

# The Theology of Robert David Preus and His Person: Making a Difference

David P. Scaer

## I. Fading Memory

Like them or not, brothers Jack and Robert Preus changed the direction of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) in the second half of the twentieth century, and Preus became a household word. Robert came to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in 1957, was the president of Concordia Theological Seminary, first in Springfield in 1974 and since 1976 in Fort Wayne, until he was dismissed in 1989 and then reinstated in 1992 before retiring in 1993. Jack came to Springfield in 1958, becoming its president in 1962 and LCMS president in 1969 until 1981. Both men's portraits hang on the seminary walls, but without continued narrative their accomplishments fade. Failing memory belongs to the human condition. Professors who died before my seminary enrollment—Graebner, Loeber, Sieck—and those who preceded me at Springfield—Albrecht, Hemmeter, Barth, Baepler—have no place in my historical consciousness. In my St. Louis seminary student years, an arch was dedicated in memory of Francis Pieper, one-time president of the LCMS, its chief theologian and the longest-serving president of that seminary. A grand faculty procession from the chapel to the arch would have been appropriate, but it did not happen. Even though the faculty occupied the Gothic styled buildings that were built during Pieper's years, nearly all were absent at the dedication. Isaac Watts said it all: "[They] fly forgotten as a dream / Dies at the opening day."<sup>1</sup> Ministerial memoirs are fascinating, as long as they are not written with the pretense of objectivity. Mix some facts with a few opinions and top off with a whiff of emotion for a perfect historical cocktail. What I say here is part memoir, part autobiographical, part disconnect, and somewhat theological.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Watts, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 733, stanza 5.

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## II. Preus Comes to the LCMS

I met Robert Preus after his installation at the 1957 opening service of the St. Louis seminary. On Tuesday, October 31, 1995, I sat next to him at a dinner at the Sasse Symposium at the St. Catharines seminary. The next day we shared a ride to the Buffalo airport. A few days later, on Saturday, November 4, he died. It was not cradle to grave, but close to it. Preus was called to teach philosophy in the place of Donald Meyer, brother-in-law to Richard Koenig, later a spokesperson for the Seminec movement, and Paul Riedel, brother of Robert Riedel, who was removed later as LCMS New England District president by Jack. Meyer and Riedel died in successive years.

My first classroom experience with Preus was a graduate seminar in 1962. Our association was more personal than academic, but it was instrumental in his suggesting me in 1966 to Jack for an assistant professor position at Springfield. I met Jack at his September 1962 seminary presidential inauguration at Trinity, Springfield. In 1965 two professors were sidelined by heart attacks. With the first string sidelined and the second string declining, Jack went for the third string. For good or for bad, my seminary tenure of over four decades has "Preus" written all over it. This did not translate into theological influence or institutional advancement. Howard Tepker, Eugene Klug, and Harry Huth were Springfield's theologians and represented its theology on the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations. From the time he came in December 1975, Kurt Marquart had Preus's confidence and came to be regarded as the seminary's eminent theologian. My being Preus's last academic dean had more to do with administration and less with theology.

## III. The First Taste of Neo-Orthodoxy

In the 1950s, St. Louis seminary students were assigned classes alphabetically. This sheep/goat division placed me in classes with Robert L. Wilken, the late Richard John Neuhaus, Paul Wildgrube, and John H. Elliott. Like myself and a quarter of the class, Neuhaus belonged to the Levitical priesthood of the LCMS. With a very orthodox Lutheran father, he belonged to the order of Aaron. Surviving classmates recall our theological confrontations. I do not. Some of our professors (e.g., Edgar Krentz, Fred Danker, Richard Caemmerer, and Martin Scharlemann) remained at the seminary until the February 1974 walkout. Robert Werberig, Everett Kalin, Ralph Klein, John Damm, John Tietjen, Edward Schroeder, Robert Bertram, and Richard Klann were not there in the 1950s when the newer theologies began emerging alongside the older one. One New Testament introduction course required three textbooks: one liberal,

one conservative or Reformed, and one middle of the road. We were left on our own to determine what position to take. Dogmatics followed Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* and was taught by the mainline Missourians Lorenz Wunderlich, Lewis Spitz, and Herbert Bouman. This was consistently unexciting. Henry Reimann had us read Emil Brunner's *The Divine-Human Encounter* but without analyzing how its neo-orthodoxy compared to the classical orthodoxy. Only in reading Brunner's *Der Mystik und das Wort* did I learn that neo-orthodoxy was a reaction to nineteenth-century liberalism. Brunner and Karl Barth's repudiation of Schleiermacher excelled Pieper's dislike for the father of liberalism.<sup>2</sup> If neo-orthodoxy was an alien element in LCMS theology, we shared a common enemy.

