

J.A.O. Preus: Theologian, Churchman, or Both?

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I. Introduction: The Death of "Old Missouri"?

By the 1960s, it seemed to many within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) that the cleft between moderates and conservatives had become so pronounced that the two sides could no longer remain together. Some argued for a peaceful separation. The administration of President Oliver Harms (1962–1969) struggled to hold the synod intact. The momentum of change in the LCMS had accelerated to the point that by the 1965 Detroit convention the moderate agenda seemed fully to have carried the day. Reflecting on what he believed was a pivotal convention, Richard John Neuhaus spoke of the emergence of a new Missouri and the passing of what had been.

The organizational structure [of old Missouri] and the name remain (although the convention resolved to consider a new name). But the self-understandings that have characterized Missouri over the years have been discarded in a manner so gentle that it almost amounts to self-deception. Many delegates at Detroit were vaguely aware that more was happening than a modification or natural development of "old Missouri." A few seemed to realize that something had died and that this was the price of new life needing room to grow.¹

Approval of LCMS participation in the Lutheran Council USA (LCUSA), participation in the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW), and adoption of the Mission Affirmations had poised the synod to pursue a fundamentally new direction—one from which there was no going back—at least in some peoples' minds.

Implicit in such forward-looking actions was, at the very least, a move away from the past and, at most, a radical disavowal of the synod's theological limitations. Indeed, Neuhaus was so brash as to speak of the death of old Missouri and its "errors."

For what has died some of us will shed no tears. It is not that we are insensitive to the brief tradition of the last several decades. Since it usually contains a fragment of truth, one can even grow fond of error. If he has

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, "The Song of Three Synods: Detroit, 1965," *Una Sancta* 22 (no. 3): 33.

been nurtured by the fragment long enough and if it is valued by those he knows and loves, he will not discard it in cavalier fashion. But discard it he must.²

Strikingly, however, in little more than a decade, the LCMS would experience tension, controversy, and, ultimately, schism. Neuhaus himself left the LCMS, eventually making his way from the Lutheran tradition into Roman Catholicism. "Old Missouri" had not, in fact, died. It was back and back to stay—at least in some peoples' minds.

How did this happen? Already in the late 1950s—and certainly by the early 1960s—formal organizations that self-consciously saw themselves as "conservative" over against the "liberal" or "moderate" direction of the "new Missouri" coalesced into what some have seen as a well-organized, powerful, and very effective "conservative movement." The most evident success of this movement was getting J.A.O. Preus elected to the presidency of the LCMS in 1969. With key figures like Cameron MacKenzie Sr. (at least initially), Waldo Werning, Herman Otten, Karl Barth, and Ralph Bohlmann, along with laymen Fred Rutz, Chet Swanson, Larry Marquardt, and Glen Peglau, this movement succeeded in redefining the terms of the debate—at least in some peoples' minds.³

An historical problem, however, exists. What seemed a unified conservative juggernaut in 1969 was by 1977 deeply fragmented, with some conservatives seeking to replace their party's leader. What happened? James Burkee has suggested that the conservative coalition was just that: a disparate grouping of individuals—most of them clergy—some of whom were more concerned with a generic conservative platform that featured such planks as anti-communism and anti-civil rights as much as anything theological, to others who were consumed largely by theological issues. When the common enemy had been displaced, says Burkee, the movement lacked sufficient ideological commonality to hold it together. To put it another way, politics held the conservatives together when they were on the "outs," but once they were "in," differing commitments led to the collapse of the movement.⁴

This interpretation does reflect the realities, at least to a certain degree. In a piece written in 1975, layman Chet Swanson described the vagaries of

² Neuhaus, "Song of Three Synods," 33.

³ For one interpretation of the early conservative movement by a participant, see Waldo J. Werning, *Making the Missouri Synod Functional Again* (Fort Wayne: Biblical Renewal, 1992).

