

Commemoration Sermon for Dr. Robert D. Preus

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Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended (Dt 34:8).

TWO THINGS WERE REMARKABLE about the funeral orations for Dr. Preus. He was the greatest Lutheran theologian of our time. He also happened to be a sinner—hardly startling information. For a reminder, the Monday edition of the most carefully read newspaper in the Missouri Synod put that fact in headlines six times. “Who’s the best” and “who’s the worst” at anything, including doing theology or sinning, is an open question, but Robert Preus himself spoke in superlatives.

Four days before he died, Dr. Preus introduced Pastor Gottfried Martens at the Sasse Symposium. He mentioned that Martens’s idea for a doctoral dissertation came from his elective on justification. Justification and inspiration were what Preus was all about. He introduced his sermons like this: “The text is taken from the second chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians, which the Holy Ghost caused to be recorded by inspiration.” It was like the first course in dogmatics, but better. Then he would recite a hymn which had to do with faith, fear of sin, the inevitability of death, and salvation in Christ. He was the ablest of dogmatists, but he never preached doctrinal essays. That was not his style. He preached Jesus Christ.

Preus’s introductions were full of hyperboles. Fort Wayne had the best students, faculty and campus. Some squirmed with feigned modesty. The 1980s have already become legendary as the best of times. Ask the students. History may in these next years again prove his exaggerations right. Preus encouraged when we were depressed.

Exile from his own church and seminary brought on a depression of his soul that only a few experience and from which nearly all flee. Some still shout, “If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over.” Let these voices be forever silent. Abandonment by friends and desertion by brothers, by those whom you love, is God’s ultimate approval, though it does not seem that way at the time. “A man’s enemies are those of his own household.” Luther called it *Anfechtungen*, God’s masks. In the Psalms it’s *eli eli lama sabachthani*. For Jesus it was: “So persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” Divine affliction perfects the saint. Robert Preus in his last years was perfected

with a divine vengeance. He bore those marks in his body and soul. Friend and foe watched him age.

Preus’s introduction of Dr. Martens was full of his customary compliments. In his Erlangen University dissertation Martens showed that the Lutheran World Federation was not able to define the chief doctrine of faith. Justification is not an existential experience, something within the believer, but it happens in Christ and gives faith its certainty. Paul said Christ is our justification. Preus was about to say Martens had been his best student. He caught himself in mid-sentence. With so many other students present, he couldn’t do it. A father cannot say he loves one child more than another. His students were his sons. If the last seven years had been kinder to him, as many prayed, and had he lived another decade, as he had planned, the thousands of students who counted him as their father would have increased. A veritable Abraham. Put Preus in the commons after chapel and it was jammed. Put Preus in the Lone Star State in a hot August and the pastors gave up their vacations. “Where the body is, there the eagles gather,” and they gathered and kept gathering and they are gathering in this place today. Like a Lutheran John Wesley, he had more students outside locked classrooms than we had inside. If the doors of one pulpit were shut, a world opened to him. Students are here today because of him and they will still come.

On the night before Preus died, an emeritus colleague said we had to let the past go. The next morning the past actually refused to go away. He was on the phone with Bill Weinrich with plans for his place at the seminary. The hands of the clock were being turned back, so it seemed. Twice banished like Jacob, he was returning from Egypt to join Israel in her march. In hours God rendered nostalgia useless. From Nebo he saw the future of a seminary which reflected who he was, but to which God did not permit him to return. “So Moses the servant of the Lord died in the land of Moab.” An era in the synod had ended. The bell had tolled on his generation. Preus more than anyone else set the tone of the age and determined its character. The top half of the hour glass had discharged its sands. The silver cord was snapped. The golden bowl was broken. The dust returned to the earth. And we watched.

Some said it was only his charisma. They were right. His person, piety, theology, call, and ministry were his charisma from God. If the seminary students are now discouraged from hammering out theological differences, Preus talked theology all the time—as much with his family as with his students. Since he was what he believed, he could no more let his call be taken from him than he could let the charge of false doctrine against him stand, especially a charge that it was wrong to hold that Christ permeates theology in all its parts. Unanswered false doctrine would let

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lies masquerade as God's truth. He fought. He was vindicated. He paid a price. We are paying that price without him.

My classmates are agreed to a man that dogmatics in the mid-1950s was a completely undistinguished enterprise. That's a polite way of saying it was dull. You read the book. The highlight of the day was a poorly worded quiz. When Preus came to St. Louis in 1957, the change was radical. He had the intellectual capacity to recognize where the church was going and the conviction and courage to do something about it. And he did. Around him gathered a generation of students who caught the contagion of his convictions. From this confessional revival we were born. When students are talking theology outside the classrooms, you know the enterprise is alive. Authoritarianism kills theology. Now his students are found in the pulpits and classrooms everywhere. They are still doing theology at this symposium, which was his brainchild. Luther disputed the church councils. Preus questioned a synod's direction. Lutherans cannot surrender that right. Edicts, decrees, resolutions, opinions, and policies cannot take the place of theology. Church councils can and do err and will. That's Luther.

Unattended on the desk rests the pen of the scholar of classical Lutheranism. The popular young dogmatics teacher of the 1950s and 1960s is gone. Death has removed the lonely champion of the St. Louis seminary of the early 1970s. Where would St. Louis, St. Catharines, and Fort Wayne be without him? But life denied him the honors which men with safely concealed courage and fractional intellectual ability continue to receive in abundance. If no seminary honored him with *doctor divinitatis honoris causa*, a grateful church may recognize him as *doctor ecclesiae*. He was a teacher of our church in a sense that only a few men in our 150 years are. He encapsulated a theological generation within himself. He has departed. Honors given in death can never compensate for the recognition life was embarrassed to give.

Robert Preus fought his first battle for the Bible: "us conservatives versus those moderates." Issues were clear, or at least clearer than they are now. We are in another conflict whose first battle was Preus's last. When he was tried for the alleged christological heresy, he responded at his trial with the hymn: "Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus / Can my heartfelt longing still." St. Paul had a similar problem: to live was Christ and to die was gain. Preus has gained. We must content ourselves with Christ alone. If the

demythologizing of the 1970s was a twentieth-century form of Rationalism, then a neo-evangelicalism of spiritual self-advancement, rapacious self-analysis, financial self-promotion, and emotional self-satisfaction is only another form of self-centered Pietism where Christ again is pushed to the side and our weak faith is put in the center.

"[Preus] 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." Not my words but his.

Our ensign is lowered, but God shall raise another Gideon for us around whom banners shall fly. On the bottom of Robert Preus's funeral folder was Revelation 14:13, "Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor.'" The last words of that verse were left out: "For their works follow them." For Robert Preus these words may have been the least important, but for us they are the most important. For the greatest work of faith is restoring the foundations, preserving the pure doctrine, and preaching the gospel. This he did!

Those who die in the Lord are absorbed into his wounds and are safely hidden under his altar on which he offers himself as an eternal sacrifice to God. As God's priests they are not silent, but they join Jesus, our High Priest, in praying to the eternal Father that he would deliver us from sin, death, and all evil. To their prayers for us we respond with our hymns so that only one song of praise rises in the power of the Holy Spirit from earth and heaven to the Father of all mercies and to him who washed us by his blood. In the poverty of sin, but in the conviction of faith, we salute that soldier who fought for the faith and won.

All hail mighty legions! You toiled in tears and pain.
Farewell! Sing salvation's glad refrain!
Swing high your palms. Lift up your voice.
Eternal praise belongs to God and the Lamb.

Farewell, dear friend, farewell. LOGIA