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## Justification in the Theology of Robert D. Preus

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When Robert D. Preus joined the ministerium of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) in 1957 and J. A. O. “Jack” Preus in 1958, a new dimension was added to the synod that would change its course. They had come to the attention of the presidents of both LCMS seminaries, which were working towards accreditation. Robert had his PhD from the University of Edinburgh under the leading British neoorthodox scholar T. F. Torrance. Jack had a PhD in classics from the University of Minnesota. Calling Robert to St. Louis in 1957 and Jack to Springfield in 1958 were academic opportunities not to be missed. In two years, Robert was challenging a new theology, known as neoorthodoxy, that was infesting the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, which eventually led to a majority of its faculty walking out in February 1974.<sup>1</sup> Now in place were events that culminated in the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which included those who supported the St. Louis majority faculty. Arriving in Springfield in 1958, Jack became seminary president in 1962. In 1969, Jack was elected LCMS president.<sup>2</sup> After the St. Louis seminary walkout, Robert first became its academic dean, then its virtual interim president, and then president of Concordia Theological Seminary, then in Springfield, Illinois.

By the mid-twentieth century, when Robert and Jack joined the LCMS, the old liberalism in American mainline Protestantism had given way to neoorthodoxy, which, in spite, of its seductive name, was an umbrella term for a theology that held that the real word of God was a preached or spoken word and the Bible was the word of God in a secondary or derivative sense. Robert Preus referred to it as “crisis theology” in that preaching becomes the word of God in the moment of preaching. According to this theology, what the Bible says does not have to correspond to the events it reports. First to go was Jonah, then the virgin birth of Jesus, his resurrection, and his miracles, all of which can be preached without asserting that

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<sup>1</sup> On these events, see The Board of Control of Concordia Seminary, *Exodus from Concordia: A Report on the 1974 Walkout* (St. Louis: Board of Control, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of J. A. O. Preus’s professional life, see Lawrence R. Rast Jr., “J. A. O. Preus: Theologian, Churchman, or Both?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74 (January–April 2010): 57–72.

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they really happened. What mattered was the proclamation of the one doctrine of the gospel as shaped by its circumstances—of good news in a bad situation. In the LCMS, this came to be called “gospel reductionism” by its critics.

Both Jack and Robert Preus were committed to Article XI of the Formula of Concord as it was understood by their great-grandfather Herman Amberg Preus (1825–1894), who came to minister to immigrants in the Upper Midwest and establish the Norwegian Lutheran Church (NLC), of which he was the second president. A controversy arose when some of its pastors taught that God’s wrath ceased only when a person believes, which for H. A. Preus was a denial of the universal atonement and objective justification, and was seen as a denial of Article XI of the Formula of Concord, which confesses that God elects sinners to salvation. Faith receives salvation but is not a cause of it. In the predestination controversy with the Ohio Synod, C. F. W. Walther and Francis Pieper rejected the teaching that God chose believers to salvation “in view of [their] faith,”<sup>3</sup> that is, that God predestined those who he knew would believe; he knew the outcome of the game before it started and placed his bets on the winner. In the 1912 Madison Agreement, the synods that would form the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (NELCA) in 1917<sup>4</sup> (later simply the ELC before its merger into the ELCA) allowed both views—that God chose the elect without condition (the position of FC XI, which was later called in the NELCA the “first form”) and the opposing view, that God elected those who he knew would believe, *intuitu fidei* (which was called the “second form”).<sup>5</sup>

Jack and Robert Preus were confirmed in an LCMS Chicago-area congregation and attended Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, founded by their great-grandfather Herman Amberg Preus, and then Luther Seminary, where their uncle, another Herman Amberg Preus (1896–1995), taught. This Herman Amberg Preus represented the “first form,” and his faculty colleague and soon opponent George Aus advocated for the “second form.” Seminary students took sides and disrupted chapel services with foot stamping.<sup>6</sup> Robert, then a student in his final seminary

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<sup>3</sup> The Latin phrase *intuitu fidei* means “in view of faith.” It indicates that God elects those people to salvation who he knows will believe, and so predestination becomes an effect of his omniscience.

<sup>4</sup> Known since 1946 as the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC).

<sup>5</sup> *Doctrinal Declarations: A Collection of Official Statements on the Doctrinal Position of Various Lutheran Bodies in America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 12.

