Robert W. Jenson died September 5, 2017, at his home in Princeton, New Jersey. He is survived by his beloved wife Blanche and their daughter Kari Jenson Gold. In this memorial tribute I will refer to him as Jens, as he was called by those who knew him well. Jens was my best friend over a period of sixty years. I am going to write mostly about my theological journey with Jens.

We attended Luther Seminary in St. Paul at the same time and were graduates of the class of 1955. But we hardly knew each other at that time and did not become close friends until 1957 when we were both doctoral students of the theological faculty of the University in Heidelberg. At the time Heidelberg had assembled the most prestigious faculty in the world: Gerhard von Rad in Old Testament, Günther Bornkamm in New Testament, Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen in patristics, Heinrich Bornkamm in Reformation and modern history, Peter Brunner and Edmund Schlink in dogmatics and systematic theology, and Wolfhart Pannenberg teaching history of doctrine.

I was there to write my doctoral dissertation for Harvard Divinity School. Paul Tillich, my Doktorvater, told me I had to write on the theology of Martin Kahler, his professor of dogmatics from the University of Halle. Jens received his doctorate from the University of Heidelberg itself, having written his dissertation on the theology of Karl Barth, with Peter Brunner serving as his Doktorvater. Virtually every week Jens and I would get together to discuss what we were learning from our German professors. We were encountering so many new things in theology: Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing of the New Testament, the latest volumes of Karl Barth’s massive church dogmatics, the new hermeneutics of Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s letters and papers from prison, as well as the

neo-confessional Lutheran theology of Edmund Schlink and Peter Brunner. That year we also learned that Wolfhart Pannenberg, then a Privatdozent, had organized a think tank for young theologians committed to finding a way beyond the alternatives of Barth and Bultmann, whose theologies they accused of not taking history seriously. Their manifesto was published under the provocative title, Revelation as History.

Jens left Heidelberg in 1960 to teach at Luther College, his alma mater, where he had already taught for two years before he went to Heidelberg. Luther College had the reputation of being the most orthodox of the midwestern Norwegian-American Lutheran colleges—of the others being St. Olaf, Concordia, Augustana, Augsburg, and Waldorf. Jens was expected to carry the torch for the kind of confessional Lutheran theology that members of the religion faculty espoused. They became bitterly disappointed because Jens had learned some new things during his three years abroad: historical-critical interpretation of the Bible, new dogmatics based on rereading the texts of the classical tradition, and serious engagement with the great thinkers of German Protestantism such as Immanuel Kant, G. F. W. Hegel, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. And the Luther he learned from his Heidelberg professors was a far cry from the Luther of midwestern Lutheranism. Members of the religion department presented an ultimatum to the President of the College: either you fire Robert Jenson, whom they were accusing of heterodoxy if not heresy, or we will resign en masse. The president called their bluff.

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ing like-minded younger Lutheran theologians equipped with doctorates. Gerhard Forde was one of them.

When Jens and I were in Heidelberg we met Roy Harrisville, doing postdoctoral work at the University of Tübingen. The three of us had been awarded Lutheran World Federation fellowships and as such were invited to gather with other international students for a few days of orientation. We met again in St. Paul at the Harrisvilles’ for lunch in the summer of 1960 and decided to launch a new journal of theology. I was a parish pastor in North Minneapolis, Jens was teaching at Luther College, and Roy had been hired as professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary. We invited a few others to join us in this venture, including James Burtness and Kent Knutson, both teaching systematic theology at Luther Seminary. Knutson went on to become president of Wartburg Seminary and then president of the American Lutheran Church. In addition we gathered in Robert Scharlemann, a Missouri Synod theologian; Franklin Sherman of Mansfield College at Oxford; Loren Halvorson; and LaVern Grosc, the latter two pastors with Ph.D.s. We invited scores of Lutheran theologians from the United States and Europe to serve as contributing editors or on the editorial council. It was a veritable “Who’s Who” in Lutheran theology from around the world. The first issue of dialog: A Journal of Theology was a huge success—five thousand subscribers! Jens and I took turns editing the journal for many decades. It’s been downhill since then. Now, more than fifty years later, the journal limps along with considerably fewer subscribers, many of them libraries.

