be understood there. And so the law has to govern. We have to keep public order simply by saying this works and this doesn't work as a human being. And so while forgiveness is always in order, there are certain instances where forgiveness has to be accompanied by punishment in the horizontal realm when criminals do things and so forth. He develops there in the context of



the public role of the church in the face of tragedy and disaster. How do we function as good citizens and express, for instance, when there's a tragic shooting, how do we affirm our unity with other human beings simply as people who have been commanded, thou shalt not kill, without betraying the gospel but affirming our being part of the community. And we have and we haven't been always so clear on that because we have had an allergy against any association with those with whom we disagree on things. But Schumacher's essay develops that whole distinction that Luther practiced. And for instance, Luther says that you can't be a good pastor, a good preacher, if you're not going to call to repentance the prince or the city council member who's sitting in your congregation. Well, I'm not sure how valuable that advice is for us today because we don't have very many people with civic responsibilities at that level, at the level where they make that kind of decision. But we do have people sitting in the pews who have responsibilities as citizens. And so I hate the politicization of the pulpit. The law always undercuts the gospel in those situations. But the responsibility of the congregation and its leadership to address issues of social justice simply follows in Luther's practice, in Luther's footsteps. And Schumacher's essay develops that idea of how to walk that very delicate line that's easily trespassed. But I had in my seminary career, I had a guest professor from Australia, the German-born Hermann Sasse. And he was the first who publicly said the National Socialist platform is unchristian because it's teaching that Aryan's Germans are superior to other races, is idolatry. And its negative impact on the Jews above all is also heresy. And so there are times when voices have to come from even the clergy. The temptation for pastors and all professional church workers is, of course, to let their own political opinions dominate their conversation with their members. And that's not what they're there for. And so there's a very finely defined job description, I think we could say, or calling description for laypeople and for professional church workers when the two realms meet. But there, I think Luther's distinctions also really help us sort out in a way that some theological systems do not.

Jessica: So if you were to break down the idea of alien and proper righteousness, down to a point where you could explain it to a confirmand, a seventh or eighth

grader, and they're reading, you should fear and love God so that you, right, over and over again. How would this play into the idea of fearing God? I know when I've worked with kids, that confuses them. I should be scared of God. I should love God. How would this guide their understanding of what it means to fear God?

Robert: Luther said, my little Hans, his first son, knows that I love him. So in that sense, he's not afraid of me. On the other hand, he looks at me and knows that I'm a whole lot bigger than he is. And I'm paraphrasing now, but could slap me across the room or something. I think it's well captured by a German theologian, whose work I don't like in general, but who wrote a book called *The Idea of the Holy*. His name was Rudolf Otto. And he pointed out that there's a sense of awe and wonder that really is pretty fundamental to our human experience. We don't experience very much awe and wonder because our lives are totally touched by human hands. And we think, at least the more prosperous among us, that we can buy ourselves out of most situations. Traditionally, people, especially in an agricultural setting, went out as the thunder cracked and the lightning blitzed and had a sense of, wow, there's something uncontrollable there. And that had Otto used two Latin terms, one meaning you're shaking in your boots, and the other means you're standing there in just total fascination. And we have that sense of awe and wonder that we don't get very often in North American society today. Seventh and eighth graders certainly have some sense of things that are just out of their control. And there is a sense of scaredness there that particularly sinners will experience. And the Christian is saint and sinner at the same time, Luther says.

Jessica: There's another distinction.

Robert: Yeah, there's just this, but there's also a wow that is involved in Luther's understanding of the word fear. And so fear and love come together in trust. I recognize God's a whole lot greater than I am, could slap me across the room, but I trust him, trust that he's not going to. And that if I feel myself flying across the room, God's going to be there to catch me. And at the same time, his love just radiates to such warmth that I respond in love.

Jessica: We've been talking about your recently published book, *The Alien and the Proper*, which is a collection of essays about Luther's twofold righteousness. So as our listeners look forward to reading this book, what would you like us to take away from it?

Robert: I think, Jessica, remember who you are. You may define yourself on any given day in all sorts of

different ways, but at the end of the day, I think Christians should think, first of all, that they are children of God. And then they should reflect on how they performed. And that will drive each one of us to repentance and to faith. And that faith is faith in a God who designed a good humanity and will raise us in that good humanity to live with him forever. But that the person who will be raised and the person that we are today, saint and sinner, is a person who can say, I am God's child. And why am I God's child? Well, because I've been reborn, reborn in my baptism, reborn in a repentance and faith each day. And why did God want to give me rebirth? I am who I am because God loves me.

Jessica: Thank you, Dr. Kolb, for talking with us today and sharing The Alien and the Proper. And thank you for listening. You can find more episodes of Tangible on Spotify, Google, Apple. If you'd like to see the show continue, please subscribe, share, leave a review. I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau. Tune into our next episode of Tangible. As always, we'll talk about Theology: Learned and Lived.