<sup>6</sup> See Roy A. Harrisville, “Contested Election Memoir,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2020): 346–349. Harrisville mistakenly says that Jack left first. Of the situation at Luther Seminary, David Preus writes, “Some [Luther] seminary students delighted in stirring up classroom controversy between Professor [H. A.] Preus and Professor George Aus, who equally defended the second

year, requested the synod council to censure Aus's position. It responded that Aus's position was acceptable, so with only months to ordination at age twenty-three, Robert left Luther Seminary for Bethany Lutheran Seminary in Mankato, Minnesota, for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).<sup>7</sup> His brother Jack, already a pastor, soon followed. Aus pointed out that the NELCA never accepted the Formula of Concord, in which the doctrine of election is found.<sup>8</sup> In "My Confession," addressed to the synod council, Robert gave reason for leaving:

I have been taught that unregenerate man under the influence of the Holy Spirit has a free will either to accept or reject Christ. I have been told in class that faith is not a gift or work of the Holy Spirit in me, and the whole class has been challenged to find a single passage which teaches otherwise. . . . It also has been stubbornly maintained that unregenerate man is not spiritually dead, dead in sins, but is only asleep. . . . It has also been publicly stated to the whole senior class that this teaching—that man is responsible for the acceptance or rejection of grace—is the official position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church [ELC].<sup>9</sup>

For Robert Preus, this was heresy and opposing it would define how he understood justification. Fifty years later, in a eulogy for his uncle, the second Herman Amberg Preus, Robert called Aus a "subtle synergist" who "taught emphatically that conversion is not exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. . . . [Aus] did not hesitate to say in class that 'man converts himself.'"<sup>10</sup> Preus notes that the 1969 LCMS declaration of fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC) did not resolve this issue.<sup>11</sup>

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predestination for [God] elected those who he knew would believe." David W. Preus, *Two Trajectories: J. A. O. Preus and David Preus* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2015), 15.

<sup>7</sup> A brief summary of the controversy is provided by Mark Granquist, *A History of Luther Seminary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 109–110. Robert's letter of departure, "My Confession," was published in Klemet I. Preus, ed., *Doctrine Is Life: The Essays of Robert D. Preus on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 193–194.

<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Preus, "Dr. Herman A. Preus: In Memoriam," *Logia* 4, no. 4 (October 1995): 55. Robert Preus called Aus's view on predestination a heresy (R. D. Preus, "My Confession," 194). On April 8, 1948, a committee appointed by NELCA president J. A. Aasgaard to resolve differences between Herman Preus and George Aus concluded that there was no essential difference on the doctrine of election between their positions (Granquist, *A History of Luther Seminary*, 125 n. 15). While Granquist notes that Robert and Jack left the NELCA, he makes no mention of the effect this would have for Lutheranism in America. H. A. Preus continued to teach at Luther Seminary until 1967 and Aus until 1973 (Granquist, *A History of Luther Seminary*, 110).

<sup>9</sup> R. D. Preus, "My Confession," 193–194.

<sup>10</sup> R. D. Preus, "Dr. Herman A. Preus," 55.

<sup>11</sup> Robert D. Preus, "Fellowship Reconsidered: An Assessment between the LCMS and the ALC in the Light of Past, Present and Future," in *Preus on Justification*, 311–335.

For Robert Preus, making justification dependent on faith was similar to what was called the “second form,” that predestination was dependent on faith, that is, that God elected to salvation those he knew would believe. This would be at odds with the LCMS’s historic position on justification.<sup>12</sup> Justification for Robert Preus was always *propter Christum per fidem* (“because of Christ, through faith”) never *propter fidem* nor even *post fidem* (“after faith”). For Preus, “Christ’s righteousness, the *justitia aliena* [“alien righteousness”] . . . [is] *extra nos* [“outside of us”] in every sense.”<sup>13</sup>

Robert Preus saw seventeenth-century Lutheran Orthodox theology almost as his own. In “the period of orthodoxy . . . (ca. 1580–1715) no other doctrine was given such thorough treatment as the locus on justification,” to which he adds that faith has no value in itself but “justifies only by virtue of its object.”<sup>14</sup> Robert was not a reprobation theologian and at times could be critical of Luther and the Lutheran Orthodox theologians. For example, Johann Wilhelm Baier—with good intentions but disastrous results—spoke of faith as a cause of salvation.<sup>15</sup> Preus wrote, “It is difficult to understand how one can make faith a condition of justification (in the causal sense), without teaching justification is *propter fidem* or at least *post fidem*.”<sup>16</sup> God does not reward the believer because of his faith or after he comes to faith. *Propter* belongs with *Christum*, “on account of Christ,” and not *fidem*, “on account of faith.” Emphasizing that faith can never be a cause of salvation, *propter fidem*, it also cannot be *post fidem*, as if believers are rewarded with salvation.