⁴ James Burkee, *Pastors and Politics: The Conservative Movement in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1956-1981*, Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2003.

conservatism as a movement and showed its sometimes complementary and sometimes competitive branches. His bottom line was that it is impossible to get conservatives to agree completely on every theological and political point. As a result, getting them to work in concert is consistently difficult. The best one can do, he concluded, is seek to get them to respect the eleventh commandment—thou shalt not speak evilly of a fellow conservative.⁵

Mary Todd suggests that the struggles in the LCMS in general and among conservatives in particular lie in J.A.O. Preus's removal of only four of eight district presidents in April 1976. She states: "had the purge been complete, the story of political division in Missouri should be history."⁶ Jack Preus's failure to remove all eight district presidents in 1976, when he had the authority and opportunity, produced far-reaching results in and for the Missouri Synod. For one thing, it defused a situation where entire districts—or at least the congregations of those districts—might have left the synod. Preus's limited action, as it were, tempered the effectiveness of the rhetoric that portrayed Preus as a power-seeking despot—at least in the minds of some. Preus's failure to use the full power that the LCMS had granted him in Convention (1975) helped avoid a more profound schism. The question was whether that was a good or a bad thing.

John Tietjen thought it was a bad thing.⁷ In *Memoirs in Exile* he states:

The number of congregations that helped form the synods of the AELC [Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches] or that joined it later was considerably less than the leaders of the Coordinating Council had anticipated. It had been expected that twelve hundred Missouri Synod

⁵ C.A. Swanson, "Present Situation in the LCMS regarding Conservative Groups," November 29, 1975 (paper in personal possession of the author): "The answer is to communicate with each other and respect each other. Keep our minds and hearts in the common cause. And, in those rare instances where disagreements among conservatives are unavoidable, let us learn to disagree agreeably." See also C.A. Swanson to the Rev. Robert Nordlie, January 27, 1976, CTS Archives, and Burkee, *Pastors and Politics*, 226.

⁶ Mary Todd, "The Curious Case of the Missouri Synod," in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard Cimino (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 34. J.A.O. Preus had removed four district presidents from their positions on April 2, 1976. The reason for the removals was that these district presidents were approving men for ordination who had not been certified by a recognized LCMS seminary faculty.

⁷ Elsewhere I have written on Tietjen's assessment of the matter. Lawrence R. Rast Jr., "Challenges to Inerrancy Today," in *Divine Multi-Media: The Manifold Means of Grace in the Life of the Church*, ed. John A. Maxfield, Luther Academy Lecture Series no. 11 (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2005), 17–35.

congregations would join the new church, but only 250 did so. Even the English Synod, the largest of the AELC synods, received only a little more than half the congregations that could legitimately have been expected to leave the English District, judging from the actions of its convention delegates.⁸

Tietjen offered six reasons for the failure of congregations to leave the LCMS for the AELC.⁹ First, pastors who had not sufficiently prepared their congregations for the potential move were unable to bring their congregations with them. Second, leaders in congregations were unsuccessful in obtaining the two-thirds majorities needed to move congregations into a new synodical affiliation, forcing these individuals to make their way into the AELC apart from their congregations. Third, "vocational and security concerns caused previously outspoken pastors to be silent when the time for decision arrived." Fourth, some pastors and congregations decided to "stay and fight." Fifth, some pastors avoided the conflict that pressing such a move would have entailed out of respect for the congregation's mission. Sixth, some "decided that institutional affiliation was not important." Tietjen's rather dispassionate assessment of the situation is rather striking given his fervent commitment to Seminech and his conviction that the LCMS was dead.¹⁰ Eventually in the memoirs his objectivity gave way to an impassioned critique of those who did not leave Missouri. He states: "I am convinced that 40 percent of those in the Missouri Synod compromised their integrity rather than pay the price of following through on the principles to which they were committed."¹¹

A congruency between Todd's claim and Tietjen's reflections exists, and I think both have much to recommend them. But more is necessary to get the whole picture. Jack Preus's removal of four district presidents on April 2, 1976, was interpreted in at least three ways and, of course, these three interpretations also reveal a spectrum of application. First, there were those who were incensed by what they believed was an exercise of brute force and power at the expense of people who were acting courageously

⁸ John H. Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1990), 269.

⁹ Tietjen, *Memoirs*, 269. The short quotations in these six reasons that follow are from Tietjen.

¹⁰ John H. Tietjen, "The Pangs of Death," text of Sermon at ELIM Assembly Eucharist, August 26, 1974, O'Hare Inn, Des Plaines, Illinois, 6: "Shall we stand in God's way by trying to hold on to the past? Shall we interfere with God's work by seeking to preserve the institutions and organizations he has already consigned to destruction? . . . The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is dead. Let the dead bury their own dead."

