

# Kessler Collection Update

*M. Patrick Graham*

The Kessler Reformation Collection grew by forty-four pieces since September 1 and so now stands at 3,319. Twelve items are by Martin Luther, another five by Melancthon, and one each by Calvin, Eck, and Erasmus. Thirteen of these do not appear to be held by any other North American library and twelve by only one other library.

The collection enjoys strong use and was incorporated into ten presentations by library staff during the fall term. Its woodcuts and engravings continue to be digitized and added to the Digital Image Archive (accessible via [www.pitts.emory.edu](http://www.pitts.emory.edu)), which now includes more than 15,000 images.

Plans for the twentieth anniversary of the Kessler Collection are moving along well and will follow the theme “Luther and the Arts.” Guest speakers this year will include Martin E. Marty (University of Chicago), Herbert L. Kessler (Johns Hopkins University), and Walter Melion (Emory University). The lectures, musical presentations, and other events for the Reformation Day at Emory program will take place on Tuesday, October 23.

Most of this issue of *Reformation Notes* is devoted to an article by Jan Storm van Leeuwen, who was until his retirement Keeper of the Bookbinding Collection at the Dutch Royal Library (The Hague). As reported in an earlier issue, he came to Atlanta to spend several days with the Kessler Collection and other special collections materials at Emory and deliver a public lecture for the Friends of the Emory University Libraries and a workshop for academic librarians in the area. The accompanying article grows out of his experience at Emory and attests the value of the Kessler Collection for those who study sixteenth-century German bindings.

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# REFORMATION NOTES

News for Partners of the Richard C. Kessler Reformation Collection  
*Winter 2007, Number 30*

## Rolls and Blocks, Pigskin and Religion

*THE VALUE OF KESSLER COLLECTION BINDINGS FOR SCHOLARSHIP*

*Jan Storm van Leeuwen*

The Richard C. Kessler Reformation Collection is a repository of rare and valuable documents produced in connection with the Protestant Reformation. The collection now contains more than 3,300 pieces written by Martin Luther, his colleagues, and opponents, and printed during their lifetimes.

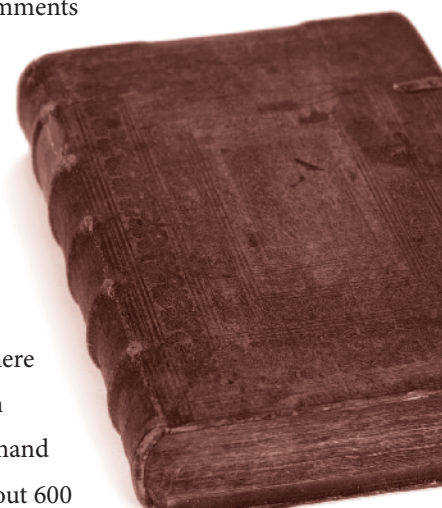
Supported by the vision and resources of Lutheran laypeople Richard and Martha Kessler and partners throughout the Southeast, the collection is housed in the Pitts Theology Library of Candler School of Theology. It provides a rich resource for scholars of the Reformation and for clergy and laity who seek to understand the history of the Christian faith.

For more information about the collection, contact:  
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The Kessler Collection is recognized for its wealth of sixteenth-century publications related to the Protestant Reformation in Germany. However, the scholarly value of its bookbindings is not so well known. Therefore, I was pleased to accept an invitation to conduct the first study of the Pitts Library's bindings. The materials outside the Kessler Collection display a variety of luxurious and semiluxurious bindings from the English Restoration period and a good overview of binding techniques and materials generally. I will leave these aside for now, though, and limit my comments to the Kessler Collection materials.

### *Sixteenth-Century Bookbinding and Libraries*

In the sixteenth century most copies of a book were not bound in a uniform style by the publisher before sale. Rather, each was bound according to the taste and instructions of the first owner. With the invention of movable type for printing in the midfifteenth century, there was a sharp increase in the number of texts published, in the number of copies issued for each text, and in the demand for hand-bookbinding. Whereas a book collection of about 600 items would have been large in 1550, one of several thousand would have been so regarded by 1600. The Protestant Reformation fueled the growing demand for printed materials by encouraging literacy, publishing in the vernacular, and inviting laypersons to join the debate. Therefore, nobles and prosperous burghers eagerly began to assemble large book collections based on themes of interest.



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## Kessler Collection Bindings—

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Jan Storm van Leeuwen

### The Decoration of Bindings

Although Renaissance book collectors in France focused on good editions and luxurious—though not always very sound—bindings, those in Germany preferred as many different texts as possible and in sturdy—but not too expensive—bindings. Calfskin was the most common covering material in the fifteenth century but was overtaken by a preference for pigskin in the sixteenth century. The Kessler Collection is especially rich in the latter.