If it were not for a tribute by the late Kurt Marquart to Preus entitled “The ‘Realist Principle’ of Theology,”<sup>17</sup> this aspect of Preus’s theology may have continued unnoticed. “Realist Principle” means that the theological and historical words of the Bible correspond to objective truth. Its alternative is an idealism that holds that truth consists in ideas and not in things, a kind of Platonism that reappeared in the

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<sup>12</sup> Robert D. Preus, “Objective Justification,” in *Preus on Justification*, 147–153. In more recent times, a variant of the second form of predestination is offered by James Nestingen, who holds that faith completes the atonement and so becomes a determinative factor for salvation. “He [Christ] enters the conscience through the absolution, through the proclaimed Word and administered Sacrament to effect the forgiveness of sins. This is the true substitutionary atonement, happening here and now.” James Arne Nestingen, “Speaking of the End to the Law,” in *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel*, ed. Albert B. Collver III, James Arne Nestingen, and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 174.

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Preus, “Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification,” in *Preus on Justification*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Preus, “The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Classical Lutheran Orthodoxy,” in *Preus on Justification*, 79, 93.

<sup>15</sup> R. D. Preus, “Perennial Problems,” 114.

<sup>16</sup> R. D. Preus, “Perennial Problems,” 116.

<sup>17</sup> Kurt Marquart, “The ‘Realist Principle’ of Theology,” in *Preus on Justification*, 367–373.

philosophies of Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel.<sup>18</sup> To Preus's list might be added the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin in which truth rests in language not in things or persons, a view incorporated into the theology of promise.

Marquart came across the "realist principle" in an essay by Preus, delivered in 1973 shortly before a majority of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, were removed from their positions in February 1974. Of the six theses, the fourth is "Luther's Realist Principle"<sup>19</sup> that "Our justification before God is a real verdict, not a myth (Apol. IV). The virgin birth, the suffering and death, the miracles, the resurrection of Christ are historical, having real references in fact."<sup>20</sup> Preus distinguishes doctrines or theology from historical facts, but historical facts such as the events in Christ's life are just as true as abstract doctrines such as election, sacraments, and justification.<sup>21</sup>

Already in 1962 before the tumultuous events at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1974, Preus had written that there are no "cases in which statements of Scripture do not seem to correspond to the apparent data in the external world (astronomy, geography, topography, etc.)."<sup>22</sup> What the Bible reports corresponds to actual historical events, things that really happened. Preus had in mind his St. Louis seminary colleagues who interpreted the historical elements of the gospels as myths, as did Rudolf Bultmann, or held to the neoorthodoxy of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, which ignored the gospel's historical elements. For them, the Bible is not the word of God but becomes the word of God,<sup>23</sup> a view which he opposed in the theology of Gerhard Forde, then a new professor at Luther Seminary.<sup>24</sup> Son Klemet

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<sup>18</sup> In his 1973 Bethany Lectures, Preus identifies Strauss, Troeltsch, Ritschl, Harnack, Classical Liberalism, and Idealism as departures from historical Christianity. To these he adds Kierkegaard, Tillich, Bultmann, Käsemann, the post-Bultmannians, E. Brunner, and K. Barth. Robert D. Preus, "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret and Use the Old and New Testaments?" in *Doctrine Is Life: The Essays of Robert Preus on Scripture* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 179–214, here at 213.

<sup>19</sup> R. D. Preus, "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret," 200–202.

<sup>20</sup> R. D. Preus, "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret," 201.

<sup>21</sup> Marquart based his chapter "The 'Realist Principle' of Theology" (*Preus on Justification*, 367) on Robert Preus's "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret" (above, n. 18).

<sup>22</sup> Robert D. Preus, "The Word of God in the Theology of Lutheran Orthodoxy," in *Preus on Scripture*, 79–97, here at 91.

<sup>23</sup> Robert D. Preus, "The Word of God in the Theology of Karl Barth," in *Preus on Scripture*, 39–52, here at 50. This was the first of three essays appearing in *Concordia Theological Monthly* in February, March, and April 1960, all of which are included in *Preus on Scripture*.

