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

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

Robert D. Preus: A Tribute

Eugene F. Klug

There is an old German proverb—probably Latin or Greek in origin—which proclaims a vital truth: “Worte lehren, Beispiele erziehen.” Words can teach, but it is examples that educate. Each generation has to discover for itself how true this proverb is in bringing up children as good, creditable, and productive citizens among their contemporaries, for the sake of the home, the country, and the communion of saints in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We could readily muster the evidence demonstrating how this truth would apply to the life and work of Robert Preus, referencing his remarkable family of children, the many literary productions—books and essays—that issued from his pen; the influence which he had on the life and education of the synodical seminaries in St. Louis as well as in Springfield and Fort Wayne; the synod-wide sway which he exercised (applauded by his loyal supporters and criticized by his opponents), the respect which he enjoyed in the realm of his academic peers, and so on. But these things have already been addressed elsewhere and by others in sundry ways.

The purpose here is to pinpoint the all-consuming focus of his life. Really it is nothing unique; it is the heart of Christian theology. Every loyal and knowledgeable Christian, particularly every Christian theologian devoted to the confessions of the Lutheran Church, readily assents to it. In theology we denote it as the material principle, the central core around which everything else in doctrine moves in an harmonious whole. It is the answer of Holy Scripture to the question over which Luther agonized so desperately as he grovelled under the oppressive system of the Roman Church, which turned a person inward to his own pious striving (*incurvatus in se*). It is this answer which finally brought Luther the joyful comfort of the knowledge of the grace of God for Christ's sake through faith, the *gratuitus favor Dei propter Christum per fidem*.

Robert Preus resonated whole-heartedly with Luther's emphasis on this gospel, by which the church stands or falls, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. There is no other gospel than the one which Luther rediscovered! Preus lived his life and did his teaching along the lines that Luther long ago had charted as the right course for his own life and for the church if it was to avoid and be spared shipwreck on the rocks of natural theology, especially the various

brands of works-righteousness which persistently seek to insinuate themselves into Christian theology. Luther observed in introducing the examination of a candidate for the doctoral degree in 1537: "The article of justification is the master and the prince, the lord, ruler and judge over all doctrine; it preserves and rules all teaching of the church and establishes our consciences before God. Without this article the world is nought but death and darkness."¹ Those who knew Robert Preus—including, of course, all who were his students—would agree that these words would accurately characterize his teaching in every respect.

His passion for the central article of the Christian faith initially came to this writer's notice when Robert Preus was not yet a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, when he was serving as a delegate of the so-called "Small Norwegians"—presently the Evangelical Lutheran Synod—at some of the last meetings of the now-defunct Synodical Conference, meeting then (1954) first in East Detroit and then in Chicago at historic old St. Paul's Church. Already then, in that august assembly, the young Norwegian-American theologian, equipped with a new doctoral degree (along with his brother J. A. O. Preus, likewise so accoutered) shone as an articulate spokesman for his synod. Sadly, the synods involved never could achieve consensus on the issues still dividing them—minor things like involvement in the Boy Scouts and military chaplaincy and a more major one involving the teaching on church and ministry—and so eventually the demise of the Synodical Conference came about and fellowship between the synods involved came to an unfortunate end. Soon thereafter, however, the brothers Preus came to employ their talents within the Missouri Synod, first Robert Preus in the seminary in St. Louis and then his brother in the seminary in Springfield and eventually as president of the synod for some twelve years.

Those of us involved with the synod's agonizing struggle during the sixties and seventies to keep the church true to its confessional heritage valued the commitment and talent of Robert and J. A. O. Preus in the effort to stanch the bleeding that was going on under the onslaught of higher criticism on the synodical theology during those years. Both of them, along with many other stalwarts—also

uncounted faithful laymen who refused to see their church sold down the river—managed with the help of God and the authoritative power of His inscripturated word to steady the synod's drift and to bring the ship of the church back on course.

Through the years, in all centuries past, the church of Christ has struggled—made up as it is of sinner-saints in whom the Old Adam is still very much alive and mightily at work—to keep the mandate given by the Lord through His apostle “that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). To achieve such ecclesial unity the pendulum has swung—at times wildly—between viewpoints that defined true Christianity in terms of its doctrine, demanding its purity (orthodoxy), and in terms of its life and piety, demanding its rightness (orthopraxis). Most often lost is the truth which Luther had recovered and reaffirmed for his time—and for the church till the end of time—that both must be there, right teaching and right living. Consciences, as stated above, are established before God through faith in the vicarious atonement of Christ. “This is the hinge on which our discussion turns,” Luther stated, in arguing against the way in which Erasmus elevated the capacity of the human will to achieve piety before God with its own volitional power. And then, in exasperation with his opponent's minimizing of doctrinal purity—as he urged, rather, a capacity to lead a pious life in tune with the Savior's model—Luther explodes, “Silly, ignorant remarks, all of them! We teach nothing save Christ crucified. But Christ crucified brings all these doctrines with Him.”² The whole notion of relativizing doctrinal integrity as taught by God in His word, the Bible, was repugnant to Luther. “What Christian could talk like that? . . . The Holy Spirit is no Sceptic . . . What can the church settle that Scripture did not settle first?”³