¹¹ Tietjen, *Memoirs*, 283.

and appropriately, both morally and theologically. Many of these people left to help form the AELC, though some stayed. Second, some thought President Preus was simply carrying out his duties in an appropriate fashion—lopping off the real “troublemakers,” if you will, while allowing for others who were willing to “play ball” to clean up their act. He was just doing his job. Finally, a third interpretation held that Preus had failed to carry out his responsibilities as directed by the synod. This group saw this *not* as a first failure on Preus’s part, but as the last straw in a series of leadership failures that could no longer be excused as understandable faux pas, but rather were part of the Preus fabric, a demonstrable pattern of lying and duplicity that had to be ended through the election of a new, truly conservative president of the LCMS. Chet Swanson was one who held this opinion; Herman Otten was another.¹² But there were plenty more, as the following letter establishes (though written a few years later).

Prior to your election in 1969 as our LCMS President, at a mass gathering of California Lutherans, in the sacristy of St. Paul’s Church, you signed a document solemnly signed by 1000 troubled ministers of the Missouri Synod, stating that “for conscience and doctrinal reasons” the proposed fellowship resolution with the ALC must be rejected. Two weeks later you told the Denver Convention, if elected president, you could live with the ALC proposal.

Since that time you have tried to silence *Christian News*, *Affirm*, and the united conservative voice who prayed and worked for your election. You betrayed us and you continue to turn against your best conservative friends in the Missouri Synod. I’m stating true facts, Mr. President. Our *Lutheran Witness* is liberally slanted and managed. Many of our outspoken liberal pastors and district presidents are throwing their weight around with their evolution theories and practicing altar and pulpit fellowship with churches not in doctrinal agreement with us—and you are doing nothing about it!

The sooner you resign the better. At the Devil’s Elbow our founding fathers gave their deceitful leader, Rev. Martin Stephan, a free one way boat ride and to replace him God gave them Dr. C.F.W. Walther to chart our ship, the LCMS. We need a new leader like Dr. Walther.¹³

¹² See the series of articles that appeared in the late winter and spring of 1977 (e.g., February 5, 1977) in *Christian News* challenging President Preus and ultimately arguing for new leadership among the conservatives. See “A Clear Choice for Conservatives: Maier or Preus?” and “Four More Years of Duplicity?” both in *Christian News* (July 4, 1977).

¹³ Norman P. Gutschmidt to J.A.O. Preus, September 5, 1980 (underlining original). CTS Archives.

II. Will the Real Jack Preus Stand Up!

Who is this man, vilified by right and left, conservative and liberal? What was he like? Was he a theologian or a churchman or both? First, a brief biography is in order, and then we will return to some of these other questions in order to try and get a partial picture of our subject.

Jacob Aall Ottesen Preus Jr. (January 8, 1920–August 13, 1994) came from a long line of Lutheran preachers, though his father, “Jake” (Jacob Aall Ottesen Preus [August 28, 1883–May 24, 1961]) was a well-known Republican politician in Minnesota. The elder Preus served as the state auditor (1915–1921), then as the governor (1921–1925), after which he moved to Chicago and helped form Lutheran Brotherhood, now part of Thrivent. Viewed as politically savvy, Jake Preus played a formative role in the lives of his two sons, particularly Jack, if Adams’s *Preus of Missouri* is to be believed.¹⁴

Jack himself attended Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, graduating in 1941, and there met his future wife, Delpha Mae Hollecue. He then entered Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, from which he graduated in 1945. His experience, however, was not a positive one, and he chose to seek ordination in the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (familiarily known as the “Little Norwegian Synod,” which took the name Evangelical Lutheran Synod [ELS] in 1957). He served congregations in Minnesota, as well as serving on the staff at Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota.

Preus quickly distinguished himself in the Norwegian Synod, offering one of the two primary doctrinal essays at its meeting in 1948.¹⁵ “What Stands Between” is a scathing denunciation of false doctrine and “loose practice” in the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC).¹⁶ In a fast-paced, direct manner, Preus condemned the ELC’s positions on the Madison Settlement (or Agreement), conversion, the will, original sin, predestination, justification, objective justification more specifically, conversion after death, Hades, millennialism, antichrist, creation, and Scripture. On each point, the ELC is found lacking. Worse, however, is that

¹⁴ James E. Adams, *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

¹⁵ *Report of the Thirty-First Regular Convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, Minnesota (June 6–10, 1948), 31–56.

