Robert Kolb’s book portrays the life, work, and theology of one of Luther’s closest friends and a key member of the Wittenberg circle of reformers. Kolb’s work highlights the way in which Amsdorf became a chief interpreter and defender of Luther’s Reformation teaching, and consequently, how Amsdorf helped direct the transformation of the evangelical movement into the Lutheran Church. This book is a scholarly study in an accessible narrative style by one of the premier Reformation historians of our time.

—Rev. Dr. Gerhard Bode
Dean of Advanced Studies,
Associate Professor of Historical Theology,
Seminary Archivist,
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After over forty years of Reformation and post-Reformation scholarship, Robert Kolb has returned with mature vigor and scholarly vitality to the subject of his dissertation: Nikolaus von Amsdorf. But this is no hagiography of Amsdorf. Kolb portrays this “knight of God,” Wittenberg warrior, and “second Luther,” with warts and all, simultaneously illuminating Amsdorf’s polemical idiosyncrasies and pastoral and confessional passion. A champion for Luther’s theology, Amsdorf was a persistent presence in early Lutheranism, especially among Gnesio-Lutherans, taking strong stands during significant controversies leading to the Formula of Concord. Several of these controversies are still smoldering in twenty-first century Lutheranism. Kolb’s inimitable writing style is readily engaging, invitingly informative, and academically rigorous as he provides a wealth of historical information and perceptively personal and insightful theological detail on this respected elder bishop and theological companion of Luther. Kolb’s work deserves assiduous attention and critical study, as Amsdorf’s perspective on key theological issues continues to be relevant for contemporary Lutheran conversations.

—Rev. Dr. Timothy Maschke
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St. Paul Lutheran Church, Grafton, Wisconsin
Professor Emeritus of Theology,
Concordia University Wisconsin, Mequon, Wisconsin
Nikolaus von Amsdorf

Champion of Martin Luther’s Reformation

Robert Kolb
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**Manuscript Collections**

- **Wf, Guelf.** Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Codex Guelferbytanus
- **Helmst.** Die Helmstedter Handschriften
- **Aug.** Die Augusteischen Handschriften
- **Extr.** Die Extravagantes Handschriften
- **Wr, ETLFB** Weimar; in 1971, the “Nationale Forschungs- und Gedenkstätten der klassischen deutschen Literatur, Goethe-Schiller Archiv” (of the former Thuringian Landesbibliothek, now the Thuringian Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar), gathered with two other volumes of Amsdorf manuscripts in “Nachlass Nikolaus von Amsdorf.”

**Primary Source Collections**

Secondary Literature

Dingel, Amsdorf

Dingel and Wartenberg,
Politik

Gehrt, Konfessionspolitik

VIEG
Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte

Periodicals

ARG
Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte

ZKG
Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte
My friend Martin Treu at the Lutherhaus in Wittenberg once commented that he was looking forward to my “big Amsdorf book.” I did not think at the time that another Amsdorf book would ever flow from my pen, and I still believe that. But for much of the past nearly half century since Bob DeGraaf published the first version of this volume, my revised dissertation on Nikolaus von Amsdorf, I have wished that I had done some things differently. Therefore, I was delighted and most grateful when Paul McCain of Concordia Publishing House approached me with the suggestion that Concordia republish my study. My own insights have grown since publication in 1978, and others have explored aspects of Amsdorf’s life that had not fallen into my purview. Particularly fruitful was the encouragement given to Amsdorf research by the decision of Irene Dingel and Günther Wartenberg to make this friend of Luther the focal point of the Wittenberger Frühjahrstagung in 2007. In addition to the volume of essays that proceeded from that conference, a host of other secondary analyses have enriched the study of the Late Reformation in ways I could not have imagined in 1973. Most of them gained mention in my survey of the historical development of the Formula of Concord in the book composed with Charles Arand and James Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), from which I have taken a number of footnotes for this volume.

