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Dr. Herman A. Preus

In Memoriam



PROFESSOR HERMAN AMBERG PREUS DIED ON MAY 17, 1995, IN HIS NINETY-NINTH YEAR. I AM HONORED AND I appreciated deeply being asked by the editors *LOGIA* to comment in its pages in grateful memory of Herman Preus.

Herman Preus was not only my uncle, but my teacher, my mentor, and my friend. He was a cultured gentleman, humble and self-effacing, a pious and loving husband and father and uncle and friend. *LOGIA*, however, has not asked me to offer personal comments about Herman Preus the man, but rather to say something *in memoriam* about Herman Preus as a theologian and teacher of the church.

For that is what he was and what God called him to be: a theologian and teacher. My first day at Luther Seminary I sat at his feet, and he opened the course—I don't remember what course it was—with the words, "From this day on, brethren, you are to think, speak, study, eat and drink theology." Herman loved theology, and he taught me and countless others to love it too. Such love sprang from his deep love for his Savior. There was never a time when I or any student could not walk into his office or go to his home to engage him in conversation on any theological topic or question. He was the best professor at the seminary, a fact recognized even by many students from pietistic and "anti-Missourian" backgrounds who did not like his confessional doctrinal position.

Herman was the most knowledgeable professor on campus, except for the redoubtable and amazing Professor G. M. Bruce, a Haugean, who had several doctor's degrees and a photographic memory. But Herman had a broad theological horizon and possessed the rare ability to synthesize his vast theological knowledge. He was able to teach effectively in all departments of theology. I took courses from him in homiletics, liturgics—where, although I thought I was a pretty good musician, he gave me a D in chanting—symbolics (there was only one semester course offered in the Lutheran Confessions, and Herman taught that course exclusively), and two semester courses in the Gospel of John, unquestionably his best course. Unlike most professors fifty years ago who taught exclusively by lecturing, Herman taught his students how to do exegesis.

Herman Preus was a Luther scholar, but not a pedantic one. He identified with Luther's cause and his theology and with the Lutheran Confessions which so consummately portrayed Luther's theology and understanding of the gospel. When Herman was called to Luther Seminary in 1936 he immediately became involved in a doctrinal controversy that centered in the principle of *sola gratia*. The controversy was greatly aggravated by the advent to the seminary of Dr. George Aus, who was called to the chair of systematic theology and for many years was the only professor to teach dogmatics. Aus was a pietist who had done his post-graduate work at Biblical Seminary, which, with its aversion to formal confessions, was hardly conducive to preparing a man to teach Lutheran dogmatics. Aus's dogmatics courses were classes in biblical theology. As one might expect, Aus was a "subtle synergist," in the pattern of Victorin Strigel. He taught emphatically that conversion is not exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. In conversion, the will of man is not inactive—like an inanimate stick or stone—but cooperates with the Spirit. He did not hesitate to say in class that "man converts himself." When confronted with Article II of the Formula of Concord with its affirmation that the will of unregenerate man was bound and he was dead in his sin, Aus responded that the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, later the Evangelical Lutheran Church, had never required subscription to the Formula of Concord or the whole *Book of Concord*, and that according to Cremer's *Lexikon* the term *nekros* in Ephesians 2:1 and Colossians 2:13 meant "under the condemnation of death," not spiritually dead, as confessed in FC II. Aus was certain that man cooperated in his conversion because he himself had "experienced" it.

Herman was committed to the theology of FC II and Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, which he assigned to every student at the seminary in his symbolics class. He saw that the theology of Luther's substantive treatise was the obverse counterpart to Luther's doctrine of justification by grace. He saw, as did Luther, that synergistic anthropology or hamartology was bound to affect the doctrine of salvation, obscuring the *sola gratia*, and undermining the sinner's assurance of salvation, and often turning sermons into harangues on personal holiness and spirituality without real evangelical content. Again and again he pointed out that this diminution of the gospel of grace was a very real threat not merely to the confessional integrity of the academic community at a Lutheran seminary, but to pastors and lay people all over the church. He had seen the deleterious effect of synergism, which almost invariably accompanied pietism, at the seminary and in church life.

In temperament Herman was a humble and irenic man, not given to controversy. But when the gospel was at stake he met the challenge and was drawn into a prolonged and intense doctrinal conflict with Professor Aus and the rest of the faculty over the fundamental issue of the *sola gratia*. Herman had to fight the battle alone. The officials of the church for the most part took the other side and did not want to become involved. President J. A. Aasgaard was a cordial leader, but had been brought up and trained in the old United Norwegian Lutheran Church, which rejected the theology of the Formula of Concord on the doctrine of conversion and election. Aasgaard (with whom I talked several times about the issue) agreed with Aas that teachers and pastors in the NLCA (ELC) were not constitutionally bound to the doctrine of the Formula of Concord, and in that regard he was technically correct. His policy was to do nothing and hope that the controversy, like a prairie fire, would sooner or later burn out. He was sure it would never get settled by dialog or debate. After all, the three Norwegian Lutheran church bodies merging in 1917 to form the NLCA had agreed to disagree on the articles of conversion and election when they entered their union.