¹⁶ The Norwegian Lutheran Church of America was formed in 1917 as a merger of the Hauge Synod, the United Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, and Norwegian Synod. It took the name the Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1946.

false doctrine has found its way into that church's life. "Loose practice" in respect to the lodge, deistic societies (including the Boy Scouts), women in the church (particularly voting), church and state, and a pervasive spirit of unionism all make the ELC a less-than-truly Lutheran body. To prove his point, Preus pointed to the official pronouncements of the church body, and, more importantly, what he had learned at Luther Seminary as a student. The presence of false doctrine in the faculty and classrooms of Luther Seminary produced assured results in the life of the church—false doctrine and false practice.

Though still in his mid-twenties when he delivered this essay, Preus's intellectual gifts were obvious. Indeed, by 1951 he had earned a doctorate in Classics at the University of Minnesota. Gifted in other ways, he quickly emerged as a leader in the Norwegian Synod. So it is not at all surprising that when, in 1955, a proposal for a "suspension" of fellowship with the LCMS was presented and adopted by the ELS, Preus, along with his brother Robert, were instrumental in leading the ELS to this action.¹⁷ The LCMS, the ELS's longtime partner in the Synodical Conference, was considered to have fallen into some of the same errors as the ELC.

And so, it was with some incredulity that Missourians saw the Preus brothers come into the LCMS shortly thereafter. Robert was called to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1957 to teach systematic theology. Jack received a call to teach Greek and New Testament at Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, in 1958.

Why this move? Leigh Jordahl, in his obituary of Jack in *Logia*, traces it to Robert being passed over for a teaching position at Bethany. This was tantamount to "repudiation" and may have triggered the twin moves.¹⁸ Pastor Rudolph Nordein, believing that Jack's talents were "withering on the vine" at Bethany, wrote to President Walter Baepler of Springfield in late 1957 stating that he "would like to see [Jack] get into our Synod as a seminary professor."¹⁹ Things moved quickly. Baepler invited Preus to

¹⁷ See also the *Report of the ELS for the year 1955*, pages 41–46.

¹⁸ Leigh Jordahl, "J.A.O. Preus," *Logia* 5 (Eastertide 1996): 48. For my part, I can say this: one of the things largely missing from the archival materials I read in preparing this paper was the personal side of Jack Preus. He seems to have kept that part of his life pretty well isolated from his professional life. However, the video "Warrior of God—Man of Peace" offers several small windows into his "ordinary" life.

¹⁹ Rudolph Nordein to Walter Baepler, November 8, 1957, CTS Archives. Baepler indicates that he had made personal contact with Preus already in the fall of 1957 and that Preus had visited Baepler around Christmas of the same year. Walter Baepler to J.A.O. Preus, March 1, 1958, CTS Archives.

visit Springfield, which Jack did on March 14–15, 1958. The visit went well; Baepler requested prior approval from the President of Synod and Board for Higher Education on March 17; approval was granted March 21 and 25, respectively; a contract was offered on March 26, and Jack returned it with his acceptance on April 21, 1958. His appointment formally commenced on July 1, 1958.²⁰

One of the things that made Jack an attractive candidate for a professorship at Springfield in 1958 (and Robert for one at St. Louis in 1957) was the need for faculty with terminal degrees. Jack's Ph.D. in Classics was unique among the Springfield faculty in the late 50s. However, Baepler had been working diligently to move Springfield away from its historic position as the "practical seminary" for what were mischaracterized as less capable students. Accreditation was a desired goal (reached in 1968), and for that to become a reality called for credentialed faculty. It also required a more robust curriculum that made greater demands of its students, particularly in the biblical languages, especially Greek. It seemed like a match made in heaven.

III. Seminary President Preus

Perhaps it was, in a way, for Jack Preus. He and his family seem to have thrived in Springfield. Jack and Delpha had seven daughters (Patricia, Delpha, Carolin, Sarah, Idella, Mary, and Margaret), and a son (Jacob). Jack quickly became a favorite teacher for his open, frank, and earthy style. Jack Preus told it like it is—and the students loved it. But he also began to emerge as a leader in this setting as well. George Beto succeeded Baepler as president in 1959, but soon moved on to lead the Texas penal system.²¹ Preus was named the acting president in the winter of 1962 and later that same year he was chosen as Springfield's tenth president.