The pigskin bindings were typically blind tooled—that is, with just the impressions of tools and no applications of gold or silver. Rolls (circular pieces of brass that were rolled off by hand) and blocks (brass plates that had to be applied with a press) were preferred, and the use of small hand tools was restricted to special purposes. In a technical and material sense, their bevelled wooden covers and brass clasps still belong to the Middle Ages, but their decoration showcases the religious themes of the late Middle Ages as well as the classical themes of the early modern period. Rolls with successive busts of the apostles or biblical scenes such as the annunciation, baptism, or crucifixion go happily together with those representing the classical virtues.

Several blocks depict the leaders of the states that formed the German Empire or their coats of arms—one on the top cover and another on the bottom. Other bindings may include the name, initials, or crest of the original owner. Other blocks depict religious scenes or the portraits

of famous reformers such as Luther or Melancthon—usually in pairs with one on the top cover and another on the bottom, engraved in the style of portraits by Lucas Cranach, the Elder.

### The Study of Bindings

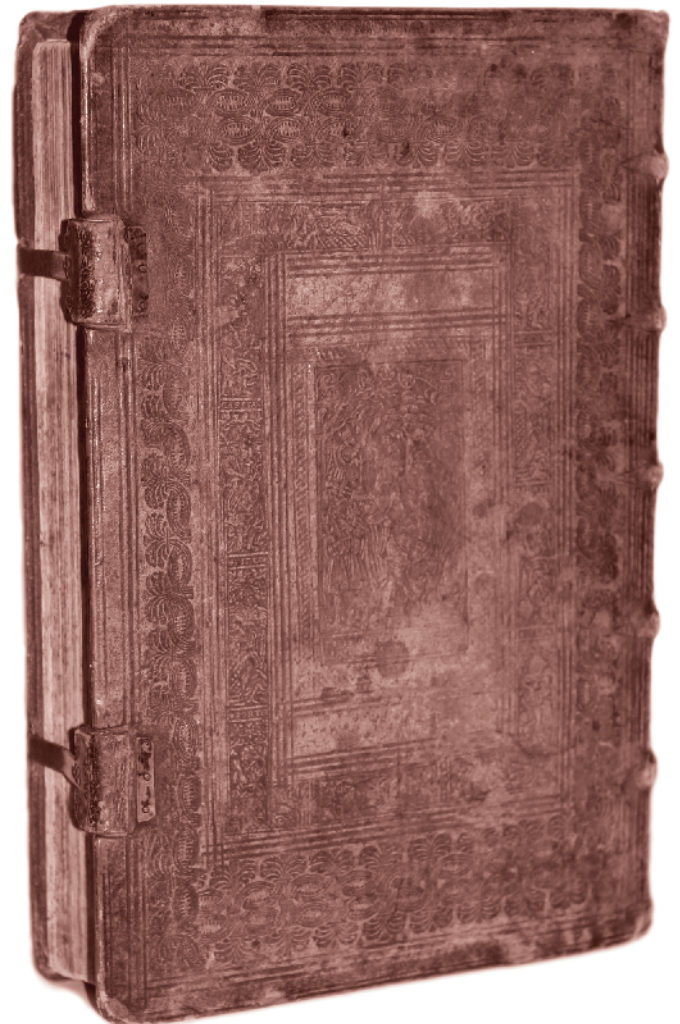
Until recently, historians of bookbinding concentrated on dating and identifying bindings by a comparison of the impression of the rolls and blocks, some of which showed the initials of the binder who had them made and the date they were made (see <http://www.hist-einband.de/>). What received less attention, though, were the themes depicted on the rolls and blocks and the possible relationships between what was portrayed on the rolls and blocks of the bindings and the texts they enclosed. Nevertheless, it has been noted that Catholic themes may be found on bindings for Protestant works and vice versa; meanwhile, some bindings show both Protestant and Catholic material. This fact is not as surprising as it may seem, since the blind-tooled depictions on the rolls—seldom larger than 4 x 2.5 cm—are clear only upon close inspection. Perhaps the binder and the customer were oblivious to the things represented or didn't find them objectionable.

As for the contents of the books and their relation to bindings, I have been intrigued by the woodcuts and engravings in the books themselves and the relation between these and the bindings (see the Digital Image Archive at <http://www.pitts.emory.edu/dia/woodcuts.htm>). An initial comparison of a few items is promising. For example, the blocks on the top and bottom covers of *Summaria vber die gantze Bibel . . .* (Nuremberg, 1548) show the same themes

