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Dedicated to the Memory of
Robert David Preus (1924-1995)

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1996



**Dedicated to the Memory of
Robert David Preus (1924-1995):
President, Colleague, Teacher, and Friend**

A Review of J. A. O. Preus' *The Second Martin*¹

Robert D. Preus

Dr. J. A. O. Preus, professor and president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, and for twelve years president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, spent the last productive and fruitful years of his life translating the theological works of Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), the second most important confessional Lutheran theologian in the history of the Lutheran Church. The most significant of Chemnitz' many writings translated by Preus was his *Loci Theologici*, published posthumously in 1591. That *opus magnum*, together with his contributions to the Formula of Concord as its foremost author, established Chemnitz as the "Second Martin." Chemnitz was an eminently gifted man: a first-rate exegete, historian, and patrologist. He was the father of modern dogmatics. He was also a pastor, a teacher of the church, and superintendent in the city of Braunschweig. Such a threefold ministry, carried out faithfully by Chemnitz, makes him an excellent model for pastors, teachers, and officials in the Lutheran Church today. Since there were no books in homiletics or practical theology in Chemnitz' day, his many books offered much needed help to pastors in writing their sermons and applying the evangelical doctrine in their ministries. His works are just as helpful today.

Recognizing this fact and the great importance of Chemnitz' life as well as his writings, Jack Preus decided to write a book on the life and theology of Chemnitz. He made his decision not only for the purpose of reviewing the profound impact of Chemnitz on the church life and theology of his day, not only to comment on Chemnitz' role in the writing of the Formula of Concord and the rehabilitation of confessional Lutheranism in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, but to present this humble and peaceful man as an example for today of a faithful, confessional Lutheran pastor, professor of theology, and church official (bishop, district president, synodical president, circuit counsellor, etc.) in the Lutheran Church.

What kind of example is Martin Chemnitz to a pastor who wants to be a confessional Lutheran today? Chemnitz put the pure doctrine of the Gospel first in his ministry. This involved much work and occasioned much trouble. But by his confession of the gospel of justification Chemnitz' parishioners grew in grace and holiness, as Preus' biography shows. And so a pastor today who wishes to be edified or stimulated would be well advised to read this book, or better yet Chemnitz' books in translation, which deal with the great themes of salvation, rather than books from the plethora of modern, often light-weight, works on such

quasi-theological subjects as "stewardship," church growth, or "pastoral" counseling, which have little or no basis in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

Chemnitz is also a paradigm for those who are called to be professors and teachers of the church today. How so? In Preus' biography the point is made repeatedly that Chemnitz, whether acting as pastor or professor or official, makes his first concern to articulate and confess a *corpus doctrinae* on which the theology of the church should be based. In other words, the priority of the teacher of the church should be to confess the truth of the gospel in all its articles. What was taught by the theological faculties at the universities and other schools in those days, whether exegesis or dogmatics or whatever, was in the service of the doctrine, the confession. Sadly, this is no longer the case in many quarters of the Lutheran Church. There are Lutheran seminaries today where more hours are devoted to sociology than to the teaching of the Bible (dogmatics or exegesis). And often dogmatic theology amounts to no more than the history of dogma or the history of "religion," or, worse still, an adjunct to sociology or anthropology of some kind. Students are graduating from Lutheran seminaries today who have never read the Lutheran Confessions nor had a course in them. The best thing that could happen at any Lutheran seminary today is that every professor would read Preus' *The Second Martin*, then proceed to Chemnitz' *Loci Theologici*, and then emulate that great teacher of the church. This is especially desirable for those whose courses are in the quasi-theological subjects mentioned above, which have gained ascendancy at many Lutheran seminaries. If this could happen, our seminaries would become more Lutheran, more theological, more evangelical, more practical, more relevant—yes, and more sensitive and devoted to the mission of the church.