In contrast to the old liberalism, neo-orthodoxy put dogmatics back into the center of the church's life, but the fly in its ointment was its concept that hearers' encounter with Christ, the *Begegnung*, was the determinative factor in revelation. What the biblical writers encountered, they recorded. Through their writings, readers could share in the original encounter at a less intense level. Encounter, revelation, inspiration, and conversion were virtual synonyms for the reality of coming to an awareness of Christ. Unlike Schleiermacher's God consciousness, *Gottesbewusstsein*, the encounter with Christ was not self-originating but was aroused by hearing about past events recorded in the Scriptures.

Throughout the LCMS, the word "encounter" sprang up overnight like a weed. Neo-orthodoxy had a positive effect in reevaluating the traditional view that understood biblical inspiration as revelation. Lutheran Orthodoxy held, as did neo-orthodoxy, that revelation could be prior to inspiration, but also that divine mysteries were revealed by inspiration. The neo-orthodox definition that the Scriptures were a witness to revelation had something going for it. Inspired biblical writers recorded both ordinary and revelatory events. Faith was involved in both receiving the revelation and writing the inspired Scriptures.

Since the word for reveal, ἀποκαλύπτω, in the Gospels refers to awakening faith in what Jesus said about himself, confusion in coming to terms with neo-orthodoxy was inevitable. Peter's revelation that Jesus was the Christ did not result from a direct working of the Spirit from heaven.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen Winter Semester 1923/24*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> "Inspiration is the act of the Holy Spirit whereby the actual knowledge of things is communicated supernaturally to the created intellect, or in an inner suggestion or

Pieper did not discuss revelation in the locus on God, but in response to neo-orthodoxy it was relocated in the prolegomena in a course called Revelation and Scriptures. Revelation was seen as prior to inspiration and distinct from it. The christological element in the neo-orthodox definition was not carried over into readjusted LCMS definitions of revelation, but stayed closer to the prevailing Evangelical definition that God could and did approach his people in revelation without Christ. Neo-orthodoxy was hardly a uniform system. Brunner and Barth differed on the natural knowledge of God. Rudolph Bultmann placed his demythologizing of the Gospels next to his understanding of justification as an encounter.

By the mid-1950s, a decade after it had come ashore in North America, neo-orthodoxy surfaced on the St. Louis faculty and made a formal entrance in Martin H. Scharlemann's February 25, 1958, essay, "The Inerrancy of Scripture." This reflected the faculty's undeveloped understanding of neo-orthodoxy and its relation to the classical theology.<sup>4</sup> Barely half a year earlier, Preus, whose doctoral supervisor was Thomas Forsyth Torrence, had joined the faculty. Torrence, who was the leading British neo-orthodox scholar and was designated by Barth to finish his *Church Dogmatics* if he became incapacitated,<sup>5</sup> said that Preus was the best student he ever had. Preus also heard Barth lecture. His still unpublished 1961 faculty essay, "Current Theological Problems Which Confront Our Church," was a response to neo-orthodoxy on the faculty and perhaps

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infusion of concepts, whether the concepts were known or unknown previous to the writing." Robert D. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Mankato, MN: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1955), 30. "Scripture was more than merely a record or history of God's revelation: it was revelation, or, to put it more accurately, it was revelation put down in writing" (31).

<sup>4</sup> One idiosyncratic version came from an Old Testament professor who designated only those sections of the Old Testament as the word of God which explicitly identified God as the author. In the sentence, "The Lord said, 'Go to Canaan,'" only 'Go to Canaan' was the word of God but not "the Lord said." This definition was of unknown origin. In any event a prophet like Isaiah got so caught up in what he was saying that he so forgot the distinction between what he and God said that he actually thought that what he said was God's word. Prophets thought their manuscripts possessed divine authority.

<sup>5</sup> John D. Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," *Trinity Journal* 25 (2004): 198. Also on the faculty of the University of Edinburgh during Preus's stay was John Baillie, whose *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956) was widely popular in North America. By 1967 it had gone through nine printings.