²⁰ J.A.O. Preus to Walter Baepler, March 4, 1958; Walter Baepler to J.A.O. Preus, March 6, 1958; Walter A. Baepler to John W. Behnken, March 17, 1958; Hugo G. Kleiner to Walter A. Baepler, March 21, 1958; John W. Behnken to Walter Baepler, March 25, 1958; "Contract and Agreement," March 26, 1958; J.A.O. Preus to Walter Baepler, April 21, 1958; all in CTS Archives. In his letter to Baepler, Behnken writes: "Herewith I want to inform you that the appointment meets with my approval. I have seen him work with the Committee on Doctrinal Unity and I believe that he is by no means a man who would cause you difficulty. If anything, he will be of value to you in preserving, under God's guidance, soundness of doctrine."

²¹ David M. Horton and George R. Nielsen, *Walking George: The Life of George John Beto and the Rise of the Modern Texas Prison System* (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2005).

Over the course the 1960s, Jack Preus's star continued to rise. He slowly surfaced as one of the leading lights in the emerging conservative movement. Springfield was increasingly seen as the "conservative" seminary, particularly once the contracts of Richard Jungkuntz and Curtis Huber were not renewed.²² More popularly, Preus's name became more familiar through the publication of articles on missions and general church life in forums like the *Lutheran Witness* and the *Lutheran Layman*, as well as AAL's *Bond*, which featured the "energetic" Jack Preus on its cover in the mid 60s.

As a result, Preus entered into correspondence with a variety of people in the LCMS. Hot letters passed between Preus and leading conservative Carl Hoffmeyer over the presence of Jungkuntz and Huber on the faculty. Much of the mail was more restrained. Writing to a regular correspondent, Ralph Lohrengel, Preus tried to allay fears of a split in the LCMS: "I do not even like to think about a split in our church," he wrote; "I feel that 95% of the clergy and laity of our church are soundly Lutheran, and if there is to be any split the liberals should be the ones to blame and to be put out."²³

IV. Synodical President Preus

In 1969, Preus was elected president of the Missouri Synod, ousting incumbent Oliver Harms.²⁴ The welcome home to Springfield was pure celebration. Many thought that conservatism was surely back as the ideology of choice for the LCMS. But more battles lay ahead. Events, familiar I think to most of us, quickly led to a confrontation. In 1973-74, a battle over teachings at the Missouri Synod's flagship seminary, Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, resulted in the suspension of the president of Concordia Seminary, John Tietjen, and a walkout of seminary professors and students to form a seminary, commonly referred to as Seminex.

However, already shortly after Preus's election to the synodical presidency, several of his actions drew fire from critics across the

²² Richard John Neuhaus, "More on the Travail of Missouri," *Una Sancta* 27 (January 1970): 16: "Richard Jungkuntz and Curtis Huber were two of the bright lights that President George Beto had acquired to give a modicum of academic respectability to the glorified Bible Institute at Springfield."

²³ J.A.O. Preus to Ralph Lohrengel, December 12, 1966. CTS Archives.

²⁴ Robert D. Preus, "After Denver, What? Four Predictions," *The Lutheran Layman* (June 1969): 11; Carl Lawrenz, "Some Significant Positions and Decisions at the Denver Convention of the LCMS" (1969), <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/LawrenzDenver.pdf>; W.M. Oesch, "Analysis of the Present Situation of Confessional Lutheranism in America and the World," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 10 Special Edition (Winter 1969-70): 35.

spectrum. In November 1969, following the dismissal of Richard Jungkuntz from his position as executive director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Missouri United Free Evangelical* first appeared. In it, editor Richard Koenig wrote:

Preus's policies make it necessary for us, however reluctantly, to concern ourselves once again with the issues of evangelical freedom and the mission of the Church in our Synod. Missouri's line of development, carefully marked by decisions of the Synod at conventions over the past quarter of a century and implemented by responsible leaders, hard-working pastors and laymen, is in jeopardy. In the interest of the Missouri Synod of the fellowship resolution and mission affirmations and many other progressive measures we appeal for your prayers, support, and help. Your immediate response is earnestly solicited (p. 1).

While it is painful to have to undertake a movement of the sort these letters will espouse, it has ever been thus in the Church. Legalism is always the dark shadow of the Gospel, and legalism has always been the foe within the Missouri Synod. What we are engaged in, therefore, is not "synodical politics" but a question of fundamental importance to the church. But since it is a question of the Gospel, we are sure of the outcome. Churches and individuals can forget or obscure the Gospel and its power for a while, but they constantly re-assert themselves. We have to bring our brothers to the point where they along with us experience anew the liberating force of the message which creates, preserves, and builds the church of Jesus Christ (p. 3).²⁵

Unhappy as the "moderates" were, the "conservatives" were at least as enraged, due to Preus's support of a resolution in the LCMS Council of Presidents that condemned Herman Otten and his *Christian News*.²⁶ Some folks began to ask, will the real Jack Preus please stand up? Or, as William Wincke put it, "The Rev. J.A.O. Preus . . . appears to be the Richard Nixon of the theological world. No one is sure where he stands on the liberal-conservative issues that divide the 2-million-member denomination."²⁷

²⁵ November 3, 1969: First number of MUFE published. Later it was revised and resent on November 18, 1969.

