

Brought to you by ConcordiaTheology.org, bringing you resources that support the vigorous life of the mind in service of the gospel of Christ.

Jessica: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life.

Through conversations with faculty 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 Bordaleau.

I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life, when it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

Today I'm talking with one of my favorite people on campus, Dr. Robert Kolb.

Dr. Kolb retired in 2009, but continues teaching as Professor Emeritus here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.

He is a world renowned authority on the work of Martin Luther and the history of the Reformation.

Dr. Kolb is also a prolific author.

I found 18 of his books on Amazon, but I know there are more.

When I asked him how many books he's written, he said, I don't know, I've never counted.

He continues to spend half the year teaching, researching and writing in Western Europe.

His most recently published book is titled Face to Face, Martin Luther's View of Reality, and that's what we are talking about today.

Dr. Kolb, welcome to the show.

Robert: It's great to be back, Jessica.

Thank you.

Jessica: As I've been reading your latest book, you're looking at Luther's work from a different perspective.

Instead of exploring his writings one at a time or chronologically or by category of the six chief parts, the book explores his theology relationally.

You've explored his view of the world from the perspective of his relationships, how he saw himself face to face with God, face to face with the devil, face to face with himself, with others.

You've divided them into seven chapters, each one dealing with a different relationship.

Why did you use those relationships as the structure to explore Luther's work and his thought?

Robert: It's not my fault, Jessica.

Tony Steinbren was president of the Lutheran Church of Missouri Synod's New Jersey district in 2016-17.

He knows the territory and he wanted me to come and do a workshop in 2017, a workshop that would deal with Luther's use of a Latin preposition, coram, which literally can be translated face to face.

It's a word of relationship.

It's a word that we use a lot even with our students.

They don't know much Latin nowadays, but at least they know what coram Deo and coram Mundo or coram hominibus.

Jessica: Face to face with God, face to face with death, face to face with each other.

Robert:

Yeah.

And so that got me to thinking I devised these four lectures and that's really the basis of the book, but it's gone on from these four lectures.

There's a debate among Luther scholars in the last 40 years about Luther's understanding of reality, what makes reality.

There was a reaction, I think a proper reaction against a kind of existentialist.

We'll never know, so we'll just make a blind leap of faith.

And if God happens to be on the other end, all the better.

That's really not fair to most existentialists, but that's the way some people understood what was being discussed.

And so actually a friend of mine named Tuomo Mannermaa, a Finnish theologian who had been in dialogue with Russian Orthodox theologians.

And so he had his theory and I had a different theory.

So I sort of framed what I'm doing here in terms of our discussion.

But what it comes down to is that Luther believed that there's hard, concrete reality.

There's this personal relationship with the speaking creator and it's in those relationships that we experience life.

Jessica: And that speaking creator would be God revealed.

Robert: Yes.

God as he presents Himself in scripture, as he became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jessica: And that's the primary relationship in which we see everything else.

Robert: Yes.

I can deal with that tree outside our window as a botanist and investigate how the cells work together and how the leaves come to be green and all that sort of thing.

And that's been simply placed in our ability, the ability of our reason to investigate God's world.

But as a Christian, I have the gift, the privilege of also viewing that tree as a creature of God and know that my relationship between myself and the tree does involve a sense of stewardship for what God has given us.

Because I suppose you could say all relationships are in a sense triangular.

I relate to you, I relate to the tree, but God's always in the picture as the creator.

That's what I see as the underlying foundation of Luther's view of reality.

You don't get out of range of the creator no matter what you're thinking about what you're dealing with.

Jessica:

So the way in which you perceive all the relationships around you and operate within them is not just you and them, but you, God, and them.

Robert: Yes.

Jessica: And that third part of the relationship is the filter through which you see who you're relating with.

Robert: Yes.

You recognize that God's at work here.

Sometimes when you're facing parts of the elements of the mystery of sin and evil, you don't know exactly what God's role in all this is.

That's why he could talk about the hidden God.

But he also said that the hidden God is not different from the revealed God.

In other words, the intentions of God, even when we think he's the devil or when He's

doing the devil's work, when He's our enemy, even there we know that He's the God who revealed

himself as Jesus Christ.