Scharlemann in particular. Faced with Preus's tour de force, Scharlemann withdrew his essay at the 1961 Cleveland LCMS convention.<sup>6</sup>

Neo-orthodoxy detached theology from history and so was not necessarily dependent on it. Theology and history operated in separate, almost autonomous spheres. While Bultmann did away with history, Barth mostly ignored it.<sup>7</sup> For a time it was as if I had been watching a tennis match thinking it was baseball. Failure to come to terms with the new theology partially resulted from the closed theological system of the LCMS, which since Pieper had engaged other theologies chiefly in a negative way. LCMS theology supported itself by references to its own theologians and official documents. In terms of Daniel's statue: the gold head was C.F.W. Walther, the silver torso was Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*, and the clay feet were *The Abiding Word*, John Theodore Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics*, and Edward W.W. Koehler's *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*. Any closed system possesses an implicit infallibility and is susceptible to external infection. The LCMS was no exception. Adding to the bewilderment of those days was the fact that the St. Louis faculty functioned as the LCMS magisterium in interpreting doctrine, but it was no longer speaking with one voice. A student body expected to respect a magisterial faculty was hardly inclined or equipped to analyze its teachings. They could hardly be expected to dissect this Eutychian blend of classical orthodoxy with the new theology, especially if some professors

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<sup>6</sup> My colleague, Lawrence R. Rast Jr., called my attention to both essays and alerted me that the timing of the Preus essay indicated that it was a refutation of Scharlemann's position. The bulk of Preus's paper dissects contemporary views on revelation. Preus spanned the theological spectrum completely. Here are some of the theologians: Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Regin Prenter, Warren Quanbeck, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, S.T. Coleridge, Julius Hare, F.D. Maurice, Anders Nygren, F.D.E. Schleiermacher, John and Donald Baillie, Martin Buber, G. Ernest Wright, Langdon Gilkey, A. Anderson, Abba, Heineken, Albert Schweitzer, Schlier, C.H. Dodd, Kierkegaard, Albrecht Ritschl, Spinoza, Lessing, Christian Wolff, et al. In comparison, Scharlemann's 1958 essay, "The Inerrancy of Scripture," to which Preus seems to be partially responding, looked like a Rube Goldberg production, something on the order of J.A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God*, taking a little from Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich and mixing it into a punch. For Preus, LCMS problems with the Scriptures were traceable to the eighteenth-century enlightenment.

<sup>7</sup> Brent A. Strawn, a professor at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, says that with the perseverance of the historical-critical method, theology up to this time had not been a factor in biblical studies. This compartmentalization of history and theology has been reversed by such scholars as N.T. Wright, "Docetism, Kasemann, and Christology," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2/2 (2008): 161-180. The Gospels courses in our seminary's new curriculum treat theology and history together.

were themselves less than fully informed and, thus, could not come to terms with what was happening.

#### IV. *Sola Scriptura* vs. the *Analogia Fidei* (*Scripturae*)

I obtained a copy of Preus's *The Inspiration of the Scriptures* in 1957.<sup>8</sup> Evident were the author's clarity of thought and an orderly and expansive mind at home with all necessary sources, especially in comparison with the rising confusion among St. Louis faculty and students. Like most LCMS seminary students and clergy then and perhaps now, I did not distinguish between what Lutheran theologians said about this or that doctrine and what the biblical documents themselves said. What was Lutheran was biblical and vice versa. An argument not won by the Scriptures could be won by referencing Luther, the Confessions, or the Brief Statement. Pieper's *Dogmatics* was the court of final resort.

*Analogia fidei*, the consensus of doctrines derived from the clear biblical passages, provided solutions to biblical discrepancies arising from unclear passages. Majority rules. The LCMS had its own *deus ex machina* to resolve difficult situations. Some passages, the *sedes doctrinae*, are valued over others. A passage in conflict with a supposedly clear one had to give way to the *analogia fidei*, but this involves sacrificing the *sola scriptura* principle. It is a highly subjective method. What is unclear to one person may be absolutely clear to another. With God as their author, the Scriptures possessed authority, sufficiency, clarity, truthfulness (i.e., their inerrancy; God could not contradict himself), efficacy, and clarity (i.e., what God spoke had to be taken literally, the *sensus literalis*).<sup>9</sup> He did not allow "departure at all from the intended meaning of single Bible text." Preus was explicit in insisting on *sensus literalis*, the literal meaning of a passage. Better to let the discrepancy between two passages remain than to go against the clear, literal meaning, the *sensus literalis*. He went further in saying that the "*Sensus literalis* and the *analogia Scripturae* complement each other."<sup>10</sup> In the case of John 6, however, which speaks of eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood, the *analogia Scripturae* took precedence over the *sensus literalis*.<sup>11</sup> In line with Lutheran tradition, Preus went for the

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<sup>8</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 371-372.

<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Preus, *Doctrine is Life: Essays on Scripture*, ed. Klemet I. Preus (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 233.

<sup>11</sup> Preus, *Doctrine is Life*, 228. For the full discussion, see 226-235. The chapter "The Hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord," 215-241, to which the following references

spiritual meaning. While he does not give an explanation for surrendering the *sensus literalis*, the reason was probably that the literal meaning challenged the Lutheran *analogia fidei* that only faith was absolutely necessary for salvation.<sup>12</sup> Luther faced the same problem in James, in which works were made a factor in justification, and simply removed the book from the canon.