Chemnitz' activity as a faithful and busy superintendent should also serve as an example for every Lutheran official to follow today. And every Lutheran bishop, synodical president, and district president would benefit greatly if he were to take the time to read Preus' book, which closely follows Chemnitz' superintendency. Chemnitz was a model superintendent, wise and compassionate, considerate of both pastor and congregation. As he began his ministry he had no compunctions, out of consideration to the church that was calling him, about preaching a prescribed trial sermon prior to being called as pastor and coadjutor at Braunschweig. Later, as superintendent he did not impose candidates or pastors on congregations, nor did he prevent congregations from making a knowledgeable decision to call the pastor of their choice. During his

entire superintendency he carried out his rigorous calling as pastor: preaching, teaching, visiting his people, and administering the keys. As superintendent he never suspended another pastor except for flagrant false doctrine or proven ungodly life, and then only after thorough investigation and due process. He faithfully inaugurated the visitation of pastors; and hard admonition was given to mean-spirited, incompetent, lazy pastors. But in such cases the pastor was advised to take another call or resign or, if old and tired, to retire from office; but these men, with all their faults, were not forced out of the ministry or blackballed, at least not by Chemnitz. Nor did he, with or without the connivance or active support of other superintendents, officials, or princes, try to control the call process. He was as concerned to be evaluated himself, along with other officials, as to evaluate his fellow pastors. Throughout his long superintendency he was deeply respected and loved for his evangelical treatment of fellow pastors and the congregations of the city.

Why was this so? Because, as Preus abundantly shows, Chemnitz had the highest regard for the office of the minister; because he was deeply committed to the divinity of the call to that office; because he was dedicated to an evangelical church polity; because he was faithful to the Lutheran Confessions (everyone knew where he stood) and loyal to those ministers who steadfastly adhered to them; and because he loved Christ's sheep. In short, because he practiced what he taught so powerfully in his *Loci Theologici* (J. A. O. Preus translation, II, 692-720) about church and ministry. And so he received the love and praise of the pastors and people in Braunschweig and of confessional Lutherans throughout the German Empire and beyond.

A great problem faced Chemnitz throughout his entire ministry, the problem of developing an evangelical church polity which in those days had to conform to the articulate Lutheran position on the two kingdoms (See AC XVI, Ap XVI; see also *Loci Theologici*, Frankfurt and Wittenberg, 1653. II, 102-133 and passim), as well as to the real state of affairs prevailing in Braunschweig and other territories, mainly Lutheran and Roman Catholic, at that time. Throughout his biography Preus touches upon this matter.

In the sixteenth century the role of the prince or magistrate was prominent in the life of the church. The prince and civil rulers had a part in calling pastors, supporting the church financially and politically, and often in carrying out church discipline. They considered themselves the defenders of the faith, and frequently entered into the affairs and

theological controversies of the church. In Lutheran as well as Roman Catholic lands the churches were many times under the virtual hegemony of the prince or state, and such circumstances often compromised the church, the pastors, and, especially, the superintendent. For instance, in Braunschweig where Chemnitz labored, Duke Julius, an ardent Lutheran, was very supportive of Chemnitz, both of his theological leadership and administration, as well as of the Lutheran Reformation. But when Julius for political reasons supported the ordination of his son to the bishopric of the nearby region of Halberstadt according to the Roman rite, Chemnitz was compelled to condemn the activity. He incurred the wrath of the duke who withdrew his support of Chemnitz and the Formula of Concord and dismissed Chemnitz as a member of his consistory. Often superintendents and pastors did not have the courage to stand up to the kingdom of the left with such firmness.