Jessica: And that's actually the first chapter.

It's called the reformer, not quite face to face with God hidden.

You can be face to face with some things, but the hidden God, it's kind of hard to be face to face with.

Robert: Yes.

Luther put up a kind of no trespassing sign on elements of what must be there as God.

He recognized that not only as sinners, that complicates the matter, but also as creatures.

We are simply not capable of embracing in our minds everything that God is.

The creator is simply greater than every creature, even the star creature, his human being.

And so the idea behind the hidden God is that we should just not speculate.

Some theologians have tried to move their minds into a world beyond our conception, just in our feeling, for instance.

And Luther played around with some of those ideas himself as he was trying to find comfort in the 15 teens as an Augustinian brother.

But he gave that up and became very down to earth with God made flesh in Jesus and with God operating in our world, very comfortable with material things and especially human language.

Jessica: And so this chapter is based on Luther's first view of his relationship with God, which was that of fear.

Robert: Yes.

Jessica: And in response to that fear, resentment.

Robert: He speaks about hatred to God simply because God had confronted him, this poor, wretched hunk of clay, and really demanded perfection.

And he knew that he not only couldn't be perfect, he couldn't do the best that he was able to do.

He never got to the point even of his own compromised standards.

And so he resented God your words right on target and could talk about hating God.

Jessica: And so then to rectify that relationship with God, he had to compare this hidden God with the revealed God.

If I hate him because he's asking me to do something that I can't do, how can God also say that he is love?

Robert: And that was his dilemma.

And the way he solved it really was by recognizing what he labeled two kinds of righteousness or twofold righteousness, that we are children of God, just as we are children of our earthly parents through no fault or agreement of our own.

They gave us life and God gives us life as His child.

And so he moves into a world in which his relationship with God is dependent simply on God's favor, not on how well he behaves.

And then he recognized that alongside that what he called passive righteousness, there's an active righteousness, that God simply expects His children to be His children, to act like His children, like any earthly parent.

And so that was really, I think, one of the important elements in Luther's breakthrough to what he found then as the gospel.

Jessica:

And if our listeners want to hear an in-depth conversation on the two kinds of righteousness,

Dr. Kolb and I have a previous episode recorded on his book, *The Alien and the Proper*, Luther's twofold righteousness and controversy, ministry and citizenship.

Check out the book, check out the episode.

Robert: It was fun.

Jessica: Now, as we move on to the next chapter in your book, after his relationship with the hidden God, instead of going right to the revealed God, you go to the reformer face to face with death, sin and law and God's wrath on the devil.

How did Luther see that relationship?

Robert: That's an interesting question, one that surprised me in my research.

That's one of the delightful things about being a historian, especially one who works with somebody who wrote as much as Luther did.

You're always discovering new things.

And so as I was researching his *On Christian Freedom*, which is one of the key works in his whole career in the year 1520, he talks about the confrontation with sin, with the wrath of God and the judgment of God and with death.

And I thought, oh, yeah, that's the way he always...

No, it's not quite the way he always talks because the devil's missing.

So I went back through using just indices of Luther's works in English, for instance, just to see how often the devil came up in the 15 teens in Luther's writings.

The answer is not very often.

It was after 1521 that Luther really started to mention the devil.

After he had been excommunicated and after he was banned by the emperor, he took the devil very seriously as an active, personal, face-to-face kind of opponent.

But that was the story of Luther's early years.

He was continually confronting his own sin and the world around him that was tempting him and then also the temptation that the devil provides through the world and our flesh.

And so as Luther's theology blossomed, the more seriously he took his own sinfulness and that meant the devil behind it, the more seriously he could take the grace of God.

And so there's a kind of descent into the pit that he expresses, for instance, in his hymn that is really a hymnic versification of Psalm 130,

Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord.

And so it's really out of the deep depths of his own conviction of his unworthiness that he begins to enjoy the worthiness that the Gospel bestows when God says,

You are my forgiven child.

Jessica: Now the third chapter, the reformer face-to-face with the person of God revealed.

The only thing through which I can understand anything else, and thank goodness because the hidden God is way too confusing.

Robert: Yes.

Jessica: Tell me about Martin Luther's relationship with God revealed.