As valuable as the *analogia fidei* is in furthering a unified theology, it can become a liability in wrestling with the Scriptures. Seminary students taught the method plod through the same biblical forest on the same paths and come across nothing really new. Answers are in hand before the questions are asked. A church's faith is fed by its past and its theology cannot contradict its official positions, but our response is that previous theologians cannot be allowed to corner the market on what the Scriptures have to offer. Preus did not differ from the LCMS official theology, but his thorough knowledge of seventeenth-century Lutheran theology and a direct encounter with neo-orthodoxy, which surfaced in his 1961 essay and his 1970 *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, gave him an advantage. While others were folding neo-orthodoxy into their theological positions, Preus knew the new theology first hand, provided an analysis of it, and, compared to others, had arguably the best understanding of it.

The Lutheran Orthodox position on inspiration, as Preus clarified in his *The Inspiration of Scripture*, was for many how the Scriptures presented their own origin. *Sola scriptura* did not differ from the LCMS's own *analogia fidei*. This approach cannot be dismissed out of hand. Scholars like Robert L. Wilken and Dale C. Allison are reviving often-ignored past interpretations in coming to terms with biblical texts.<sup>13</sup> A raw *sola scriptura* approach can produce devastating results. The Scriptures were written within the context of the church and intended to be understood there.<sup>14</sup> For the LCMS, the boundary date of that context was 1847.<sup>15</sup> Preus moved the

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are made, appeared in *No Other Gospel*, ed. A. Koeplin (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1980) and brought together earlier works in an essay delivered at the 1973 Bethany Lectures in Mankato, Minnesota.

<sup>12</sup> Preus, *Doctrine is Life*, 232-239.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Dale C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Assigning the role of interpreting the Bible to the academy will inevitably produce a different result than when that was done in the church. See Karl Paul Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible: Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic* (New York: The Crossword Publishing Company, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Current attention to past and often discredited historical interpretations of the Bible is partially a reaction to the fragmented and meager results of some historical-

ball back more than two centuries to the early seventeenth century and enlarged the playing field. He could take issue with these theologians on this or that point, but their position and that of Luther and the Confessions were his. Here was the seamless theological cloak. Close to the heart of the classical Lutheran position was the delineation of the process of biblical inspiration from the Spirit's directing the writers' research to the picking up of their pens.<sup>16</sup> Each was given "a specific command and impulse" to write, but was not necessarily aware that the Spirit was working directly on him.<sup>17</sup> The Scriptures' divine character of *autopistia* (i.e., their self-authentication) was demonstrable only by the Scriptures' own testimony to themselves. Each word was *autopistos* and could be recognized as divine by the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*. Preus saw believing in Christ and accepting the Scriptures as God's word as one act worked by the Spirit, a view with which Barth could be comfortable. Claiming the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* as the proof of inspiration is not without problems. It comes close to a tautology, since accepting the Spirit's testimony is faith.<sup>18</sup> It suspiciously resembles Calvin's view of the indwelling of the Spirit as the evidence of faith.<sup>19</sup> Preus defends the Lutheran dogmaticians (and himself) by asserting that "belief in the authority of the Scripture is only a part of the total effect of the Spirit's effect in me," a topic which he promised to engage later.<sup>20</sup>

There is no quarrel that the Spirit inspires the Bible and creates faith, but axiomatic for Lutheran theology is that the Spirit works only through the word.<sup>21</sup> Since for Preus the "Word" is Christ, the Scriptures are

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critical methods that do not recognize that the Scriptures are primarily theological documents intended to produce theological results. The LCMS proclivity for seeing its history of less than two centuries as *Heilsgeschichte* hardly shares in the catholic scope of other endeavors but it is not atypical of how other churches interpret the Bible.

<sup>16</sup> Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, 50–52.

<sup>17</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 276. Primary *sedes doctrinae* for biblical inspiration were Second Timothy 3:15–17 and Second Peter 1:21 (282–283).

<sup>18</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 296–299. He points out that faith in the Scriptures cannot really be distinguished from faith in Christ and that both are worked by the Holy Spirit (302–303).

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 1:72.

<sup>20</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 303. Rather than resolving a potentially major flaw, Preus advises the reader that the Spirit's work in believers will be undertaken in the section on soteriology, for which he did not live long enough to provide a volume.

