

In memoriam James M. Kittelson

By Carter Lindberg

James Matthew Kittelson, Professor of Church History at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, died of liver cancer at the age of 62 on 10 November 2003. The son of Berta († 1999) and Lee M. Kittelson, James was born in Beresford, South Dakota where he is buried. He is survived by his wife Margaret, two married daughters, and two grandchildren. A graduate of St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota (1963), Kittelson received his M. A. (1964) and Ph. D. (1969) from Stanford University where his mentor was Lewis W. Spitz (1922-1999).

Kittelson's academic career began in the History Department of the University of Iowa (1967-1971) from whence he went to the History Department of The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio (1971-1997). After he became Professor Emeritus at Ohio State, he was appointed Professor of Church History and Director of the Thrivent Reformation Research Program at Luther Seminary (1997-2003). His academic career included visiting professorships at Luther Seminary (1992), Concordia University in Irvine, California (1997), and the University of Copenhagen (2002).

Kittelson's service to the field of Reformation studies included Vice-President and President of the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference (1973-1974) and membership on the boards of the Center for Reformation Research, the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, the American Society for Reformation Research, Newberry Library Renaissance Center, and the editorial boards of »Studies in the Reformation« and »Lutheran quarterly«. As Director of the Thrivent Reformation Research Program he acquired substantial grants to facilitate the microfilming as well as the acquisition of Reformation materials. He set the goal of the program's »Project Wittenberg« to complete a library of 40,000 titles. In working toward this goal he established institutional relationships with programs in Lutherstadt Wittenberg.

Kittelson's »home away from home« was Strasbourg, the locus for his numerous archival studies and his major scholarly research and publications. The first fruit of his work in Strasbourg was the monograph »Wolfgang Capito from Humanist to Reformer« (Leiden 1975). After numerous articles on Strasbourg reformers and events that appeared over the years in ARG, SCJ, and TRE, Kittelson's second major work on Strasbourg appeared: »Toward an established church: Strasbourg from 1500 to the dawn of the seventeenth century« (MZ 2000). In conjunction with his work on the Reformation in Strasbourg, Kittelson pursued a long-term interest in the role of Humanism and education in the formation of the Reformation. With Pamela Transue he edited »Rebirth, reform, and resilience: universities in transition, 1300-1700« (Columbus, OH 1984); he also wrote numerous articles such as »Humanism and the Reformation in Germany« (Central European history 9 [Leiden 1976], 302-322); »Luther the educational reformer« (in: Luther and Learning/ ed. by Marilyn Harran. Selinsgrove 1985); »Learning and education: phase two of the Reformation« (in: Die dänische Reformation vor ihrem internationalen Hintergrund/ ed. by Leif Grane and Kai Horby. GÖ 1990); »Luther on the education of a Christian« (LuJ 57, [1990], 260f) and »Humanism in the Lutheran theological faculties of the late Reformation« (in: The harvest of Humanism in Central Europe: essays in honor of Lewis W. Spitz/ ed. by Manfred P. Fleischer et al. StL 1992); Kittelson also contributed articles to the TRE and was a contributor to as well as a senior editor of the four volume »The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation/ ed. by Hans J. Hillerbrand. NY; Oxford 1996«. In addition to the painstaking archival-based research that established Kittelson's place among leading North American Reformation scholars, he had the ability to make that research readily accessible to others. A prime example is his very popular Luther volume, »Luther the Reformer: the story of the man and his career« (MP 1986) that has been translated into Korean, Chinese, Portuguese, Finnish, and Estonian.

Kittelson's solid grounding in the primary sources along with his feisty personality made him a substantive controversialist. He did not hesitate to take on such eminent historians as Heiko A. Oberman (1930-2001) and Gerald Strauss; see for example his »Luther the theologian« (in: Reformation Europe: a guide to research II/ ed. by William S. Maltby. StL 1992) and

»Visitations and popular religious culture: further reports from Strasbourg« (in: *Pietas et societas: new trends in Reformation social history*/ ed. by Kyle Sessions and Phillip Bebb. Kirksville 1985). Kittelson's ire directed against biased historical readings found a major target in those »systematic theologians« who »enlisted the authority of Luther and early Lutheranism to buttress teachings that are demonstrably contrary to the historical record, when understood in its own terms«; »Leading the least of these astray: ›Evangelical Catholic‹ ecclesiology and Luther« (in: *Caritas et Reformatio*/ ed. by David Whitford. StL 2002, 245); see also »Historical and systematic theology in the mirror of church history: the lessons of ›Ordination‹ in sixteenth-century Saxony« (ChH 71 [2002], 743-773). If anything, Kittelson's sense of the importance of historical truth-telling was sharpened when he moved from the Department of History at Ohio State to the position of Church Historian at Luther Seminary.

He was especially critical when he perceived historical scholarship distorted to the service of a theological fad or an ecumenical agenda; see for example »Contemporary spirituality's challenge to sola gratia« (LQ 9 [1995], 367-390) and »Enough is enough!: the confusion over the Augsburg Confession and its Satis est« (LQ 12 [1998], 249-270). It was in this spirit that Kittelson added his name to an international group of Lutheran professors opposing the »Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification« and in North America raised critical objections to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's statement »Called to common mission« that affirmed acceptance of the Anglican »historic episcopate«. Kittelson's passion for the historic Lutheran confessions was recognized by his recent election as Honorary President of the Fellowship of Confessing Lutheran Churches.

Yet for all his historical and theological passion, Kittelson also possessed a sharp wit and earthy humor reminiscent of Luther himself. Kittelson was fond of Luther's declaration in his preface to »Galeatius Cappela: History of the German peoples« that »Historians are the most useful people and they can never be honored, praised, and thanked enough.« That is an apt description of Kittelson himself.

Bibliography: Hans WIERSMA: James Kittelson (1941-2003): a doctor of the church. LQ 18 (2004), 333-341.

Picture: Kittelson: Luther the reformer, cover; <http://www.luthersem.edu>