Jens and I abandoned dialog in 1991 because our ecumenical turn convinced us that Lutheranism in the United States was becoming just another liberal Protestant denomination. Numerous projects. In the early 1970s we travelled to Cuernavaca, Mexico, to teach a seminar on eschatology and politics at an institute run by the Jesuit theologian Ivan Illich. We were comrades-in-arms opposing the Vietnam War, along with many clergy from all denominations. Richard John Neuhaus was one of the leaders in the movement, who during this time became a close friend of both of us.

In the early 1980s we invited four theologians to join us in writing a two-volume work of Christian Dogmatics in twelve loci. These four were Gerhard Forde, Hans Schwarz, Paul Sponheim, and Philip Hefner, representing different “brands” of Lutheran theology. I wrote the first locus, Prolegomena to Christian Dogmatics, and the sixth, the Person of Jesus Christ. Jens wrote the second on the Triune God and the eighth on the Holy Spirit. The other loci covered the Work of Christ, the Christian Life, the Means of Grace, Eschatology, the Knowledge of God, Sin and Evil, Creation, and the Church. Christian Dogmatics has been translated into Portuguese and is still in print with Augsburg Fortress. It has served as the basic text of dogmatics in some Lutheran seminaries for over thirty years.

Jenson’s years at Gettysburg were very productive. He became widely acclaimed as a front-ranking ecumenical Lutheran theologian. He was a Lutheran participant in the Lutheran-Episcopal dialogue in the U.S. and a consultant to the international Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. Out of this experience he became convinced there was a deep theological problem at the base of the ecumenical dialogues, which he explained in his book, Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology. In this book he argued that the doctrine of God in the ancient church was influenced more by the metaphysical axioms of Hellenistic philosophy than by the biblical God of the gospel. All the ecumenical dialogues, no matter which churches were involved, were impeded by this flaw they shared in common. It was also during the years at Gettysburg that he wrote The Triune Identity, which ranks along with the contributions of John Zizioulas, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Jürgen Moltmann as a major source in the renewal of trinitarian theology.

Jens left the Lutheran seminary in Gettysburg to teach at St. Olaf College for ten years. There I met up with Jens again when I resigned from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 1991. Jens wrote an editorial in dialog, “Why did Braaten do it?” His answer: “Seminaries of the ELCA are now institutions emphatically inhospitable to theological work and instruction, and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.” After one particularly long, exasperating
faculty meeting, I had had enough of the politically correct shenanigans at the seminary. The arrival of the Seminex faculty—ten former professors of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis—had made things worse. After that meeting my wife LaVonne picked me up at the seminary; after spending a long day at one of her Health Food Stores. I jumped in the car and asked her, "Do we have enough money to leave the Seminary and do something more useful?" She said, "Let's think about it." That evening we went out to dinner and had a lengthy conversation, at the end of which we had reached a decision. The next day I wrote a letter of resignation, called the Jensons in Northfield, and said, "We have decided to come to Northfield, and we hope you will join us in creating a center committed to bringing Lutheran theology into a wider ecumenical orbit." Soon thereafter we founded the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, this year celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary.

Before we got to Northfield, the editors of three journals—dialog, Lutheran Forum, and Lutheran Quarterly—met in Chicago to plan a theological conference to focus on the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Many pastors and laypeople were complaining about what they observed coming out of headquarters in Chicago. Only three years old, the new church seemed already to be in need of reform and renewal. Richard John Neuhaus suggested we name the conference "A Call to Faithfulness." Nearly one thousand people filled the St. Olaf College chapel. The speakers were well-known: Robert Jenson, James Kittelson, Gerhard Forde, Joseph Burgess, George Lindbeck, Paul Spongheim, Richard John Neuhaus, Larry Rasmussen, and myself. Members of the office staff at Higgins Road were told, "Don't attend!" And they didn't.

The conference received mixed reviews. One criticism was that the speakers were all white males, shamelessly defying the very quota system the ELCA had invented for itself. The real story was that the speakers themselves were not all on the same page. Those who paid close attention could detect that the ELCA was badly polarized, even among its theologians, between those whom George Lindbeck described as denominational Lutherans, on the one hand, and evangelical catholics, on the other—a polarization that unfortunately continues to this day.