<sup>24</sup> On Forde, see below, p. 51. A thorough presentation of this view that the Scriptures are inspiring and not inspired was set forth in some detail by Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture*, rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999). For example, "The reliability of Scripture is to be found in the reality to

explains, “His [father’s] ‘realist principle,’” which he attributed to Luther, “is nothing more than the fact that theological assertions correspond to reality outside of themselves.”<sup>25</sup> “[For] when a biblical section in its intended sense has a referent, it is a real referent, whether the referent is a historical occurrence (Christ’s resurrection), a state of being (the personal union), an act of God in history (personal justification through faith in Christ) or whatever.”<sup>26</sup> Biblical words correspond to events that really happened, like the resurrection, and to what really exists, like the Trinity. Reality does not consist in the words but in what the words report. Preus called this “exegetical realism,” that the “God who has caused all Scripture to be recorded is indeed a living God who invades history, authors it, and reveals himself historically.”<sup>27</sup> Preus expands on his view that history is the locale of revelation in a response to Thestrup Pedersen, who said that “Luther engages in Christological exegesis . . . not with the eyes of a historian but with the eyes of a theologian.”<sup>28</sup> In this view, what the Bible said about Christ could be theologically true but not historically true. For Pedersen, history had an objectivity that theology did not have. To this, Preus responds that the article on original sin in the Formula of Concord is “nothing more than a commentary on the history of Genesis 3.” History was as important for Luther as it was to Preus, that he could say that biblical “history gives rise to doctrine”<sup>29</sup> and adds that “Luther would not distinguish between the eyes of a historian and the eyes of a theologian—as though they could come to different conclusions.”<sup>30</sup> Preus sums up his argument, “The doctrines revealed in Scripture and the acts of God recounted there have a real basis, a real referent, or there would be no theology at all to Luther. This is a hermeneutical principle to Luther.”<sup>31</sup> Doctrines are drawn out of historical events. Klemet Preus comments on his father’s position, “Justification had to be a real verdict based on a

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which it points, rather than the form in which it is given” (142). The authority of the Bible is seen in what it does and not what it is. Compare Oswald Bayer: “[Scripture’s] *authority consists in that it works faith*. The Lutheran tradition has articulated this in such a way that its *auctoritas normativa* follows from its *auctoritas causativa*—because of the authority it has to create faith.” Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 77. The chapter in which this appears is entitled “*What Makes the Bible Become Holy Scripture*” (68–92, italics original).

<sup>25</sup> K. I. Preus, “Introduction,” in *Preus on Justification*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Klemet I. Preus, “Introduction,” 23. Klemet elaborated on his father’s “Realist Principle of Theology” in a section of his introduction called “Correspondence” in *Preus on Justification*, 21–28.

<sup>27</sup> R. D. Preus, “How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret,” 201.

<sup>28</sup> R. D. Preus, “How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret,” 200.

<sup>29</sup> R. D. Preus, “How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret,” 201.

<sup>30</sup> R. D. Preus, “How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret,” 201.

<sup>31</sup> R. D. Preus, “How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret,” 200.

real atonement that occurred through real historical events or the Christian could have no certainty of the grace of God.”<sup>32</sup> The dogmatic bias of the apostles does not compromise the historical authenticity of their witness. Tellingly, he adds that anyone who experienced the resurrection would have a bias.<sup>33</sup>

Having attended Luther College and then Luther Seminary, Robert and Jack knew many of the theologians in the ALC in which the ELC was its majority component.<sup>34</sup> Succeeding Kent Knutson as ALC president was David Preus, who never understood why cousins Jack and Robert could be so upset with two Latin words, *intuitu fidei*.<sup>35</sup> In 1968, the year before the same convention in which the LCMS would first elect Jack president and declare fellowship with the ALC, Robert delivered an essay entitled “To Join or Not to Join.” Here he noted that biblical inerrancy was being denied at his alma mater Luther College, and this was not “cut off from the main stream of theological development in the [American Lutheran] Church.”<sup>36</sup> He continues, “At Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, the largest seminary of the American Lutheran Church and the second largest seminary in our country, the same denial of the truthfulness and infallibility of Scripture is explicit and denied.”<sup>37</sup> He references Warren Quanbeck, an advisor to the ALC president, who said that “the doctrine that ‘The Holy Spirit was the real author of Scripture’ and that therefore ‘every proposition in it was guaranteed infallible and inerrant’ has been crushed by the blows struck by studies in historical and scientific matters.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> K. I. Preus, “Introduction,” 25.

<sup>33</sup> Robert D. Preus, “Biblical Hermeneutics and the Lutheran Church Today,” 131–178, here at 159: “Of course [the apostles] have a dogmatic bias. Who would not had seen the risen Christ? Of course they were believing Christians and not merely objective historians. But faith and history do not oppose each other. How can one report a historical event if he does not believe it? And profound interpretation does not vitiate or cast doubt upon the reality and historicity of the event interpreted. A religious aim may well influence the presentation of fact, but this does not change the facts themselves. There is nothing wrong with the facts being explained by one who has experienced them and been affected by them.”