Robert: Well, you're not supposed to go speculating about the hidden God.

Jessica: Oh good, because I can't.

Robert: Yes, that's right.

And those who try, I think, may make peace with themselves, but often find that only frustrating.

Because what you do when you speculate about the hidden God is invent a God of your own

there in the dark.

And those gods are always demanding, they always reflect ourselves.

It does seem to me that throughout much of human history, God has appeared to be angry because we're angry with ourselves or because our parents have often been angry with us. Today, I think we face a challenge in that too many children are not suffering from tyrannical parents but from indifferent parents, from parents who pursue their own agendas rather than investing time and energy with their children.

But that's another question.

The whole relationship of Luther, especially with the second person of the Holy Trinity, was the thing that made his life.

His whole writing, what we have of Luther, is just filled with Jesus.

It's not that he ignored the first article, he had a very strong doctrine of creation.

It's not that he ignored the third article.

The Holy Spirit is every place for him, keeping him in contact with Jesus.

But the message is centered on both Jesus' death, which is the death of our death.

It's meeting what Paul describes in Romans 6 as the wages of sin.

Somebody's got to die and every human being dies either baptismally or eternally.

And then he goes on to more than medieval theologians.

Talk about the resurrection of Christ and how Christ had this magnificent duel with the devil, for instance, or how he smashes, he swallows death and smashes the devil in his resurrection.

So Luther's confrontation with Jesus both takes seriously his teaching, his moral instruction.

Luther uses that in the sermons that he preaches on the Christian life, but especially His death and resurrection.

One of his favorite Bible passages was Romans 4:25.

Christ died to take care of our sin, this is my rather free paraphrase, and he died to supply us with a new righteousness.

Jessica: So his perception of the revealed God is mostly through the person of the Trinity that has been the most revealed.

Because it's God incarnate.

And so that filled in the gaps of the hidden God instead of indifference or indulgence or wrath or however we might view God to fill in those gaps.

But he fills in those gaps with Jesus.

Robert: Jesus Christ was his constant companion.

He accompanied him wherever he went.

Jessica: Now here's a more complex relationship that you wrote about, chapter 4.

Face to face in conversation with the person of God revealed.

How is that a relationship?

Robert: That's the speaking God, the God of his word, the God who deals with us in various forms of communication.

Orally Luther emphasized the importance of preaching and teaching and telling.

Parents were to be constantly telling the story of Jesus to their children and their servants as the 16th century household was constructed.

So the word comes, Jesus is communicating with us through the Holy Spirit in oral forms.

Certainly in written forms because the Bible first of all is just foundational for everything as the place God continues to speak to us.

Luther once said, nowhere is the Holy Spirit more present than in the pages of scripture.

But also in other written forms.

From scripture we have Christian poetry, Christian novels, Christian devotional works, catechisms, hymns and so forth.

And so in the printed word the Holy Spirit is speaking to us.

And then Luther recognized that God's a multimedia communicator.

And that he not only uses oral promises for instance as we speak about the gospel, but he also illustrates them.

And he uses water to be the place where we encountered the promise and his body and blood in the bread and wine as another place where we encounter his saying, I died for you, for you as an individual.

And so Luther sees God's communicating with us in oral and written and sacramental forms.

I keep playing with whether you and I need today to add electronic forms or whether they're sort of something like an oral form in a different form than other forms of oral forms.

I like to say that God's a God of conversation and community.

That means that he is in communication with us day in and day out.

As he provides for us even if we don't recognize he's the one who's making the whole food chain work.

Or if we're simply taking a rest with our scriptures in hand and letting his word speak from the pages of the Bible.

Jessica: That describes God as someone who wants to have a relationship with us personally. A close one.

And is that how Luther saw it?

Robert: Yes.

And that's why I think his message is so valuable today.

We value personal relationships.

We live in the United States particularly but also in Canada and North America and Australia.

We live with this sense that we ought to be independent, stand on our own two feet.

That's not the way God saw us in Genesis 2.

Not only the community of husband and wife but all human community flows out of his saying it's not good for Adam to be alone.

And that means relationship, that means conversation, that means this sense of community.

Jessica: Is that where you head in the chapter the reformer face to face with the world?