My Amsdorf book is not in the strictest or fullest sense a biography, although it does survey Amsdorf’s life from his family background to his death. It concentrates, however, on the last eighteen years of his life and his participation in the debates that sorted out the legacy left by his Wittenberg colleagues, especially Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon. It assesses his role in the debates of that period, which determined much of the agenda for Lutheran theology in the following centuries. The scholarly work of the past fifty years contributes to the analyses of Amsdorf’s thought and the discussion of his role in shaping the Lutheran Reformation and the interpretation of Luther’s legacy.

New manuscripts from Amsdorf’s pen or contemporary copiers have also
appeared in edited form since 1973. To a large extent, these newly uncovered sources have not been digested for incorporation into the volume because they seem to offer, at best, supplementary examples of the material that was at hand in 1968–1973, as my dissertation took shape. However, a more careful survey may produce new angles from which to assess Amsdorf’s impact. One of the new collections of sources is a selection of manuscripts, edited by Hagen Jäger, in the former “Ministerialbibliothek” in Eisenach.1 Hans-Peter Hasse has catalogued a collection of manuscripts and printed works in the Lutherhaus in Wittenberg (Stiftung Luthergedenkstätten in Sachsen-Anhalt).2 Hartmut Kühne has provided a complete catalogue to the “Amsdorffiana” now held in the Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv in Weimar. I encountered these documents in the Goethe-Schiller Archiv of the then “Nationale Forschungs- und Gedenkstätten der klassischen deutschen Literatur” of the former Thuringian Landesbibliothek in 1971. The five volumes in the collection at that time have been supplemented with two other volumes of material directly or indirectly related to Amsdorf under the designation “Nachlass Nikolaus von Amsdorf.”3 I have retained in this book the older cataloguing, referencing volumes 38–42 of the Goethe-Schiller Archiv catalogue, which are now volumes 1–5 of the “Nachlass.”

Another great resource and impetus for further research about this time period is the nine-volume series Controversia et Confessio. Theologische Kontroversen 1548–1577/80. Kritische Auswahledition, edited by Irene Dingel, with the assistance of Henning Jürgens, Johannes Hund, Hans-Otto Schneider, Jan Martin Lies, and Kestutis Daugierdas (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008–), which presents scholarly editions of works by Amsdorf and his contemporaries relating to the controversies of their time.

Another most helpful aid is Professor Dingel’s edition of Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), with sections prepared by a team of scholars and diligently readied in final form by Irene Dingel, Marion Bechthold-Mayer, and Johannes Hund. The Formula of Concord is important in Amsdorf studies because its formulations on original sin, freedom of the will, justification, good works, and third use of the Law, as well as on election and adiaphora, assisted in resolving the debates in which

Amsdorf was involved. The two-volume work of Dingel and Bechthold-Mayer has finally provided the background materials for the Formula of Concord in useful form; the volume in which the stages of the Formula of Concord are gathered together and edited for the first time is particularly helpful ([Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche. Quellen und Materialien Band 2: Die Konkordienformel], [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014]).

I must also express my appreciation to the publisher Koningklijke Brill NV; its rights and permissions department readily granted permission to republish this study with revisions. Brill had assumed control of the publishing firm of Bob DeGraaf at his death.

The original preface to the 1973 publication of my dissertation contained thanks to many others, particularly to my doctoral advisor, Robert M. Kingdon. Bob Kingdon became a friend through his careful guidance and cultivation of the historical skills of his students. After the completion of my dissertation, I had the privilege of working with him for twenty-five years on The Sixteenth Century Journal. His model as a practitioner of the calling and craft of the historian continues to shape my research and writing fifty years after I entered his seminar. My gratitude to the many others who helped the struggling graduate student of the late 1960s and early 1970s remains as strong today as in 1973, when I listed the whole host of them in the preface to the first edition of this study.

Nikolaus von Amsdorf was not the most intellectually gifted person among Luther’s adherents and students; but he was a close friend of Luther, and his role in interpreting Luther’s teaching and the Wittenberg way of reform carried Luther’s insights into popular form and into the next generation. Though Amsdorf was only three weeks younger than Luther, he lived nearly two decades longer. The long-lasting influence of the Reformation was significantly shaped during those two decades of change and turmoil. Therefore, I hope this revised study aids readers in further understanding the construction of the Wittenberg legacy that lives on in many parts of the world even to our day.