With one exception all the faculty opposed the position of the Formula of Concord and of Herman. The one exception was President Thaddaeus Gullixson, who, like Aasgaard, assumed a posture of benign neglect in respect to doctrinal differences. Except for the support of many students who over the years appreciated the importance of the correct understanding of man's state of depravity for the effective proclamation of

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the gospel, Herman stood alone throughout the tedious and trying controversy. And the controversy took its toll on his health. But he never wavered. And under great stress he remained always a Christian gentleman. This was true, I think, also of Professor Aus and the other faculty members who disagreed, sometimes profoundly, with Herman on the articles of conversion and election. The students, however, were not always so refined. I remember a classmate, who later joined the United Lutheran Church in America, yelling at the top of his lungs in the hall: "Herman Preus is a sixteenth-century heretic." Herman had to put up with a lot of that kind of insult, but very likely Aus did too.

In a festschrift entitled *Striving for Ministry: Centennial Essays Interpreting the Heritage of Luther Theological Seminary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), Warren Quanbeck, the editor of the book, who was called to the seminary in the early fifties to teach dogmatics, comments on Herman's work and activity and contribution to the seminary (p.152). His comments misrepresent Herman's theology consistently, and therefore misrepresent Herman. Quanbeck avers that Herman derived his doctrine of conversion and *sola gratia* not from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, but from a "view of the Reformation and the confessions articulated by theologians such as C. F. W. Walther and the editors of the *Concordia Triglotta*." Every student who studied at the feet of Herman Preus (Quanbeck did not) knew better than that. As I recall, Herman never mentioned Walther in symbolics classes, and we students did not use the *Triglotta* and were not assigned Bente's introduction to it. Quanbeck credits Herman with responsibility for the intense controversy on conversion and election, whereas Aus "probably did more than anyone else to help the church maintain its Lutheran confession." Translated into plain language, that means that synergism helped the church to move out of an immigrant enclave into a "new self-awareness as an American Lutheran community." Herman's only contribution by defending the doctrine of the Formula of Concord was to create a climate, which often happens to narrow the scope of theological reflection and obscure some important

connections between theology and practice. Not much of a legacy to leave after over forty years of service as a teacher of the church. But such a lampoon is the meat and drink of a confessional Lutheran. Herman's theology was often trivialized and distorted.

Beginning in the early fifties another controversy replaced the unresolved dispute at the seminary and in the ELC on the article of the divine monergism of grace. It had to do with the authority of Scripture. As synergism had attacked the *sola gratia* principle, so the principle of *sola Scriptura* was attacked by a different kind of synergism. I recall reading in an old issue of *Lehre und Wehre* an interesting article by Francis Pieper criticizing a synergistic theory of biblical inspiration much in vogue in his day. The theory went back to Johann Salomo Semler and other early protagonists of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. The theory hypothesized that the Bible was a divine-human book (in a kind of Nestorian sense) containing a divine word and a human word, the result of some kind of divine-human cooperation. There was much speculation about what was divine and what was human in the Bible and how the interpreter makes his decisions about what in fact was God's word and what was merely human dross; but one thing was certain, both God and the human authors cooperated in the production of the Bible. The mistakes, contradictions, and doctrinal differences and errors were contributed by the human authors. The historical-critical method of biblical interpretation as well as the recent movement called Neo-orthodoxy (Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and many others) both build squarely on this synergistic premise regarding the origin of Scripture.

One cannot fail to see the parallel between this synergistic theory of the origin the Bible and the synergistic doctrine of conversion that prevailed at the 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. Herman saw all this in a moment. 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.

Not so with Herman's colleagues, however. When the method was introduced into the seminary by Professor Quanbeck and other younger professors, the convinced synergists on the faculty had little trouble adjusting to it or adopting it outright. And 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 the younger professors that they would leave the school before they would affirm the impossible doctrine of biblical inerrancy. The Church Council backed down. Again Herman Preus stood virtually alone in defense of the confessional Lutheran principle of *sola Scriptura*, just as he had been virtually alone so many years contending for the *sola gratia*. A confessional Lutheran often becomes a "lonely Lutheran," as Herman's dear friend, Hermann Sasse, often said.

I relate these animadversions relative to Herman Preus's career not just because they are true and interesting and no one else will probably write them, certainly not just to be contentious, but because only in the context of doctrinal controversy will this peace-loving, humble man's great contribution to the Lutheran Church be understood and appreciated. He was a witness for the truth, the truth of the biblical gospel, a real teacher of the church. He was a confessional Lutheran who confessed that faith all through his life. He did not waver; he did not compromise the Lutheran Confessions. He followed his mentor, Luther, and taught the theology of the cross. And he lived the theology of the cross, which is never easy. That was his accomplishment in life, the glory of his ministry, and his legacy to the church, all by grace alone.

Robert D. Preus