²⁶ Statement of the Council of Presidents, October 3, 1969.

²⁷ November 29, 1969. He continued: "Liberals fear that Dr. Preus is attempting to negate the liberal steps taken by the denomination in recent years. But conservatives are not convinced that their president can be relied upon to protect their church against the encroachment of doctrinal dilution by the American Lutheran Church and biblical experts who question the denomination's literalistic position on the scriptures." Cited in MUFE #2 12-16, 1969.

V. Garbage In, Garbage Out

Trying to summarize the events of 1969 to February 19, 1974, briefly is challenging. To put it rather crassly, it might be said that two (at least) contending understandings of Lutheranism joined in battle. Among the leaders of the more progressive group was John Tietjen, president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Among the leaders of the more conservative party were the Preus brothers, Jacob and Robert, along with Ralph Bohlmann of the systematics department at the St. Louis Seminary. As the issue moved toward a confrontation, Tietjen claimed that President Preus's vision was fundamentally flawed and that his Fact Finding Committee's report compromised the gospel. He wrote: "A theology whose basic thrust is unLutheran underlies the Report of the president's Committee and served as the yardstick for measuring the confessional position of the faculty, resulting in a basic distortion and misrepresentation of faculty views."²⁸ The Preuses' vision of Lutheranism was one informed by their reading of the Great Tradition of Lutheranism particularly as laid out in Lutheran orthodoxy. The switches had been thrown, and the trains were heading right at one another.

The details leading up to the walkout will not be rehearsed here. Suffice it to say, after the events of the first half of 1974, John Tietjen thought there was no going back.

We are free to find new forms and methods to bring God's Gospel to the world. God has set us free from the law, including any system of rules, no matter how serviceable it may have been, which seeks to muzzle the free proclamation of the grace of God. . . . Shall we stand in God's way by trying to hold on to the past? Shall we interfere with God's work by seeking to preserve the institutions and organizations he has already consigned to destruction? . . . The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is dead. Let the dead bury their own dead. The organization that has given us life and nurtured us is no more. Its structures are hopelessly corrupt. Its leadership is morally bankrupt. Let the dead bury their own dead.²⁹

Shortly before Tietjen delivered his remarks, Robert D. Preus was elected president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois. In little more than a year, the LCMS in convention closed Concordia Senior College and moved Concordia Theological Seminary from Springfield, Illinois, to Fort Wayne, Indiana. With that election and move, what was already a vibrant and dynamic enterprise took on an even more vital role

²⁸ Tietjen, *Fact Finding or Fault Finding? An Analysis of President J.A.O. Preus' Investigation of Concordia Seminary* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1972), 34.

²⁹ John H. Tietjen, "The Pangs of Death," 6-7.

in the life of the LCMS. What one of my colleagues has called the “days of dead orthodoxy” were about to begin and the Missouri Synod would never be the same. But what emerged was, frankly, not “old Missouri,” and part of the reason for that lay in the work of Jack and Robert Preus.

Not everyone was optimistic, however. Tietjen looked at the LCMS and saw a corpse. Others in the conservative camp were beginning to think that Jack Preus himself might be the problem.

VI. Schism(s)

1975 and 1976 each provided a crucial event in the ultimate departure of pastors and congregations from the Missouri Synod to form the AELC. 1975's Anaheim Convention, among other things, voted to close Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne and to transfer the Springfield seminary to the Senior College campus. Beyond this, delegates agreed that district presidents may not ordain candidates without the formal certification of one of the two official seminaries of the LCMS. Further, the convention granted the synodical president the authority to declare vacant the office of any district president who should ordain a non-certified candidate.