Before Jens left St. Olaf College to accept a position as Senior Scholar for Research at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton Theological Seminary, he published his Systematic Theology in two volumes. When asked how long it took to write his magnum opus, he answered, "The last thirty years." Together we also coedited A Map of Twentieth Century Theology: Readings from Karl Barth to Radical Pluralism, which came out in 1995.

About the time the Jensons left Northfield for Princeton, LaVonne and I left the cold winters of Minnesota for the hot desert of Arizona. Thanks to modern technology we were able to continue to collaborate on many projects. Jens's stature as an ecumenical theologian grew by leaps and bounds during his years in Princeton. He became associated with many of America's most important theologians and religious leaders—Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish. At the same time, Jens's Lutheran contacts and connections steadily diminished, but not entirely. The Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology has attracted Lutheran pastors and theologians who regularly attend its annual theological conferences, subscribe to Pro Ecclesia, and serve on its Board of Directors. One of the most faithful supporters of the Center's projects is its current Executive Director, Gregory Fryer, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Manhattan.

In 1999 the Center decided to undertake a major study on ecclesiology and the future of ecumenism. Jens and I formed a task force of sixteen members, including Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, and one Pentecostal. The study group produced an ecumenical manifesto, In
One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity. The statement focused on problems of church division and the ecumenical movement. The document was critically examined by many of the most experienced ecumenists and ranking theologians in the United States.

When I was teaching theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago I would often include some of Jens's books as required course readings. Most of the students found them difficult to understand, mostly due to Jens's writing style. Jens has been called "a theologian's theologian." Seminary students are not yet theologians and most of them never will be. Some will probably never bother to read a solid theological book again. I would say to those students: don't give up so easily. In his later years, Jens wrote some shorter things that are quite a bit more readable. One such is a conversation Jensen had with his eight-year-old granddaughter Solveig Lucia Gold. The little book is entitled Conversations with Poppio about God. For the blurb on the dust jacket I wrote, "Robert Jensen has translated the core convictions of his two volumes of Systematic Theology into simple truths that his eight-year-old grandchild can understand in the course of their unrehearsed and lively conversation. If you want to know what a sophisticated theologian really believes, listen to him explain the mysteries of the Christian faith to a child in simple terms without being simplistic."

Another gem—some are already calling it a classic-to-be—was the last thing he published, in 2016: A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live? Stanley Hauerwas wrote, "In these lectures presented to undergraduates Jenson states the basics of the Christian faith with the theological insight that has characterized his work from the very beginning." And Bruce McCormack of Princeton Theological Seminary wrote even more laudatory remarks: "Robert Jenson is, in my view, the greatest living Protestant theologian in the English-speaking world. What is given to us here is an ‘outline of dogmatics’—and much more. Like Tillich’s famous lectures on Protestant theology in the nineteenth century, these lectures were delivered in a more or less extemporaneous fashion. And they were delivered in the form of a conversation between ‘Jens’ and introductory students of theology at Princeton University." Anyone who wishes to get a taste of Jens’s magisterial presentation of the ABC’s of Christian faith and doctrine will discover that this little book is just the thing.

The funeral for Robert W. Jenson took place on September 16, 2017, at Trinity Church, Princeton, New Jersey, the Episcopal parish across the street from the Jenson residence. I was privileged to be one of the six pallbearers. Three of them—Matthew Bruce, C. J. Dickson, and Adam Eitel—were doctoral students mentored by Jens during their years at Princeton Seminary. They told me how much they had learned from Jens and how they held him in highest esteem. Jens will be a great role model for them as teachers of the Christian faith. It heartened me so much to be assured that they will keep the legacy of Jens’s theology fresh and alive for generations to come. The sermon was preached by Victor Lee Austin, whom Jens knew and respected very much, the Program Director of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and Theologian-in-Residence of the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas. The service was a glorious and joyous celebration of the life of one of God’s saints, now received into the arms of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose blessed resurrection was the linchpin of everything Jens believed and the reason for his being a theologian of the church.