<sup>34</sup> Preus gives a historical overview of how Lutheran synods would eventually merge into the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in “To Join or Not to Join,” in *Preus on Justification*, 275–310. This was followed by another essay, “Fellowship Reconsidered,” 311–335.

<sup>35</sup> See David W. Preus, *Pastor and President: Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2011). On the relationship and theological emphases of David and J. A. O. Preus, see D. W. Preus, *Two Trajectories*. For more background on the *intuitu fidei* controversy, see David P. Scaer, *Surviving the Storms: Memoirs of David P. Scaer* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Luther Academy, 2018), 251–258.

<sup>36</sup> R. D. Preus, “To Join or Not to Join,” 298–299.

<sup>37</sup> R. D. Preus, “To Join or Not to Join,” 299–301.

<sup>38</sup> R. D. Preus, “To Join or Not to Join,” 299–301. Fredrik A. Schiøtz, president of the American Lutheran Church, had outlined his church body’s stance with respect to the Scriptures in his *The Church’s Confessional Stand Relative to the Scriptures: An Address* (Minneapolis: Office of Public Relations of The American Lutheran Church, 1966).



Then Preus zeroes in on Gerhard Forde, who he says is even more explicit in his rejection of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Forde says the Bible is inspired only by reason of its content; and so our preaching would be inspired for the same reason.<sup>39</sup> In this view, biblical authority rests in its proximity to the events it reports and not in its inspired character,<sup>40</sup> a view proposed long before by Schleiermacher.<sup>41</sup>

Forde's denial of the Bible as the inspired word of God was bad enough for Preus, but Preus also took Forde to task for being downright wrong in saying the divine origin of the Scriptures was an unproven presupposition for the earliest church fathers and for Lutheran Orthodox theologians when they did theology. For his position, Preus says, Forde "does not have a shred of evidence." He elaborates that Forde is "another young ALC theologian" who made an unfounded charge that any "orthodox Lutheran theologian ever treated Scriptures in such a cavalier fashion" as to assume the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible without proof.<sup>42</sup> Preus is emphatic: "Christians did not invent the theory of inspiration to support Christianity, as Forde implies. Rather all have arrived at the doctrine of inspiration in the same way as they arrive at every other article of faith, by drawing it from Scripture itself."<sup>43</sup>

Forde's claim that biblical inspiration was an unproven assumption was historically false and parallels his theory that the Bible's inspiration consisted in its ability to create faith. Preus's dog in the fight was his published PhD dissertation *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmatians*.<sup>44</sup> Forde's functional view that the Bible is inspired insofar as it inspires faith had already been proposed by neoorthodox theologians as an alternative to the classical view that the Bible is the inspired word of God.

Preus saw a connection between the denial of verbal inspiration and the synergistic view of faith that he encountered in his student days at Luther Seminary.

One cannot fail to see the parallel between this synergistic theory of the origin of the Bible and the synergistic doctrine of conversion that prevailed at

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<sup>39</sup> R. D. Preus, "Biblical Hermeneutics and the Lutheran Church Today," 172.

<sup>40</sup> R. D. Preus, "To Join or Not to Join," 301.

<sup>41</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, 2 vols. (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row Publishers, 1956), 1:594–596.

<sup>42</sup> R. D. Preus, "Biblical Hermeneutics and the Lutheran Church Today," 155–179, here at 171. Like others, Forde came under the spell of Karl Barth's neoorthodoxy (172–173), but the view that the efficacy of the Bible is derived from the proximity of the writers to Jesus had already been proposed by Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 1:591–594.

<sup>43</sup> R. D. Preus, "Biblical Hermeneutics and the Lutheran Church Today," 174.

<sup>44</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmatians* (Edinburgh, UK: Oliver and Boyd, 1955).

[Luther] Seminary. As faith has its origin in the cooperation of the human will with the Holy Spirit working through the gospel, so the Scriptures are the result of a collaboration of the will of the human authors and the Spirit of God. One who believes that faith and justification are entirely a gift of God's grace easily perceives the fundamental error underlying the historical-critical method.<sup>45</sup>