Commenting on the situation, *Time* magazine stated:

Even if Preus declares the eight posts vacant, at least seven of the presidents are expected to be defiantly re-elected by their districts. Whether the confrontation will compel the moderates actually to break with the official church—or how such a rupture would come about—remains to be seen. Evangelical Lutherans in Mission, an organization of moderates that the convention declared “schismatic,” will meet next month to discuss what to do.³⁰

The article further stated, “If a split does occur, it is uncertain how many would leave the Missouri Synod. Tietjen predicts that more than 1,500 congregations will depart. Others put the figure much lower, at a maximum of 500 congregations encompassing some 250,000 members.”³¹

Preus did remove four of the eight district presidents. As noted earlier, however, his reticence in removing all eight—even after the eight had made it clear that they intended to stand together—created distress not only among the “moderates,” but also among the “conservatives.” This proved to be too much for some conservatives, and efforts began to find a replacement for Preus. By way of one example is the following:

³⁰ “Preus’ Purge,” *Time*, Monday, July 21, 1975, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,913312,00.html>.

³¹ “Preus’ Purge,” *Time*, July 21, 1975.

Since published reports would, no doubt, generate a lot of untimely publicity which would not enhance your chances of reelection, I therefore strongly urge you to open your books for inspection and answer my questions before this occurs. It seems to me that both you and your attorney are very shortsighted as there is no way you can escape answering questions regarding Synod's financial operations which has produced such tragic results.³²

Despite the grumbling, Preus was returned to office in 1977. There was now, however, a clear division in the conservative ranks bordering on schism. As the 1981 nomination cycle was about to begin, Preus surprised many and came out with a letter indicating his unwillingness to allow his name to stand for another term.

In his retirement, Jack worked on fundraising for a new chapel on the St. Louis campus. He also completed a biography of Chemnitz that proved to be popular. Further, he remained involved in certain theological disputes and continued to appear at synodical conventions. He was named President Emeritus of the Missouri Synod in 1992.

Jacob A.O. Preus died on August 13, 1994, and is buried in Concordia Cemetery in St. Louis. Though his death occurred more than a decade and a half ago, he remains a controversial figure in the history of American Lutheranism generally and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod specifically.

VII. Conclusion: Coming to Grips with an Old Problem

The question still remains unanswered: Was Jack Preus a theologian, a churchman, or both? Perhaps you have formed an opinion by now—or perhaps the opinion you had previously has remained intact. My answer is simple: I would say both—and more. Preus's role in the controversies of the 60s and 70s will always offer the temptation to take the path of least resistance. Perhaps some of you have heard that simple interpretation: Jack was the politician and Robert was the theologian. I just think that is too easy a way out.

When Robert and Jack Preus came to the Missouri Synod, they brought with them a new way of doing things. Ironically enough, those opportunities would likely not have been open to them had it not been for the openness to new theological perspectives at St. Louis especially, though also at Springfield. In other words, Robert and Jack brought a fresh

³² Fred C. Rutz to J.A.O. Preus, February 24, 1977. CTS Archives.

look at Lutheran orthodoxy to Missourians through their teaching, writing, and translating.

Lutheran orthodoxy had been largely defined in terms of Pieper's dogmatics at both seminaries by this time. It is worth noting, however, that Pieper was translated initially in the edited form of J.T. Mueller's dogmatics. Up to the seventy-fifth anniversary of the LCMS, the most consistently used dogmatics textbook at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, was Walther's edition of Baier's *Compendium*.³³ Whatever limitations that text may have had—and I happen to like it—it did still place one into conversation with at least a portion of the Great Tradition. When Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* appeared, however, the focus seems to have shifted. Granted, Pieper's work is nothing short of remarkable—the production of a dogmatics makes extraordinary demands on its author(s); just ask those working on the Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics or Concordia Publishing House's Bohlmann/Nafzger dogmatics—some 20 years later! So my purpose is not to denigrate Pieper, but simply to make this point. Where Walther's edition of Baier was connected to the historic Lutheran chorus through the voices that sounded from the pages themselves, Pieper's dogmatics was a solo. And by becoming the “standard” text, his dogmatics in some ways closed the LCMS's theological system. Add to that the very real limitations of the Mueller edition, and the system could—perhaps did—become self-referencing.

Enter the new thinking at St. Louis and the broader familiarity with Lutheran orthodoxy of the Preus brothers. Two new ways of viewing the Lutheran world—at least. Robert read and summarized the thought of the Lutheran Orthodox fathers in his wonderful *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*.³⁴ Jack translated Chemnitz's *The Two Natures in Christ*, along with other key texts, and helped ensure that others would be translated.³⁵ Think of the other texts that we now take for granted that have appeared in English translation since 1957: Chemnitz's *Examination of the Council of*

³³ Johann Wilhelm Baier and C.F.W. Walther, *Compendium theologiae positivae: adjectis notis amplioribus, quibus doctrina orthodoxa ad ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑΝ academicam explicatur atque ex Scriptura S. eique innixis rationibus theologicis confirmatur* (Grand Rapids: Emmanuel Press, 2006).