<sup>21</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 302. "All the Lutheran theologians stress that the work of the Spirit and the work of the Word in this regard, as



thoroughly christological,<sup>22</sup> though he acknowledges he does not know the reason for this.<sup>23</sup> For Preus, the Bible's christological character is determined by the Word that exists alongside of God without referring to it as the incarnate Word and so the historical aspects of Jesus' ministry are not included in the Spirit's inspiration of the Scriptures. Lutheran and Reformed theology differ on how God works with his creation. As is evident in their doctrine of the sacraments, Lutherans hold that God is comfortable working through things he created. In Reformed thought, God can never quite come to terms with his own creation and hence the Spirit is given directly, maybe alongside of things, but never through them. Here Lutherans and the Reformed face one another across an unbridgeable gap.<sup>24</sup> In defining the inspiration of the Scriptures, however, the Lutheran dogmaticians and Preus held to a direct working of the Spirit on the writers and went further to say that Christ as God's eternal Word was speaking in the Scriptures, but they did not take the next step in identifying the Word with the historical Jesus. In inspiring the Scriptures, the Spirit worked directly without means. Christ, assumably the Jesus of the Gospels, was the content of the Scriptures but was not part of the process of inspiration.<sup>25</sup> For the dogmaticians, the unity of the Scriptures was derived from common inspiration by the Spirit and not by their historical, organic interconnectedness.

The seventeenth-century dogmaticians did not know of the historical-critical method of interpreting away biblical history, but on the basis of the older theology, Preus did respond to it in his 1980 essay "The Hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord." In this essay he coins the

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in the work of conversion itself, is not two operations but one work, one unity of operation." In his *The Inspiration of Scripture* Preus discussed the fact that for the Lutheran dogmaticians the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* was always worked by the external word (108–118).

<sup>22</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 270. "The orthodox Lutherans actually found Christ throughout Scripture. . . . To Lutheran theology the Christocentricity of Scripture is evidence of the identity of the Word of God, evidence of the intimate relation and conjunction of the hypostatic Word of Christ and the prophetic Word of God (Scripture), of the material principle of theology and the formal principle of theology."

<sup>23</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 372.

<sup>24</sup> See my discussion of this in *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, ed. John Stephenson (St. Louis: The Luther Academy), 159–161.

<sup>25</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 372–373. Preus is adamant in holding that Christ is the content and purpose of the Scriptures and that "When Scripture speaks, Christ speaks," but he does not connect inspiration with the historical Jesus. Preus's position resembles Barth's.

phrase "biblical realism," by which he means that what the Bible sets forth as history must be taken that way. "Any genre suggested for a pericope or section of Scripture which would militate against a historical or real referent for theology would have been repudiated as allegorization and unbelief (e.g. etiological saga, didactic tale, symbolic history, faith event, midrash)."<sup>26</sup> These terms were probably used by some faculty colleagues to introduce the new theology into the LCMS. For Preus, what the Scriptures present as historical could not be reduced to literary forms. Preus, however, approaches biblical history from inspiration and not from a historical perspective, as has been recently done by Simon Gathercole,<sup>27</sup> N.T. Wright,<sup>28</sup> and Larry Hurtado.<sup>29</sup> His approach is ahistorical. Inspiration is the proof of an event's historical character. Just as historical circumstances of the biblical writers have no part in defining inspiration, so the historical events reported in the Scriptures are to be accepted because they have been recorded by inspiration.<sup>30</sup>

Here may be a parallel between the older Lutheran theology and Fundamentalism, or at least a caricature of it. Consistent with this view, Preus calls attempts of some Lutheran dogmaticians to use proofs to demonstrate the Bible's divine character "one of the most unfortunate concessions to rationalism in the theology of Lutheran orthodoxy."<sup>31</sup> These proofs are called internal and external criteria and can awaken a human

<sup>26</sup> Preus, *Doctrine is Life*, 239.

<sup>27</sup> Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.)

<sup>28</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); see David P. Scaer, "Recent Research on Jesus: Assessing the Contribution of Larry Hurtado," *CTQ* 69 (2005): 48-62.

<sup>30</sup> In his essay "The 'Realist Principle' of Theology," in *Doctrine is Life: Essays on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Klemet I. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 367-373, Kurt Marquart analyzes what he calls Preus's "realist principle" or "biblical realism" as set forth in "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret and Use the Old and New Testaments?" *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 14 (Fall 1973): 31-32. While Marquart says that the lecture was given at Bethany Lectures in 1973, it is more likely that it was given the year before in 1972. In this lecture biblical realism includes not only the biblical history but doctrines like justification. In this essay Preus insisted "that history and reality underlay the theology of Scripture" (367), and "he specified 'biblical realism,' a presupposition for biblical interpretation" (368). Beneath the historical underlay, however, was inspiration.