Robert: Certainly and with individuals whatever the...

Jessica: Other human beings.

Robert: Other human beings yes.

Both of those talk about then the whole range of human relationships.

Jessica: Now for my favorite chapter, chapter 5, the reformer face to face with himself.

Robert: That was a concept that I kind of stumbled over when I first got into this.

Gerhard Ebeling who was one of the great Luther scholars of the 20th century suggested that there is a coram se ipso to use the Latin.

Jessica: Better give me the translation of that one.

Robert: Yeah, Luther face to face with himself.

So he explored what that meant that he was both a sinful and a redeemed person with reason,

person with a will, person with emotions.

And so it's within that self reflection which he does not do excessively but which nonetheless I think is important for him.

Luther did reflect on his sinfulness that's for sure and he did reflect on the fact that he was a redeemed child of God.

But it wasn't the kind of monastic withdrawal and just sitting there thinking about who I am.

It was saying God thinks I'm his child so I better get going and get to do his work.

So it was Luther driven back into the marketplace, into the lecture hall, into the place where real life took place.

But he does do some reflecting on himself.

And so I thought that that's an important part of our relationship too.

It's just that when we think about ourselves we definitely need to think about this dimension of relating to the creator and the fact that he's not only created us but he's recreated us through the work of the Holy Spirit on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection.

Jessica: The aspect that hit me is kind of your in-depth description of faith and that the way he saw himself was kind of defined by faith.

It says, thus Luther concluded true faith is a certain trust in the heart and a firm assent through which Christ is grasped.

And dividing it in those two ways helped me kind of have a deeper understanding of what true faith is.

Less of a noun and more of a relationship.

Robert: A verb.

Jessica: A verb.

Robert: Could you really say that?

Yeah.

I think that that's right.

I think talking about trust today isn't very difficult with other people.

First of all because of the work of the psychologist Erik Erikson who said that trust is kind of fundamental to our human personhood and our personalities.

And so he puts a lot of emphasis on relationships with mothers because his father was absent when he was a child.

I think his insight applies to both parents and grandparents and everyone who has a chance to hold a baby and doesn't drop the baby contributes to perceiving the world as a trustworthy place

and other individuals as trustworthy.

To get back to Erikson, he sees trust as fundamental.

Well that's an insight that Luther certainly had that the biblical writers have.

Our word amen comes from the Greek word or the Hebrew word.

Sometimes we even say it that way, let it be so.

And it's really the stem talks about the faithfulness of God and our faithfulness, our trust then in Him.

But we recognize that trust is so fundamental to human life.

You and I are trusting that this building is not going to collapse on us.

We're trusting that we're safe here from a tornado should one come through.  
And so our whole lives are based on trusting relationships or broken relationships where trust is not possible.  
And in the last decade, we've been talking a lot about the breakdown of trust in the United States.  
And there are those who actually pursue the breakdown of trust.  
I'm particularly conscious of how this could work in a fascist dictatorship like that of Hitler where you break down trust in normal human relationships so that everybody will turn simply to the fuhrer, to the leader.  
And so I think in the United States, we're worried about that sort of thing and we recognize how vital to human life trust is.  
And so that in one sense, you've hit on the heart of Luther's whole perception of what it means to be human.

Jessica:

So that aspect of faith that is trust.  
And the other is the firm ascent, it says, through which Christ is grasped.  
That was significant to me because sometimes you talk about we are saved by faith, but we're saved through faith.  
Right?  
It's not the faith that saves me.  
It's the person and promise in which is being trusted or grasped.  
Do I have that right?

Robert:

When Tim Wengert and I were translating the book of Concord, we were very interested in very good friends.  
And so we could yell at each other over whether his translation or my translation.  
Tim and I got very emotional about right translations when we were working on the Book of Concord.  
Our wives didn't want the other one to come to town because they knew it was going to be a loud weekend.  
And so we had exactly this debate.  
Is it by faith or through faith?  
And I said, well, by faith makes it sound almost as though faith is a good work.  
And so it's through faith, as you say.  
It's that instrumental grasping and so forth.  
And he said, oh, no, no.  
Through faith makes it sound as though we hook, faith is the hose that we hook up to the faucet.  
We turn the faucet on, grace flows through, then it flows out of faith into the ground and the grace produces the garden.  
And the faith isn't really all that important.  
So then we decided, well, what's the Bible say?  
Well, it uses *dia*, the preposition that means through, and it uses the dative case, which is more the *by*.  
And so Paul, for instance, the man who talks about faith, he doesn't help very much because he uses them in ways that are hard to sort out.  
So what we finally decided was, his contention was, so through faith is something just that's kind of incidental to our real person.  
And *by faith* means that this trust determines our whole being and our whole outlook and our whole sense of relationship.