Robert Kolb,
Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis
May 14, 2018
The four-hundred-fifty-third anniversary
of the death of Nikolaus von Amsdorf
INTRODUCTION

A SECOND LUTHER?

Luther once observed at table,

Licentiate Amsdorf teaches purely and says what he thinks plainly, precisely, and candidly. When we were at the diet in Smalcald [in 1537, when the Smalcald Articles were subscribed], he said in a sermon, “This gospel belongs to the sick, the weak, the poor sinners, but there is not one of that kind of person here, for the great, the rich princes and lords, do not feel their sicknesses and weaknesses.” That is the way he gets to the point in disputations, too. He is a theologian by nature.¹

Johannes Brenz believed that Nikolaus von Amsdorf was Luther’s natural and logical successor as leader of the Evangelical churches at the time of the reformer’s death.² Friedrich Myconius, the reformer of Gotha and an intimate of the Wittenberg theologians, called Amsdorf “a man powerful in preaching and teaching.”³ Hieronymus Weller, a younger contemporary of Luther and Amsdorf, ascribed to Amsdorf the “highest authority” after Luther was gone, and he urged students of theology to study Amsdorf’s works and recognize that he was “a second Luther.”⁴ It was even said that Luther bequeathed his spirit to Amsdorf.⁵

Yet, “natural theologian” or not, Amsdorf was not the man whom Luther’s mantle fit. No one was able to wear it. Luther’s followers recognized no single leader after the reformer’s death. In Saxony, his disciples split into two parties, called “Philippists” and “Gnesio-Lutherans” by later scholars. They called each other “adiaphorists” and “Flacianists,” while regarding themselves as “Evangelicals” or “Lutherans” or “adherents of the Augsburg Confession.” However, Luther’s close friend Amsdorf did continue to exercise a significant influence

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¹ WA TR 3:461, Nr. 3619.
⁴ Hieronymus Weller, Opera Omnia 3 (Leipzig: Stock, 1702), 172.
⁵ Reported by Christian F. Paullini, Historia Isenacensis (Frankfurt/M: Bauer, 1698), 152.
on the Wittenberg Reformation after Luther’s death. Amsdorf’s ongoing influence arose not so much from the depth of his thought but from his decisiveness and determination, as well as the prestige he had won as Luther’s friend and a crusader for Luther’s cause.

Modern scholarship has paid Amsdorf less attention than he appears to deserve. On the other hand, he seems to promise the modern student more than he delivers. As the only nobleman in Luther’s inner circle, he promises a basis for interesting sociological comparisons, yet few traces of the impact of his noble background are found in his writings. Since he was the only close colleague who shared Luther’s scholastic training and background, Amsdorf’s thought invites important questions about the influence of the medieval doctors on Reformation theology. But his works do not answer these questions. His message was directed so exclusively toward lay readers and “simple pastors” that only a few hints of possible influence from his Scotist instructors appear in his tracts and manuscripts; even these are so general that their sources cannot be finally determined. As one of the first Evangelicals to sit on a medieval bishop’s throne, Amsdorf should offer a basis for evaluating the development of Evangelical institutional forms, but studies of his episcopal career show that he accomplished less as bishop than he had as Magdeburg’s ecclesiastical superintendent or than he would in his very active retirement. Finally, those who claim that Amsdorf became “the father of Lutheran orthodoxy” by scholasticizing Luther’s message overestimate and misunderstand Amsdorf, a man who eschewed scholastic forms. Still, Amsdorf’s life deserves study because—particularly in the last two decades of his life, from 1547 to 1565—he occupied a singular position among sixteenth-century interpreters of Luther. After Luther’s death, Amsdorf sparked and fueled a series of efforts to defend Luther’s radical critique of late medieval religion. His efforts helped preserve and shape Luther’s message for use in the Lutheran churches of early modern Europe.