<sup>31</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 303. Arguably Lutheran Orthodoxy's external proofs for the divine nature may have been the seed bed for rationalism rather than the other way around as Preus sees it.

faith in the Bible, but ultimately recognition of the Scriptures' divine character comes from the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*.<sup>32</sup> Absence of apologetics in Preus's theology fits his dislike of proofs for the Bible as rationalistic, an otherwise unremarkable observation except for his close association with Marquart, who saw apologetics as part of the theological task. While Preus engaged in the circular reasoning of the *autopistia* and *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* in demonstrating the Bible's authority, Marquart was comfortable and intellectually equipped in using the extra-biblical sources to support biblical inerrancy. This Preus did not do.<sup>33</sup> It is likely that Preus was aware of his differences with Marquart but made no mention of it. He had an openness of mind that allowed for different theological approaches.

### V. Preus and Barth Compared

The title of an essay by John D. Morrison of Liberty University in *Trinity Journal*, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals: Reassessing the Question of the Relation of Holy Scripture and the Word of God,"<sup>34</sup> indicates the Swiss theologian's doctrine on the Scriptures may not have been fully grasped by either his admirers or his detractors.<sup>35</sup> Barth may not have been the "Barthian" that others thought. Something like this goes on in Luther studies in showing that classical Lutheranism was not identical with the Reformer's views. Morrison argues that Barth did not hold that human words only become the word of God upon hearing them in the encounter. This was the position of the Barthians who followed him. Morrison argues that Barth held that the Scriptures' past inspiration was the basis for their becoming the inspiring word of God. The present inspiring character of the Bible was an extension of its past inspiration. "While Barth stresses Scripture's *function* as 'witness to' the Word (Christ), and, as witness its *present* inspiring and so its present 'becoming' as Word

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<sup>32</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 301. Listed are eight external and eight internal criteria. Among the former is the Bible's antiquity and among the latter are the depths of its mysteries and the harmony between the Old and New Testaments. One, "the majesty of God speaking to us in Scripture," seems indistinguishable from *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*.

<sup>33</sup> Preus and Marquart agreed that the Bible was inspired and hence the authoritative word of God, but they reached that goal not only by different roads but on lanes going in opposite directions.

<sup>34</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 187-213.

<sup>35</sup> Morrison discusses Cornelius Van Til, Gordon H. Clark, Carl F.H. Henry, and Bernhard Ramm in "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 201-212. Clark and especially Henry were friends of Preus.

of God now by the Spirit, he thereby only 'mutes' his past affirmation of the *past inspiration* of Scripture."<sup>36</sup>

Objectivity adhered to the presence of "the Spirit of Christ the Word, thereby negating the notion that present authority is locked in human subjectivity."<sup>37</sup> For Barth, where and when the Scripture "becomes" the Word of God, it is only "becoming" what it already is,<sup>38</sup> but for the Barthians a present inspiration or inspiring in hearing the word replaces past inspiration.<sup>39</sup> Torrence, Preus's teacher, "saw Scripture as an opaque (though somehow 'inspired') human medium which is dramatically made transparent by the 'coming' of the Word 'through' that medium by the Spirit in order to 'encounter' the human hearer."<sup>40</sup> Morrison summarizes the Barthian (not Barth's) view of the Scripture as "only human text, which by the Spirit of God can 'become' that which it is *not*, the Word of God in the moment of 'encounter' with the risen Christ."<sup>41</sup> Evangelical theology, what Morrison calls, "'the Protestant orthodox' theology" also saw Barth's position as separating the word of God from the Bible.<sup>42</sup> Barth may have been responsible for his position being misunderstood by his caricaturing the classical Protestant doctrine of inspiration and placing the greater weight on the Scripture's "'inspiring' character at the expense of its '*inspiredness*.'" Nevertheless, Barth "still asserted that Holy Scripture is that Word of God which, by the Spirit, can 'become' the Word of God, the Word of God's redemptive truth and grace in Jesus Christ, to one who hears in faith."<sup>43</sup>

Reevaluation of Barth raises the possibility of finding points of agreement with Preus. Both were agreed that prior to their use the Scriptures were the word of God, efficacious and self-authenticating, a point Preus acknowledges.<sup>44</sup> Neither included the historical origins of the biblical documents in their doctrines of the Bible as the word of God. Both Preus and Barth began theology with the Scripture as the absolute word of

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<sup>36</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 191, italics original.

<sup>37</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 191.

<sup>38</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 193. David Mueller, Otto Weber, and Arnold Come, identified as Barthians, place the moment of revelation in the encounter and not in the composition of the Scripture.

<sup>39</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 195-198.

<sup>40</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 198.

<sup>41</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 200-201.

<sup>42</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 212-213.

<sup>43</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 213.

<sup>44</sup> Preus, *Doctrine is Life*, 43.