And so what we decided was that neither by or through is totally adequate. Both of them reveal sides of faith, of our understanding of faith that are important. And that we finally went with the good old translation principle, what sounds best in English?

How does it come out best in English?

Because the concept of trust is so deep and broad in defining our being human that human language doesn't quite capture the whole thing.

There's this mystery of our humanity that goes beyond our linguistic capabilities at certain points.

Jessica: What word did you end up using?

Robert: Both, as it sounded best.

And so that was, translation is a wonderful way to understand the text, to get a deeper meaning because you have to really look at the words and struggle with them.

And that was one of the best experiences of our years of translating together.

And despite the fact that he yelled at me, I still like him.

He's wrong about certain things, but he thinks I'm wrong about certain things.

But that only enriches friendship, I think.

Jessica: What is your goal with this book?

I suppose to bring readers face to face with Martin Luther.

I think that Luther is a man for our time.

I think his insights into the nature of what it means to be human as a relational being and to understand God as this God who, as far as we know, there's more to him than we know.

But as far as we know, is a God who is always in relationship, who's always talking, who's always creating community with his world, mineral, plant, animal and with us.

I think that getting face to face with Luther and his understanding of both who God is in Jesus Christ and who we are as his children is just helps with living in the 21st century.

And so I would hope that the book will provide conversation.

I doubt that anybody's going to sit down and just say, I've got to read this in the next two days.

I'm going to just read it straight through.

I think it's a book that can be read as a sampler.

So it's a kind of introduction and survey of Luther's thought from a different angle than most surveys of Luther's thought.

And that's what I hope it serves to be a conversation piece.

Encounters with books are moments of pleasure for me.

And so I'm hoping that will be true to our listeners too.

Jessica: Now, the bibliography at the end of the book, the list of writings you quoted or referenced is 19 pages long, writings in German and in English.

So you have a wide base of information.

Do you see this at all as a cumulative piece of writing for you?

Robert: Yes, I think in many ways it is.

Each book that I've written draws a lot on the past.

And so I think that readers who know some of my work will say, he's saying that again.

But I do try to bring together with this new focus on the relational underlying, the underlying relational nature of reality.

I hope to bring things together so that even those who've perhaps read something like The Genius of Luther's Theology or my Luther Confessor of Faith, which is more traditional

Jessica: topic by topic overview of Luther, that they will find new provocations to thought in face to face. Dr. Kolb, a lot of people think you're a great man because of all the things you've written and translated and the way that you have influenced at least the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod and beyond that and our understanding of Luther. But that's not what makes you a great man. What makes you a great man is how you treat people with a pastoral heart and the way that you communicate people without any pretension, which you could have, but face to face with people as though you respect them. Your office is down the hall from mine and it is a pleasure to see you in the hallways.

Robert: I like seeing you too, but not only seeing you, but conversing with you because our conversations always are fruitful. But I think the key word in your exaggerated estimate of me is respect. We see a decline in civility and decency in our public arena in the United States today. And you can't live like that if you recognize that every other human being is a creature of God. And you may think they're wrong about all sorts of things, but you still have to respect them as a product of God's hand because if you don't respect other people, you're not really respecting their creator.

Jessica: Thanks for being on the show, Dr. Kolb.

Robert: It's always a pleasure to talk to you, Jessica.

Jessica: You can find more episodes of Tangible on all the major hosting apps or on our website, Concordia Theology.org. We've got a lot more resources for you there. We have links to Dr. Kolb's book so you can buy it and I think you should, check it out. If you would like to see this show continue, please subscribe, share and leave a review that helps us show up in Google searches and more people can find us. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life when it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.