Today in America we do not have to contend with the interference of the state, and we suppose that our separation of church and state under the first amendment solves that vexing problem, which has plagued European Lutheranism until this day. In Europe the church depended upon the state in many respects. When Lutherans immigrated to America they were forced to change their church polity radically. The role of the civil government was no longer any factor in administering the church. And so a church polity had to be developed whereby the role of civil government was divvied up among the entities that were strictly ecclesiastical, e.g., the laity, the pastors, the officials, and the church councils. In some cases the immigrant Lutheran pastors and people worked out a polity that gave too much authority to the laity (e.g., some of the "low church," anti-clerical, Scandinavian pietists). In some cases undue authority was given the clergy and the superintendents, or bishops (e.g., the Buffalo Synod). The Missouri Synod under the leadership of C. F. W. Walther and other fledgling synods trod a middle course whereby both pastors and people were encouraged to carry out their respective offices with integrity and according to biblical principles, and the function of synodical president and other officials was advisory. Thus, Walther and other immigrant Lutherans remained faithful to the evangelical polity of Chemnitz and at the same time were able to rid the Lutheran Church in America of both the encroachments of the civil government (which Chemnitz and his age had to endure), and the entrenched, at times almost Erastian, polity that marked later generations in Europe living within a state church. Today Lutheran synods have gradually handed over to church officials, who hold their offices *jure humano*, many of the legal

and legislative functions and powers that the state exercised in Chemnitz' day and that the pastors and people performed in Walther's day. A polity of entrenched ecclesiasticism seems to prevail in the larger Lutheran synods in America today. The extravagancies and power plays of the secular princes of Chemnitz' day are repeated by the princes of the church today. This turn of affairs has proven to be no blessing to the church, and the losers are both the pastors and the people who together make up the church.²

Jack Preus devotes fully half of his book to Chemnitz' theological position on the chief articles of the Christian faith. He deftly draws from Chemnitz' prodigious theological output, including the Formula of Concord, a summary of the main themes of the Lutheran Reformation and of the Lutheran Confessions. This makes the book very helpful to the busy pastor and layman to understand the theology of confessional Lutheranism. Preus examines Chemnitz' brilliant treatment of such topics as Scripture and the theological task, the Person of Christ, and justification; and he shows in several instances how Chemnitz in the Formula of Concord and in his other writings correctly understood and presented Luther's position in contrast to Melancthon's. This is important to Preus in light of the fact that modern day Lutherans have on crucial issues often swallowed more of the later Melancthon than they have drunk from Luther or Chemnitz. The result has been synergism, the denial or compromise of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper (supported by the practice of open communion), unionism, and doctrinal indifferentism.

Preus' book is especially helpful because Lutheranism today is beset with the same aberrations and unlutheran pressures from outside and within her ranks as in Chemnitz' time, e.g., Romanism, Antinomianism, Majorism, Osiandrianism, Crypto-Calvinism, and confusion concerning adiaphora. All these false doctrines struck at the very heart of the gospel. All of them have to varying degrees penetrated our Lutheran synods and congregations today. In the attractive dress of Ecumenism, popular Evangelicalism, the Church Growth Movement, and other fads and movements they have freely entered our Lutheran Zion and are causing a lot of trouble. Preus' book will be of great help to all Lutherans who wish to address our modern situation. It will help us all to meet the problems and challenges we as confessional Lutherans face in our complex and increasingly secularized society and to be faithful to our confessional heritage and to the mission of the church. It sounds a trumpet call to the Lutheran Church to heed the words of the prophet,

"Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16). For Lutherans—laypeople, pastors, teachers, and officials—to look to their past will provide the best means to face the present and the future. The great Reformer did this. So did the Second Martin. So did Jack Preus.

The Endnotes

1. J. A. O. Preus, *The Second Martin, the Life and Theology of Martin Chemnitz* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994).
2. A state of affairs has developed in the larger Lutheran synods in America today which is more akin to a Reformed model of polity than the free position on *Kirchenregiment* so typical of historic Lutheranism. The Westminster Confession (XXX, 1) says, "The Lord Jesus, as king and head of His church, hath appointed a government in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate." At times officials in the Lutheran Church today act as if they hold office *jure divino*. This is seen most clearly today when officials exercise church discipline by suspending a pastor or congregation from a synod or church body without first observing due process (see Tr. 74). Such a mischievous practice is especially harmful in our country where neither pastor or congregation can seek due process in civil courts and in some cases no ecclesiastical due process is provided. Such was not the case in Chemnitz' day. I imagine that the church and civil courts in Chemnitz' day were as inept and corrupt at times as in our modern day, but at least they were there.