God, but Preus went from the word to history, what he called "biblical realism," a step Barth did not take. As Morrison points out, Barth's "radical historicity and total humanness of the text, seemed to allow the luxury of 'having their cake and eating it too.'" <sup>45</sup> It was the having the cake and eating it too among his colleagues that Preus addressed. <sup>46</sup>

## VI. Preus and Christology

Preus's position on justification was formed in his student days by a controversy with a Luther Seminary professor who held to *intuitu fidei*, the belief condemned by the Lutheran Confessions that God predestined to salvation those who he knew would believe. For Preus faith could not be a cause of justification, a position that he and Jack later confronted in the LCMS. He might have been expected to write his dissertation on predestination or justification, but he chose inspiration. Later, justification with its christological component would play a determinative role in his theology. His 1955 *The Inspiration of Scripture* does not discuss the place of Christology in the classical Lutheran theology of the Scriptures, but his 1970 *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* makes it clear that the Bible is completely christological. In Barth-like language he says, "When Scripture speaks, Christ speaks." <sup>47</sup> As mentioned, Preus admits that the orthodox Lutheran theologians did not provide a reason for why the biblical content was christological. <sup>48</sup> Neither does he, but the matter surfaced in our different approaches to theology.

Preus's doctrine of inspiration was a theology "from above." My *The Apostolic Scriptures*, published in 1971, based biblical authority not on inspiration but on their apostolic origins and hence I approached theology "from below." Two years later Preus had wanted my popular Christology to be titled *What Do You Think of Christ?*, but at my insistence it appeared under the title *What Do You Think of Jesus?* Different titles indicated different approaches. I approached both the Scriptures and Jesus from their human side. At several systematics department meetings, these differences surfaced in discussions of how Christology should be taught in the classrooms. My approach evaluated the claims of the man Jesus to be divine, similar to what would later appear in Larry W. Hurtado's *Lord Jesus*

<sup>45</sup> Morrison, "Barth, Barthians and Evangelicals," 213.

<sup>46</sup> Preus, *Doctrine is Life*, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 373-374.

<sup>48</sup> "The Lutheran theologians refuse to debate how Christ is present in the Word of Scripture and how Scripture brings Christ to us." Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 374.

*Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*.<sup>49</sup> Preus favored Marquart's approach in following Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* that the first question in Christology should be how the divine became human, a question that divided Lutherans from the Reformed from the Reformation era. Knowing that the matter of how Christology was to be taught could not be resolved, Preus proposed two christological courses to accommodate the different approaches. Nothing came of it and each student determined from whom he took Christology.

On the christological issue, Preus favored Marquart, but enigmatically chose me to write the *Christology* volume in the Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series.<sup>50</sup> A bit of irony and an even greater enigma was that he chose me to write the *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace* volume, since these terms had no place in my preaching or theology and I had not offered courses on these topics.<sup>51</sup> Each time I tried to back out of this assignment, Preus would say, "Dave, I want you to do it." After his death in 1995, some series editors were not convinced that my volume should be published, but I took refuge in Preus's words, "Dave, I want you to do it." Well, I did it and in writing it I came to know what it meant that we must through much tribulation enter God's kingdom.

Another factor in Preus's christological thought was a formal charge of false doctrine brought against a colleague in 1988 who taught that all theology was Christology. To shore up his shaky position as seminary president, he could have backed away from the controversy, but as Christology surfaced as the chief element in his theology, this option was closed to him. This controversy gave Preus a place to reevaluate gospel reductionism, the view that the gospel existentially defined as the word of justification was the standard in judging the Scriptures. He rejected the view of gospel reductionism that juxtaposed the gospel to the Scriptures. However, if the Scriptures were thoroughly christological, which was Preus's position, then the gospel was the standard in judging the Scriptures. For Preus the outward and inward forms of the Scriptures were one. Preus was a prominent member of the Council for Biblical Inerrancy, a group that held to the Evangelical position that the Scriptures were inspired but not christological in every part. For gospel reductionism, only

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<sup>49</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>50</sup> David P. Scaer, *Christology* (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 1998).

<sup>51</sup> David P. Scaer, *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace* (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 2008).

those Scriptures in which Christ was encountered were word of God.<sup>52</sup> Classical Lutheranism as presented by Preus saw all of the Bible as word of God (inspired) and christological, but he did not explain how the Scriptures as the word of God came to be christological.

### VII. Breaking the Golden Ring or Getting on the Merry-Go-Round

Theology is like a perpetual merry-go-round. Ideally we should all get on at the same place, but we don't. Our presuppositions differ, and even if we can agree on the same way of doing theology, we still come to different conclusions. Outcomes cannot be predetermined. If we have been Christians since infancy, the question may have never crossed our minds why we believe in the Bible. We just do. "Jesus loves me for the Bible tells me so" says it all, at least for Barth and Preus. Current fascination with apologetics indicates that Preus's argument of the *autopistia* of the Scriptures coupled with the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* for some may not be enough. Now that Herod's tomb is found, maybe we can find Noah's ark in its place on Mount Ararat, and behold there will be more Christians. This would be foreign to Preus's thought, but the *autopistia* argument for biblical authority is not without problems. It is not an exclusively Christian argument. Other religions use it.