The way of salvation has always been a central concern for Christians in every age. Luther’s Reformation—though aided and supported by a host of religious, political, social, and economic factors—was born out of his own spiritual

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7 See below, pages 34–35 (note 58), 110, 111–112 (note 52).
struggles to find the proper path to his Creator, to establish the right relationship with God. Luther’s calling as a biblical exegete at the University of Wittenberg forced him into the study of Scripture. There he found insights that he applied successfully to his own spiritual trials. His religious experiences had been shaped initially by the popular religion of the time, by its dependence on ritual performance of sacred activities and pious practices for gaining and hanging onto God’s grace. These views emphasized what the believer does for God. However, Luther discovered that the fundamental dynamic of the biblical faith is the action of the Creator, who takes the initiative to move toward his human creatures and to restore through his Son, Jesus Christ, and through his re-creative word of absolution the relationship broken by sin.

The religious forms and beliefs in places such as Luther’s village were, in many ways, still dependent on the structure of the traditional religions that had existed long before the German-speaking tribes had been converted to Christianity. The traditional view Luther inherited—the route to heaven being dependent on a human being’s efforts to reach God—was reinforced by Luther’s semipelagian instructors, who relied heavily on the works of Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420–1495), a professor at Tübingen in the later years of his life. The University of Tübingen exercised significant influence on other universities, including the universities in Erfurt and Wittenberg, at that time.

Luther reacted against the system of earning salvation that his instructors had offered him, a system centered on “doing his best” to fulfill God’s Law and produce good works. Against that system, Luther proclaimed a way of salvation centered in God’s gracious intervention as Jesus Christ in human history. In the death and resurrection of Christ, Luther found that God had done everything necessary to save the sinner. Luther believed that God gives this salvation to those who receive the gift of faith in Christ. Against the legal structure of a moral system that enforces itself with rewards and punishments, Luther presented a relationship established by the freely given mercy of a gracious God through the gift of faith—which is trust in Christ.10 He summarized that relationship in the concept of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Luther saw himself as a prophet of God, presenting and defending the Gospel message concerning the relationship established by justifying faith. He believed that he was engaged in the same struggle that Augustine had waged against Pelagius and that Paul had fought against the Judaizers: the struggle of divine grace

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STUDENT, PROFESSOR, SUPERINTENDENT, BISHOP

The Life and Times of Luther’s Friend

WITTENBERG’S “PROFOUND MASTER AND KEEN DISPUTANT”

When Martin Luther arrived in Wittenberg in 1508 for his first semester of teaching, he met a young nobleman who was already giving lectures as a member of the university’s arts faculty. Nikolaus von Amsdorf was his name. He was the grandson of Hieronymus, the chief secretary of the chancery of Saxon Elector Frederick II and later the administrator of Torgau. He was the son of Georg, a loyal courtier of Elector Frederick III (“the Wise”). Nikolaus came from a family of seven sons and two daughters. He left his family’s estate near Torgau to study in Leipzig, where his father had also been a student. In 1502 when Frederick “the Wise” opened a new university in Wittenberg, Nikolaus went there to further his education. Amsdorf’s maternal uncle, Johannes von Staupitz, played a key role in the organization of the new university. There Nikolaus advanced through the prescribed course of degrees for Master of Arts (1504) through Licentiate of Theology (1511), but he never proceeded to the doctorate.

Amsdorf’s instructors taught philosophy according to the via antiqua (“old way”), and he followed in their footsteps when he became a young instructor, teaching Aristotle’s logic as interpreted by the fourteenth-century thinker John Duns Scotus. Amsdorf’s lectures competed with Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt’s Thomist interpretation of the same subject at six o’clock each morning. In 1508, Amsdorf became a canon at the foundation located at the Castle Church in Wittenberg and seemed to have found his niche in life: a nobleman’s son serving church and school. A contemporary described Amsdorf as a “profound master

of the liberal arts, a supporter of the Scotistic method, and a keen disputant, who in spite of his high birth did not hesitate to study the noble arts, which give luster to his noble blood.”