In his essay "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification," Preus lists five ways in which the doctrine of justification is threatened, of which, "The second assault against the article of justification by faith is to separate God's act of justifying the sinner through faith from its basis in Christ's atonement."<sup>46</sup> In a previous essay, "The Unity of Scripture," Preus wrote that "without reference to [Christ's] work of atonement . . . the very term Christocentricity of the Scriptures is a piece of deceptive theological blather."<sup>47</sup> "The danger and the tragedy of making faith a condition for justification is that one begins to look for assurance of salvation and grace, not in the objective atonement and righteousness of Christ, but in the quality or strength of one's faith, as if justifying faith is something other than pure trust and receptivity."<sup>48</sup> "There can be no imputation of Christ's righteousness with which I can stand before God, if Christ did not by His atonement acquire such righteousness."<sup>49</sup> In his last book, *Justification and Rome*, he points out that the nominalists and Socinians (forerunners of the Unitarians) "taught an 'absolute grace,' a free and absolute imputation which did not require the intervention of Christ to atone for the sins of the world."<sup>50</sup> He cites Luther, that the forgiveness of sins merely by imputation without atonement is a "miserable and shocking opinion and error," that if this were true, "the entire New Testament would be nothing and useless."<sup>51</sup> The view that justification was based on "a forensic act . . . dependent on His will rather than the atonement and righteousness of Christ" had been proposed by Peter Abelard, who denied the vicarious atonement.<sup>52</sup> For Preus, "The *propter Christum* is exclusive in that it is the *only* basis for God's verdict of justification."<sup>53</sup> For Preus, the atonement was the foundation for justification, just as it was for Francis Pieper: "We do not believe in Christ to our justification and salvation unless

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<sup>45</sup> R. D. Preus, "Dr. Herman A. Preus," 55 (as above, n. 8).

<sup>46</sup> R. D. Preus, "Perennial Problems," 100.

<sup>47</sup> Robert D. Preus, "The Unity of Scripture," in *Preus on Scripture*, 251.

<sup>48</sup> R. D. Preus, "Perennial Problems," 116.

<sup>49</sup> R. D. Preus, "Perennial Problems," 100–101.

<sup>50</sup> Robert D. Preus, *Justification and Rome* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 74.

<sup>51</sup> R. D. Preus, *Justification and Rome*, 132 n. 79.

<sup>52</sup> R. D. Preus, "Perennial Problems," 101. This has been put forth by Forde and his students Steven Paulson and James Nestingen (see above, n. 12), that justification is imputed through preaching without substitutionary atonement.

<sup>53</sup> R. D. Preus, "Perennial Problems," 106 (italics original).

we believe in Him as the One who was crucified for the expiation of our sins (1 Corinthians 2:2) . . . and in our stead fulfilled the Law (Galatians 4:4–5), shed his precious blood (1 Peter 1:18), gave His life into death (Matthew 10:28; Romans 5:10).” Preus saw the atonement as Christ placing himself under the law.<sup>54</sup>

“The fifth assault against the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith is to make faith a condition for justification.”<sup>55</sup> Preus explains, “This tendency to make justification dependent upon faith has a long and sorry history in the Lutheran church, which in its Confessions hints at no such thing.”<sup>56</sup> Here Preus probably had in mind George Aus or anyone else who made justification dependent on faith. Justification for Preus, as it is for Pieper, is always *propter Christum per fidem*, that is, we are justified, forgiven, found acceptable to God on account of Christ through faith and never *propter fidem*, “on account of faith.” When faith is inserted into the proclamation, human beings take the place of God as the ultimate cause of their salvation.

Crassly, of course, historic Roman and Arminian theology made faith a work and virtue of man a condition for fellowship with God and for salvation. But in a more subtle form the tendency to condition justification on faith is found in every form of synergism and pietism and religious emotionalism in ideologies which stress inwardness and subjectivity, in Christian Existentialism and Crisis Theology (Emil Brunner), all protestations of adherence to the *sola gratia* notwithstanding. We find the tendency where there is a preoccupation with faith as such or an inordinate interest in the phenomenology of faith rather than in the object of faith, Christ and His atoning work, and in the Gospel. For my faith is not the Gospel or the content of the Gospel, but rather embraces and applies the Gospel. Faith is never directed toward itself.<sup>57</sup>

To accentuate the point, justification for Preus is *extra et ante fidem*, and its reality does not reside in what he calls “any ‘communication.’”<sup>58</sup> For Robert Preus, the Christian life was more than justification, *simul iustus et peccator*, as if only the final moment in a believer’s life was important. In referencing Jesper Rasmussen Brochmand’s commentary on James, Preus says, “He who says he believes in Christ who died is a liar, if by the power of Christ’s death he does not daily die to sin; and

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<sup>54</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:426. See also Robert D. Preus, “The Vicarious Atonement in John Quenstedt,” in *Preus on Justification*, 57–58. “On the part of God there are two purposes for the vicarious atonement. First, His divine justice must be satisfied, for God is not willing to remit sins without satisfaction being made” (73).