One solution may be found in expanding the classical Lutheran view that Christ is "present in the Word of Scripture,"<sup>53</sup> as the personal or hypostatic Word, "the Logos through whom God speaks his prophetic Word. He is the heart and content and meaning of the prophetic Word; He is the message and the purpose of all the Scriptures."<sup>54</sup> This should be expanded so that we first see the hypostatic or personal Word as the Word who preached in Galilee, was crucified and resurrected in Jerusalem. The Word who became flesh gives his Spirit to the apostles through whom the Scriptures are inspired.<sup>55</sup> Over against the Reformed, the basic Lutheran understanding is that the Creator is accessible through his creation and the divine word is accessed through human words. Hence Jesus of Nazareth is the essential component in inspiration. Preus held that the unity of the Scriptures resulted from their divine origin. This unity also arose from the

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<sup>52</sup> The Spirit's procession from the Father and the Son, as well as the giving of the Spirit by the incarnate Son to the apostles, becomes tangible in biblical inspiration that now can be understood less as a mystical act and more as a historical one.

<sup>53</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 374.

<sup>54</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 270.

<sup>55</sup> Preus said Christ's presence in the Scriptures was a mystery and any probing of this was philosophizing; *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 377. Not really.

historical interrelatedness of the biblical documents, but this did not belong to Preus's argument.

### VIII. Concluding and Failing

In coming to the end of this essay, one is faced with the haunting feeling that the center of who Robert Preus was may never be fully discovered. A place to begin may be Jack and Robert's mercurial rise to influence and prominence in the LCMS. They were liked, disliked, loved, and hated by those on both sides of the aisle.<sup>56</sup> Wherever they were present, they were the center of attention. Robert's sermons began with the claim that the biblical text had been inspired by the Holy Spirit with additional laudatory remarks about the Bible. His sermons were riveting. Even during Robert's darkest days, after he was deprived of the seminary presidency, he attracted groups of students and pastors around him. This made him the envy of his opponents, who, living or dead, will be forgotten sooner than he will.<sup>57</sup>

At the January 1996 seminary symposium, two months after he died, professors who agreed with his removal from the presidency or with disallowing his return to the classroom gathered around his widow Donna to express their condolences. It was Mafia-like. Even after his death the Preus mystique remained, but what was this? He had the first published volume of the Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics dedicated to Pieper, but he was not quite a Missourian. He worked to preserve the LCMS's traditional theology, but he worked outside the LCMS boundaries in establishing relations with churches still not in fellowship with the LCMS. He made the first contacts with Asian, African, and European churches that have since his death come into fellowship with the LCMS or are contemplating it. Even those who could not agree with his theology remained his friends. Those whom he appointed to prominent seminary positions and who shared his doctrines of justification and inspiration were among those who supported his removal as seminary president. One administrator who locked him out of the student commons so as not to allow him a place to speak on campus after his reinstatement as president in July 1992 still tells students that Robert Preus was a marvelous preacher and the LCMS's best theologian.

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Preus's influence in the LCMS stretched from 1957–1995 (38 years), but Jack's was primarily from 1958–1981 (23 years).

<sup>57</sup> As evidence, see the essays in *The Theology and Life of Robert David Preus* (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 2009).



This riddle of who Preus was and what made him tick may never be resolved, but a living parable of who he was might be found in a party that he and Donna gave in Maple Grove, Minnesota, after leaving Fort Wayne in the spring of 1994. Like Caesar's Gaul, the guests had divided themselves into three groups. First was the ELCA group with ALC origins, including his cousin, David Preus, that church's last president. Second was the ELS group at whose Mankato seminary Robert finished his last semester of studies and two of whose congregations he served as pastor until 1957. Finally was the LCMS group. Robert felt at home with each group and they in turn were at home with him. Jack would die that summer and Robert the following year. The Preus era was coming to an end.

Both Preus brothers preferred preaching in black Geneva gowns. Liturgical protocol was not high on their agenda. Each made a point of their never having put on a clerical collar, mention of which mattered little to some and was annoying to others. They did not quite fit prescribed patterns, but years after their deaths they are remembered and continue to shape theological patterns for others. From their generation no one has had or will have the staying mystique and influence the Preus brothers had. For those who knew Jack and Robert, they remain so alive that if they would appear now in this place, we would have no difficulty in picking up the theological discourse they brought to the LCMS. For them, theology was the common discourse.