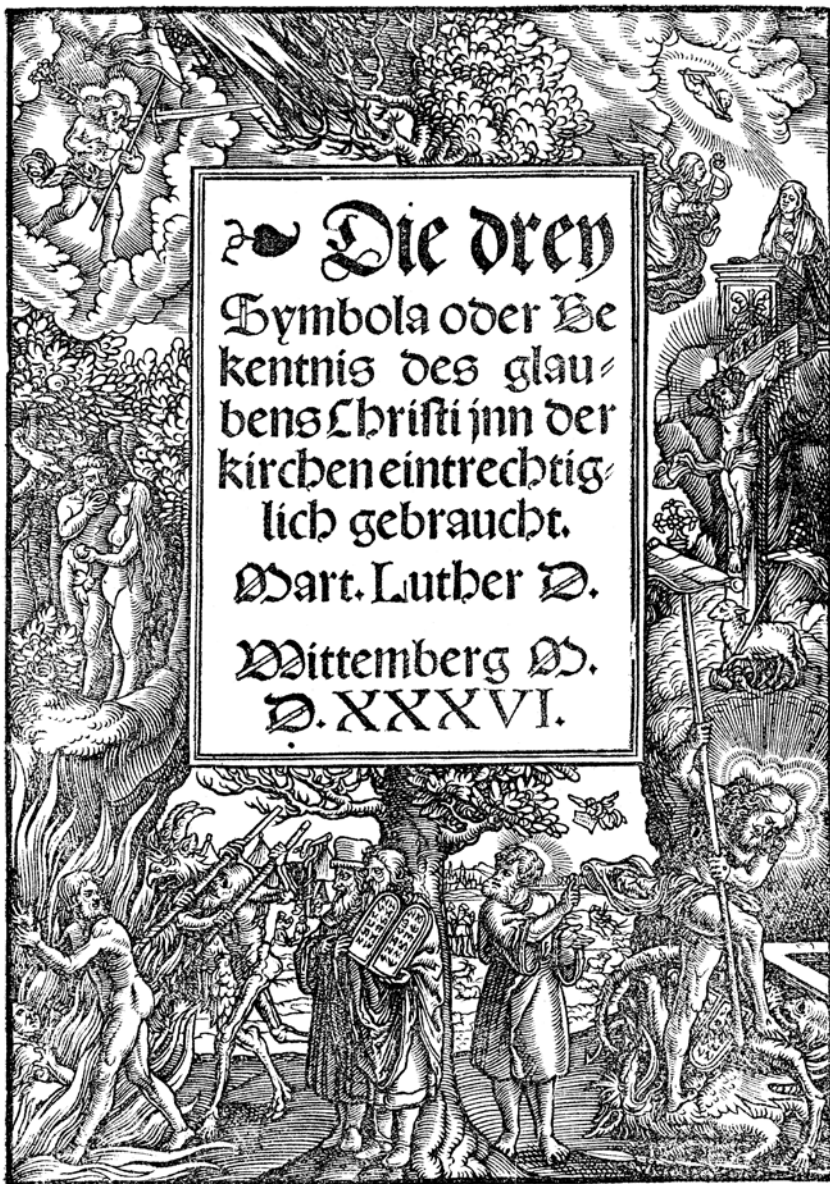
as the title-page borders of several Wittenberg publications from 1536 to 1555. The block on the top cover shows the baptism of Jesus, the resurrection lamb, and Jesus slaying the dragon; the bottom cover shows the sin in the Garden of Eden, Moses giving the law, and the consignment of souls to Hell. Both “blocks”—they are exactly the same size and will, in fact, be impressions of two engraved sides of the same brass plate—come closest to the themes and style of the woodcut border of the 1536 imprint of Luther's edition of the Apostles, Athanasian, and Nicene Creeds (*Die drey Symbola . . .*). The precise relationship of blocks and border, though, has not yet been ascertained.

### The Way Forward

Even though thousands of sixteenth-century bookbindings have survived due to their sturdy construction and protection in libraries, the bindings in the Kessler Collection are notable







Title page of Martin Luther's *Die drey Symbola oder Bekentnis des glaubens Christi . . .* (Wittenberg: J. Weis, 1536 [actually issued in 1538]). The photographs of book bindings elsewhere in this issue are taken from Veit Dietrich's *Summaria vber die gantze Bibel* (Nuremberg: Johann vom Berg und Vlrich Newber, 1548).

for their special focus on religion and the early years of the Lutheran church in Germany. This aspect permits a comparison of the themes on the bindings with Lutheranism generally and the contents of the books themselves. The Kessler Collection is still small enough to allow the binding historian to inspect the contents and note the bindings that merit further study. In addition, I found the helpfulness and expert knowledge of the Pitts Library staff to be a great asset in my study of the collection.

I hope that the means can be found to study all the pigskin—and even some calfskin—bindings with impressions of rolls and blocks in the Kessler collection. Contrary to what was thought formerly, binder and customer must often have made a conscious choice of the tooling material from the rolls and blocks that the binder possessed. In this way, they wanted the attire of the religious texts to express something of their faith. Our task now is to understand what they did and so honor them in the process.



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