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In Memoriam

Robert David Preus

DAVID P. SCAER



DR. ROBERT D. PREUS WILL GO DOWN in the 150-year history of The Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod as one of its most remarkable and influential theologians and churchmen. He was ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, known as “the little Norwegian Synod,” whose predecessor synod his great-grandfather had founded and in which his grandfather served. For thirty-eight years Dr. Preus served the Missouri Synod as a professor of systematic theology, first at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (1957–1974) and then at Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, later Fort Wayne (1974–1995), of which he was also the president (1974–1989; 1992–1993). History cannot now render a verdict, but at this time no other person has a claim to be recognized as the most significant theologian of this period.

His *Inspiration of the Scriptures*, a doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Edinburgh, was the first detailed study of this doctrine in the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy. It provided the Missouri Synod with an analysis of the view that was essential to understanding its theology. He pursued his studies with another dissertation at the University of Strassbourg that analyzed the theology of the same period. This was published as *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. A second published volume with the same title covered the doctrine of God and was the promise of a complete set covering all the doctrines of this period.

During his Saint Louis days he was recognized as the leading confessional professor when certain others were entertaining methods that cast doubt on the historical nature of the Bible. Through his reading of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* he was an authority on neo-orthodoxy, a theological approach that avoided the historical issues by relegating everything in the Bible to a doctrine of revelation that was defined in existential terms. His broad grasp of theology and his confessional convictions attracted students who as pastors became church leaders.

His late brother, Dr. J. A. O. Preus, held to the same fundamental beliefs and was elected synodical president in 1969. By 1974 the opposing approaches represented by the Preus brothers and the faculty precipitated a crisis in which nearly all the professors left their positions in Saint Louis. When the acting president, the late Dr. Martin Scharlemann, could no longer carry out his duties, Dr. Robert Preus was called upon to administer what was until then the largest Lutheran seminary in the western hemisphere. With only two other regular faculty members as instructors, he

recruited *emeriti* from Saint Louis and colleagues from Springfield where he would become president in May of that same year.

The 1975 synod convention moved the Springfield seminary to Fort Wayne, where it had been founded in 1846. During his presidency the seminary had large enrollments and was financially solvent. (At times it was one of the few schools in the church that were.) Faculty and students were recognized for loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions.

In July 1989, at age 64, Dr. Preus was retired from the presidency by a 5-3 vote of the Board of Regents, after a prior vote of 4-1-3 in May failed. During a lecture Dr. Preus was delivering at the January 1991 symposium, he was notified by a fax letter delivered by the seminary security officer that the synod president and vice-presidents were requesting his removal from the ministerium of the synod. He was noticeably shaken, but continued with the second part of his lecture. A district vice-president soon acceded to this request and for a time Dr. Preus was not considered a minister of the church. During this same time he was charged with false doctrine for defending a colleague's statement that all theology is christology. He was cleared of all charges and returned to the presidency of the seminary by the 1992 synod convention. It was understood that after leaving that position in April 1993, he would remain as professor of systematic theology until his retirement. But seminary officials intervened and again he was not allowed to teach or preach in chapel. In April 1994 he and his wife, Donna, after seventeen years in Fort Wayne, left for Minnesota. At sixty-nine he was the same age as some colleagues and younger than others. He took a prominent part in the July 1995 synod convention, where he was narrowly deprived of election to the synodical praesidium.

His wide success as a theologian and organizer and his popularity with students and lay people may have been underlying reasons for his removal. All charges against him were found to be without substance. Although some questioned his administrative competency, he had in 1989 garnered enough funds to eliminate tuition for students. Men of lesser stamina might have retreated, but he was determined to rebuild funds intended for tuition that had been depleted after his removal in 1989.

When the 1995 synod convention voted by large majorities for a change in the membership of the Fort Wayne Board of Regents, this was widely interpreted as another vindication. The new board intended not only to let Dr. Preus return as an active professor, but also to confer on him the title of president emeritus. He took an active part in the September faculty meetings, in which he resolved a thorny issue raised by a district president about pastors' loyalty to the synod if they did not support women as congregational presidents. During these same three months

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after the convention, he made plans to resume teaching in the fall of 1996 and to reactivate some off-campus sites. He was going to take a prominent part in the 1996 Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, an idea he had originated in 1978, and to lay out plans for the seminary's future.

Beginning in 1989 he laid plans for the Luther Academy, which he served as president. Among its purposes were sponsoring the confessional journal *Logia*; publishing the *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics* series, of which he was the editor and for which he himself was writing volumes on the Scriptures and justification; and conducting scholarly meetings. Annual gatherings were held in Chicago, and a few days before he died he was in Saint Catharines for the Sasse Symposium, of which the Luther Academy was a sponsor.

At the time of his removal from office, Dr. Preus also had plans for the seminary to offer the Doctor of Theology and Doctor of Missiology degrees, which reflected his great loves. Plans for the Doctor of Theology, which involved a chair of confessional Lutheran studies, were consistently thwarted, though it was widely recognized that under his leadership the seminary had the resources. After he returned to the presidency in 1992, he again took up this dream of a chair of confessional Lutheran studies, which he would hold for a year or two. This offer was declined, and again he was no longer allowed to teach any seminary courses. In the morning of the day he died he was laying down plans to establish this chair, though he no longer desired it for himself. The seminary board in cooperation with the Preus family is carrying out his wishes to create the chair he was not allowed to hold. In his honor it will be called the Robert D. Preus Chair of Confessional Studies.

Dr. Preus was a significant figure in Evangelical circles, where his commitment to the Scriptures was admired. He was welcomed into their societies, where he played a leading role and contributed to their anthologies. His staunch defense of biblical inerrancy and what he had done for the Missouri Synod in 1974 attracted the admiration of those who would later fight the same kinds of battles in their churches. He was credited with starting a revolution towards a more conservative Christianity in other denominations.

After participating in the September faculty meeting, he lectured in Finland and laid plans for a seminary extension in Cambridge, England. Dr. Preus's obvious vitality left his family, friends, and admirers unprepared for his death. His calendar years stood diametrically opposed to his extensive plans for writing and teaching. The six years of controversy provided his church with a focal point to clarify the newer theological issues, but they had taken a toll on him. His vigor and zeal for theology and for the seminary were still there, but to those who had known him only a few years before he had noticeably aged. He seemed to be unaware of the price he had been forced to pay.

The year 1974 with its controversy over the Bible in which Dr. Robert Preus was a prominent factor has been considered the watershed year for the Missouri Synod. His removal from the presidency in 1989 and the following six years in which he worked to exercise his position as a teacher of the church at the seminary may give historians reason to reevaluate the importance of the earlier date. The confessional theology of the Missouri Synod and the Fort Wayne seminary remain as tributes to what he has done. Our tribute to him is maintaining his heritage. LOGIA

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