The key to unity and harmony within the Christian church begins and ends with orthodoxy, not orthopraxis—important as it also is—in Luther's thinking. It is pietism in all times past, but especially as eloquently refined and argued by Friedrich Schleiermacher, which has accented life, rather than doctrine, as the pivot upon which peace and unity within the church turns. Erasmus had

resonated to that stance earlier. But Luther's position, as stated in his famous treatise *Against Hanswurst* (1541), was simple and clear:

The holy church cannot and may not lie or suffer false doctrine, but must teach nothing except what is holy and true, that is, God's word alone . . . Whatever departs from the word of God . . . is without question error, lie, and death. And what would we have of the word if we could find ways for ourselves without it? . . . If the plumb-line or the T-square were false or crooked, what kind of work would or could the master-builder produce? One crooked thing would make the other crooked, without limit or measure. Life too can be sinful and untrue in the same way—unfortunately life is indeed very untrue—but doctrine must be straight as a plumb-line, sure, and without sin.⁴

It is in that context that Luther's famous statement concerning the role of the preacher in the pulpit and his use of the Lord's Prayer occurs: "A preacher should neither pray the Lord's Prayer nor ask for forgiveness of sins when he has preached (if he is a true preacher, but . . . should say firmly, *Haec dixit Dominus*, 'God Himself has said these things.'" And Luther goes on in this way: "This we say about doctrine, which must be pure and clean, namely, the dear, blessed, holy, and one word of God without any addition. But life, which should daily direct, purify, and sanctify itself according to doctrine, is not yet entirely pure or holy, so long as this maggoty body of flesh and blood is alive." These words summed up the Reformer's reply to Duke Henry of Braunschweig, who had scurrilously defamed Luther's prince, Elector John Frederick of Saxony. With biting satire—of which Luther was capable when first baited by his vicious opponents—he characterized Henry as that "excellent man, as skillful, clever, and versed in Holy Scripture as a cow in a walnut tree or a sow on a harp."⁵

The Reformation with its stress on purity of doctrine was by no means unconnected with piety and loving concern for the neighbor. Very early in his professional life Luther had written his extremely beautiful and rightly famous *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), dedicating it to Leo X in a conciliatory spirit as he pursued his efforts to reform the Church of Rome, if possible. There he touched

upon the Christian life in a man of faith and his pursuit of godly living. "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make an evil man, but a wicked man does evil works. Consequently, it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says, 'A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.' (Matthew 7:18)."⁶

But when it came to a clash between doctrine and life Luther was prepared to speak with vehemence, as in his lectures on Galatians (1535):

With the utmost rigor we demand that all the articles of Christian doctrine, both large and small—although we do not regard any of them as small—be kept pure and certain. . . . Therefore, . . . doctrine must be carefully distinguished from life. Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. . . . There is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. . . . We can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture. The devil would dearly love to corrupt and overthrow these; that is why he attacks us so cleverly with this specious argument about not offending against love and the harmony among the churches.

It is for this reason that the apostle speaks with such sharp denunciation of false doctrine and false spirits in his exhortation to the Galatian Christians: "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed." In other words, damned be that love by which the truth is lost.⁷

Such sentiments have characterized all conscientious followers of Luther since the dawn of the Reformation, and Robert Preus is clearly to be numbered among them. Whatever else could be added, the doctrinal fidelity, urged in these words of Luther, must certainly

be affirmed of Robert Preus: "Just as the world with all its wisdom and power cannot bend the rays of the sun which are aimed directly from heaven to earth, so nothing can be taken away from or added to the doctrine of faith without overthrowing it all."⁸

As was stated at the outset here, such a focus is not unexpected in a Christian theologian; it derives from his passion for and commitment to the central article of the Bible, the sinner's justification before God *sola gratia sola fide*. It was the guiding star in Luther's life and theology; and the same may be said of Robert Preus. No higher tribute can be spoken. The old adage still holds true that the closer a man stands to Luther, the better a theologian he will be: *quo propior Luthero, eius melior theologus*.

The Endnotes

1. WA 39, 205, 2.
2. *The Bondage of the Will*, ed. and trans. Packer and Johnson, pages 78 and 107.
3. *Ibid.*, 68-70 passim.
4. *Luther's Works*, 41, 214-217, passim.
5. *Op. cit.*, 219.
6. *Luther's Works*, 31, 361.
7. *Luther's Works*, 27, 40ff.
8. *Op. cit.*, 39.