In 1508 when Luther and Amsdorf first met, neither had any idea that they would become close friends and would share the experiences of the Wittenberg movement for reform. For about eight years after they first encountered one another, the two men remained only acquaintances. At the time, Amsdorf belonged to a small sodality of professors aspiring to propagate a mild sort of educational reform often labeled “biblical humanism”; however, Amsdorf’s work was still primarily shaped by the scholastic mold his instructors had passed along to him. The historical record provides no indication of Amsdorf’s theological position during those years. Though labeled a “Scotist” in the Wittenberg curriculum, Amsdorf later said Thomas Aquinas had seduced him in his early years in Wittenberg. Like most of his contemporaries, Amsdorf’s beliefs probably comprised an amalgam of ideas from several currents of thought. Any early influence that Amsdorf’s uncle, Johannes von Staupitz—Luther’s spiritual counselor in the Augustinian order—may have had on Amsdorf went unnoted in his later writings.

In September 1516, the heart of Luther’s developing understanding of God’s grace and human depravity was presented in a series of theses prepared for defense in disputation by Luther’s student and colleague in the Wittenberg arts faculty, Bartholomäus Bernhardi von Feldkirchen. Amsdorf’s reaction to these theses is the first indication that he was being converted to Luther’s way of thinking. Amsdorf shared the theses with his friend Johann Lang, who was prior of the Augustinian cloister in Erfurt. Amsdorf’s accompanying letter mentioned that Luther had given him a copy of Augustine. These records indicate Amsdorf responded warmly to the ideas his colleague was advancing.3

These ideas matured slowly in Luther’s mind and also in Amsdorf’s. In 1519, Amsdorf prepared for publication a statement of his faith at the urging of Luther and perhaps Christoph Scheurl of Nuremberg.4 Amsdorf’s first published

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3 WA 1:142, 145–151; Luther’s letters regarding these theses to Johann Lang and to Michael Dressel are found in WA Br 1:66, 57–58.

4 In addition to urging Amsdorf to put his ideas into print, Scheurl sent his thanks to Amsdorf and also the thanks of Scheurl’s friend, Albrecht Dürer (*Christoph Scheurl’s Briefbuch*, eds. F. von Soden and J. K. F. S.).
tract, *A Christian Meditation How One Should Pray the Lord’s Prayer, Drawn from the Sermons of Dr. Martin Luther of Wittenberg*.\(^5\) introduced a pattern that would mark Amsdorf’s ministry and way of thinking for the remaining forty-five years of his life. Simple in style and content and written in the vernacular, Amsdorf’s first tract appealed to the common people and village priests; for the rest of his life, these groups of people were his primary audience and concern. He wrote the tract to propagate Luther’s thinking. That continued to be the goal of his subsequent writing as well. He did not always draw the material in his tracts so directly from his friend as he did by paraphrasing and summarizing Luther in this first tract; but he did always use Luther’s writings as the guideline for his own proclamation. Amsdorf’s *Meditation* contained basic concepts of sin and grace that he would repeat again and again during his life. In that tract, he confessed that he was a wretched sinner with a nature poisoned by original sin inherited from his parents, and he acknowledged that even his good works were harmful if he put his trust in them for salvation.\(^6\) For redemption from sin, Amsdorf turned to God, who had become “a criminal, a sinner, a fool” so that believers might become righteous. Luther himself later set forth his doctrine of justification in this way.\(^7\) Amsdorf’s first tract placed sole responsibility for human salvation in God’s hands, a salvation which was effected through the substitutionary, atoning work of Christ. This simple understanding of the Christian Gospel would mark Amsdorf’s theological writings from 1519 until the end of his life.

By 1519, Amsdorf’s friendship with Luther had begun to pull him into a new kind of life, far different from his routine as an instructor of the liberal arts. In June 1519, he rode to Leipzig with Luther and Karlstadt and witnessed their debate with Johann Eck. Two years later, Amsdorf accompanied Luther to Worms; they were returning to Wittenberg together when Elector Frederick’s men stopped the wagon and spirited Luther off to the Wartburg. Friends had informed Amsdorf of Frederick’s plans to kidnap Luther and place him in protective custody; yet Amsdorf reportedly reacted so vehemently against the horsemen who interrupted their journey that Luther and Amsdorf’s driver and

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\(^6\) Cf. chapter 3, pages 116–120.

traveling companion had no idea that Amsdorf was less concerned than they were about Luther’s disappearance.