<sup>55</sup> R. D. Preus, “Perennial Problems,” 113.

<sup>56</sup> R. D. Preus, “Perennial Problems,” 114.

<sup>57</sup> R. D. Preus, “Perennial Problems,” 114.

<sup>58</sup> R. D. Preus, “Perennial Problems,” 113.

he who claims to believe in the risen Christ deceives himself, if he does not by the power of the risen Christ advance daily in newness of life.”<sup>59</sup>

Lutherans are widely agreed that justification is the chief article, but they are not agreed on its definition, a problem that surfaced at the Lutheran World Federation in Helsinki in 1963 where, Preus notes, it was seen in monolithic terms and since then it has been seen as the only articles necessary for church fellowship. Preus follows Lutheran Orthodoxy in affirming that justification is *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* (“article on which the church stands and falls”), a phrase still not located in Luther but which typifies his theology. He refers to Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article I: “What is beyond dispute is that ‘The first and chief article [*Hauptartikel*] is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification (Rom. 4:25).”<sup>60</sup> Preus notes, “Indeed, [the Lutheran dogmaticians] never ‘considered the doctrine of justification by faith’ a fundamental article of the faith.” For them, justification “means the centrality of the Gospel, the centrality of Christ crucified in the theology and the proclamation of the church.”<sup>61</sup> Justification describes the effect, what preaching accomplishes, and not its content.<sup>62</sup> As for its content and basis:

According to this classic Christian model, God is real, creator and sustainer of all that exists . . . the Son of God really became incarnate; He really suffered and died and rose again; the atonement is real; heaven is real; hell is real; forgiveness and justification are real, not just metaphors for something else. Unless all this is included in our theological *Vorbild*, there is nothing left of our Christianity and our Gospel, except words, empty words, impotent words, words without referents and without meaning, like tinsel on a discarded Christmas tree, or bridgework on a corpse.<sup>63</sup>

For Preus, justification is central, but it is not the only doctrine.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> R. D. Preus, “The Doctrine of Justification,” 95.

<sup>60</sup> R. D. Preus, “How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret,” 195.

<sup>61</sup> R. D. Preus, “The Doctrine of Justification,” 83.

<sup>62</sup> Robert D. Preus, “Luther and the Doctrine of Justification,” in *Preus on Justification*, 127. “The doctrine of justification is a fundamental principle for the Christian in applying and integrating Law and Gospel and the entire Christian doctrine.”

<sup>63</sup> R. D. Preus, “Perennial Problems,” 113.

<sup>64</sup> Justification can become so central that it soon becomes the only doctrine or at least the only doctrine that matters. Consider what Suzanne Hequet says about a meeting in 2002 between ELCA Lutherans and Catholics held in the aftermath of the 1999 *Joint Declaration of Justification*. “[Steven] Paulson asserted that if both parties were truly in agreement on justification, then ‘Let’s do church now,’ meaning that Paulson, as an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was willing to give and receive communion with the Cardinal [Avery Dulles] then and there. . . . For Paulson, however, justification as articulated in the *Augsburg Confession* was the sole

For Preus, the doctrine of justification “presents God’s revealed answer to all major problems of sinful man,” and then he proceeds to list them: “Does God exist? What is He like? Does He love me? What must I do to be saved? Can sinful man ever stand before a holy and righteous God?”<sup>65</sup> Oswald Bayer also sees justification as fundamental in the sense that each person is working to justify himself: “We cannot reject the question that others put to us. Why have you done this?”<sup>66</sup>

Whereas Preus sees justification as how God accepts the individual, Bayer here sees it as the way others accept him. Yet Bayer’s definition can be of value in assessing Preus’s life. Was what Preus did worth it in the eyes of others? Those seminary regents and those who conspired and succeeded in depriving him of his ministry said it wasn’t. “One of his friends urged him to bear the cross quietly and accept the decision of the Board of Regents without demur.”<sup>67</sup>

For his refusal to take this option, we need look no further than the title of the two-volume collection of his essays, *Doctrine Is Life*. What he believed and confessed is what he lived. His life and work are pictured in the words of Jesus: “So everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 10:32–33). Without confessing the truth, we put ourselves in danger of hearing the words no one wants to hear: “I never knew you” (Matt 7:23). The student who at age twenty-three did not back down before the synod and seminary leaders who found nothing wrong with the synergism of George Aus was the same man who at age fifty stood virtually alone at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in insisting that biblical history was the foundation of the gospel. In 1989, now old beyond his years, he was charged with false doctrine for defending the phrase that “all theology is Christology.” Of course he had to defend it. Justification was only an extension of the atonement. This was what he once called “the realist principle in theology.” For Preus, theology had to do with life and life had to do with belief and belief had to do with Christ. For Preus, theology was an academic discipline involving the mind, but it also involved the soul.