³⁴ Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), and Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism 2, God and His Creation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972).

³⁵ Martin Chemnitz and J.A.O. Preus, *The Two Natures in Christ* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971). For example, Jack was key in getting the word out about Chemnitz's wonderful *Enchiridion: Ministry, Word, and Sacraments*.

Trent and *The Lord's Supper*, to name only two. The Gerhard project now underway and the expansion of the American Edition of Luther's Works are two more recent examples.³⁶ These texts are forcing us to reengage the Lutheran portion of the Great Tradition and will continue to do so.

What systematic theology does—indeed, what it is supposed to do—is weave a web of perfect symmetry. Robert did this with his *Post-Reformation Lutheranism* and Jack supported it with his translations. Their contributions were rightfully formative for a generation of pastors. But beneath their snapshot of orthodoxy are churning historical realities. Lutheranism was a mess and in danger always of falling apart during the original days of dead orthodoxy. Orthodox theologians did things inconsistent with the true faith. For my part, I am suspicious of Abraham Calov—he was too influenced by Pietism for my comfort. But you would never know that from Robert Preus's *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*; Calov was simply one of the "orthodox" voices in the choir. As such, the Preuses' approach to Lutheran Orthodoxy was something like that of Perry Miller, the great historian of Puritanism in the colonial period of America. Miller simply identified a "New England Mind." In *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* he did not even bother to cite his sources, so convinced was he of the fundamental philosophical agreement among the New England Puritans.³⁷ For Jack and Robert Preus "Orthodox Lutheranism" was a life of the mind, a symmetrical system—the "web of doctrine" of which these two brilliantly, passionately, and persuasively spoke.

The fact is, however, that even the best web has its asymmetries. And here I cannot speak to Jack, but I can to Robert. He was a fine historian and knew that no system was ever perfectly applied. He convinced me of the perfect ideal, but he also taught me how to live with the historical realities. And so, even the most perfect web must have its asymmetries if the web is going to work. The spider cannot connect all the pieces and parts of the web without having to bend the perfect frame somewhat to the circumstances in which it is being built. But even as it does so, it constructs a piece of functional beauty.

We human beings tend to see beauty and truth in symmetry. Life, however, is not always like that. While in South Africa during February 2008, I went on a game walk with some African guides. As we walked through the fog, I nearly walked into a massive spider web in which a bird

³⁶ Martin Chemnitz, Fred Kramer, Luther Poellot, J.A.O. Preus, and Georg Williams, *Chemnitz's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008).

³⁷ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983).

had been snared, wrapped, and sucked dry. It scared me to death! It had to be the ugliest, messiest, nastiest web that I have ever seen. But that ugly mess of a web got the job done. Being able to see that in the life of the church shows real historical perspective.

For a man whose experience was as varied as J.A.O. Preus's, one should not expect one descriptor to capture the entire man. The web of each of our lives is far messier than that. Still, as God's people, God accomplishes his will through inconsistent people like you and me—and J.A.O. Preus. And with that in mind, perhaps the more perspectival assessment offered by Leigh Jordahl offers us the best conclusion.

Almost always jovial, always quick to form judgments, infatuated with watching people and sizing them up, impetuous, and given to generalizations expressed in sometimes wild hyperbole, he was restless, and, for someone so amazingly bright, too much on the move to become, as his younger brother did, a theologian in depth. And, as is well known, he hated face-to-face confrontation. It was a flaw in his character that . . . he tended to improvise and imply pacification when issues at hand should have been openly addressed and thrashed out. For that he sometimes was accused of being double-tongued. (I don't want to put too fine a point on that, since I wonder who could have done better at the tasks that confronted Preus when he came to leadership in the terribly divided Missouri of 1969.) Neither can I imagine him plugging along year after year in a pastorate where nothing exciting was apt to happen, as, for instance, the *Faith-Life* editor did for forty years in a non-growing country parish. Not that Jack sought or received much glory, but he was once lightheartedly described as a man who ate Mexican jumping beans for breakfast.³⁸

³⁸ Jordahl, "J.A.O. Preus," 45.