When Luther was taken to the Wartburg, Amsdorf returned to Wittenberg and worked with Philip Melanchthon to try to direct Luther’s movement in his absence. The humanist prodigy Melanchthon and Amsdorf had quickly become friends when Melanchthon arrived in Wittenberg in 1518 to teach Greek at the university. With Luther, they had formed their own beer-drinking sodality, as Luther later fondly recalled. Although Amsdorf’s and Melanchthon’s understandings of Luther’s message later diverged at certain points, the memory of the time they shared together around beer steins never faded. While Melanchthon was alive, Amsdorf restrained himself from attacking his old friend in print with the same fierce polemic he used against some of Melanchthon’s disciples, even though Amsdorf strongly objected to aspects of Melanchthon’s interpretation of Luther. Likewise, when Melanchthon expressed strong objections to Amsdorf’s stance on one subject or another after 1530, Melanchthon did so privately, or at least not in print.

During Luther’s concealment in the Wartburg, Amsdorf and Melanchthon advised Elector Frederick on critical issues. The two also shared the trials of those months in 1521 and 1522 when they had to temporarily assume Luther’s leadership role. From one direction, they were pressed by the papal party, who wielded the threat of their excommunication, attached by Johann Eck to the bull Deceit Pontificem Romanum. From the other direction, they were pressured by enthusiastic comrades such as Karlstadt and Luther’s fellow Augustinian Gabriel Zwilling to support more wide-ranging reforms of ecclesiastical life in Wittenberg. Luther did visit Wittenberg for a few days in December 1521 to check on the situation caused by the pace of reform Karlstadt and Zwilling were instigating. He stayed in Amsdorf’s home, and with Melanchthon and a few other friends, they discussed how reform could best be promoted. But at the end of December 1521, three self-styled “prophets” from Zwickau confronted Amsdorf and Melanchthon, claiming to have had heavenly visions. Amsdorf invited them into his home, where Melanchthon was also boarding, and the prophets thoroughly confused Luther’s vicars. Amsdorf and Melanchthon

8 WA 10/3:18.
9 CR 1:271–272, Nr. 94; MBWT 1:236–237, Nr. 112.
12 In a letter dated to January 13, 1522, Luther counseled Amsdorf not to get upset over the three men from
must have been relieved in March 1522 when Luther decided to return to Wittenberg indefinitely.

Besides his work with Melanchthon, there were several ways Amsdorf specifically sought to fill the gaps during the time of Luther’s absence. Amsdorf read Luther’s notes on the Book of Hebrews to students who had come to Wittenberg seeking to hear the reformer himself. Amsdorf continued to conduct disputation for students. He consulted with friends over questions of biblical interpretation, including with individuals as significant as Georg Spalatin, the private secretary of Frederick the Wise and the chief link between the electoral Saxon government and Luther’s circle. Amsdorf also wrote theses for disputation during this time.

One set of theses espoused the conviction that the Roman papacy was the Antichrist, a conviction Luther had been developing. This was the first time Amsdorf publicly stated this idea, which became a standard theme in his writing for the rest of his life. The idea had not appeared in Amsdorf’s simple meditation of 1519; rather, he became more convinced of this attribution as the hostility between Rome and Wittenberg intensified around 1520. In 1521 and 1522, the fierce and frustrating dispute Amsdorf and others waged against defenders of the Roman mass in Wittenberg strengthened Amsdorf’s growing belief that the institution of the papacy fulfilled prophecies about the opponent of God named the Antichrist in Daniel, Paul’s Epistles, and Revelation. In 1522, Amsdorf authored a preface and conclusion on this topic in an anonymous tract by Lazarus Spengler, the secretary of Nuremberg’s city council and one of Luther’s most prominent and dedicated lay disciples. In that anonymous preface and conclusion...