Oswald Bayer saw the value of one’s life in this way: “We cannot reject the question that others put to us. Why have you done this?”<sup>68</sup> And the answer is Robert

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criterion” for church unity. Hequet, *The 1541 Colloquy at Regensburg: In Pursuit of Church Unity* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009), 76.

<sup>65</sup> R. D. Preus, “Perennial Problems,” 97.

<sup>66</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

<sup>67</sup> K. I. Preus, “Introduction,” 27.

<sup>68</sup> Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 1.

Preus did it not only for himself or even his ministry, but for the sake of this seminary.

Soon after Preus was removed from the seminary presidency, his erstwhile friend turned accuser learned that Preus's replacement as interim president disallowed him from responding to an LCMS administrator who was advocating for the ordination of women. Caught in a sorry dilemma, that professor retired. The LCMS president involved in Preus's removal did not continue in office at the 1992 synod convention. If in the face of his accusers he had walked away, our seminary would not be what it is today, and in his own eyes he would have denied the ministry which he believed God had given him. In response to the colleague who urged him not to contest his removal from the seminary, Preus responded, "There is nothing abstract or unreal about the ministry or the minister or the function [of the ministry]."<sup>69</sup> His great-grandfather Herman Amberg Preus understood the ministry in the same way. After Preus was formally vindicated, he was returned to the seminary as its president and reinstated in the LCMS ministerium from which he had been removed by the praesidium, but in a year and a half he was dead. For Robert, justification, atonement, the history of Jesus, and the ministry were all real, as was this seminary which will owe him a debt as long as it stands.

In a memorial tribute to his uncle, Robert noted the connection between the synergist doctrine of justification he confronted as a student at Luther Seminary and the synergism inherent in the historical-critical study of the Scriptures, which no longer were regarded as the inspired word of God. When historical criticism was introduced at Luther Seminary, Preus writes,

The older professors who had closed their eyes to the dangers of synergism in the doctrine of conversion had little trouble closing their eyes to this new intrusion. Once the historical-critical method controlled the theological curriculum at the seminary, the doctrine of the authority, verbal inspiration, and inerrancy of Scripture, held so firmly just a few years before when I was at the seminary, was abandoned. When a number of concerned district presidents on the Church Council complained to the faculty about what was happening, they were told by a large number of younger professors that they would leave

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<sup>69</sup> Preus also saw as a denial of the realist principle of theology the LCMS's "Wichita Recension" of AC XIV, adopted in 1989, that allowed licensed laymen to preach and administer sacraments (K. I. Preus, "Introduction," 31). He also saw his call to the presidency of Concordia Theological Seminary as belonging to the realist principle of theology and so fought to regain it (27).

the school before they would affirm the impossible doctrine of biblical inerrancy.<sup>70</sup>

The Church Council backed down. And his uncle Herman Preus stood virtually alone.

After Robert was removed from the LCMS ministerium, he organized the Luther Academy, which would go on to publish the Lutheran Confessional Dogmatics and *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*. Life is filled with as many tragedies as ironies. The Reformation 2006 issue of *Logia* printed James Nestingen's tribute to Gerhard Forde along with the "Funeral Sermon for Gerhard O. Forde" preached by Steven O. Paulson.<sup>71</sup> Paulson entitles his introduction to *The Essential Forde*, a collection of his writings, "Forde Lives."<sup>72</sup> In 2005, Forde died and has a still-growing group of disciples preserving his essays to advance his "theology of the cross" and adding their own. Yes, Forde lives. Klemet Preus published two volumes of his father's collected writings and more may be coming.<sup>73</sup> The time is already here to put the writings of Preus side by side with those of Forde and his disciples and to listen to the words of Joshua, "Choose this day whom you will serve" (24:15), or better, those of Jesus, "No one can serve two masters" (Matt 6:24).

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<sup>70</sup> R. D. Preus, "Dr. Herman A. Preus," 55 (as in n. 8).

<sup>71</sup> A decade previously, the Holy Trinity 1996 issue of *Logia* had published memorials of Robert Preus.

<sup>72</sup> Stephen D. Paulson, "Forde Lives," in *The Essential Forde: Distinguishing Law and Gospel*, ed. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Stephen D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 18.

<sup>73</sup> See the comprehensive bibliography of Robert Preus's writings in this issue, below, p. 000.