

The Legacy of Herman Amberg Preus

By Rolf David Preus

Herman Amberg Preus was my great-great-grandfather. His great-great-grandfather was from Eisfeldt, on the Werra River in Sachsen-Meiningen, Germany. Hans Preus had three sons, all of whom moved to Norway. His first son was named Abraham. Abraham begat Jacob. Jacob begat Paul. Paul begat Herman. Herman moved to America and begat Christian. Christian begat Jacob. Jacob begat Robert. Robert begat me, and, by God's fatherly providence the begetting of Preuses has continued. But I am not sure that this is the legacy envisioned by those who asked me to speak to you today on the topic: "The Legacy of Herman Amberg Preus." The true legacy of Herman Amberg Preus is that of a faithful Lutheran pastor.

Part One: The Preuses in Norway

Still, a bit a family history is in order.^[1] Herman's great-grandfather, Abraham (1691-1765) was born in Germany and settled in Kristiania (what is today called Oslo) where he served as Royal Commissioner of Weights and Measures. Abraham married Mette Christine Louise Liwyn. Their second son was named Jacob (1733-1805). Jacob, Herman's grandfather, served as a pastor in Haabel, east of the Oslo Fjord, not far from Denmark. When Jacob was 43 years old, he met a seventeen-year-old girl by the name of Anne Elizabeth Arctander. She was quite a young lady. Three days after Jacob met her, he proposed and three weeks later they were married. Anne wrote poetry and hymns, established a weaving industry in the parish, had ten children, and on one occasion saved her pastor husband from being dismissed from his office. Her husband Jacob had married a couple whose papers appeared to indicate that they had parental approval for the wedding. But they did not. They were eloping without their parents' permission. The bride's father was furious and he was an influential man. He went to the authorities in Kristiania and had Pastor Preus suspended from office. Anne Elizabeth was not going to take this lying down. She hired two men to row her across the Kattegat Straits to Denmark. This was before Norway had its own king. She went to Copenhagen where she secured the efforts of the Prime Minister to persuade the King to have her husband reinstated. What a wife!

Jacob Preus and his wife Anne became the parents of Paul Arctander Preus on July 27, 1779. Paul attended the Cathedral School in Kristiania. After

graduating from the University of Copenhagen, he accepted the position of headmaster at the Cathedral School in Kristiansand, in the southernmost part of Norway. Paul, like his father before him, married well. His wife was also named Anne – Anne Keyser – whose father was Johan Keyser, the Bishop of Kristiansand. Anne was the only child of Johan's first wife who died at the age of twenty-nine. It was to Paul and Anne Preus that Herman Amberg Preus was born on June 16, 1825 in Kristiansand. He was their fourth son and their sixth child.

Herman attended the Cathedral School in Kristiansand. He was firmly indoctrinated in the historic Lutheran teaching. From his earliest years he learned theology from men strongly opposed to the prevailing rationalism of the day. While one might argue that in the Norway of the nineteenth century even strong confessionalists were not entirely free from the influence of pietism,^[2] Herman gave evidence throughout his life of a clearly confessionally Lutheran approach to theology. After coming to America, Herman would become a great admirer of C. F. W. Walther as an outstanding Lutheran theologian. Herman, however, was spared much of the youthful turmoil that marked Walther's theological development. Walther alternately gave his devotion first to pietism and then to a radically anti-establishment confessional movement known as Stephanism. We see in Walther's early years a tumultuous struggle in the soul from which the great confessional Lutheran theologian would be born after coming to America. There is no such struggle evident in Herman Amberg Preus. From his early theological training as a boy in Kristiansand to his education at Royal Frederik's University in Kristiania, Herman was indoctrinated in the classical Lutheran orthodoxy to which he would be committed his entire life. At the University he became acquainted with the Jewish convert and great German confessional theologian, Carl Paul Caspari, and took classes as well from Gisle Johnson. Herman graduated from the University in 1848 and became a schoolteacher as he waited for the opportunity to serve as a pastor in America.

As I mentioned earlier, Herman's mother, Anne, lost her mother at an early age. Her father remarried and had seven children. One of these children was Christian Keyser, who became one of Herman's teachers at the University. Christian was thus a half-brother to Herman's mother, making Christian's children half-cousins to Herman Amberg Preus. There were seven of these half-cousins, one boy followed by six girls. The oldest girl was Caroline, but everyone called her Linka. Linka was born in Kristiansand on July 2, 1829. She lost her mother when she was ten years old. Her father died when she was seventeen. She was very close to her extended family of aunts and uncles as evidenced by her many references to them in her diary.^[3] Linka had known her half-cousin Herman since she was a child. On February 26, 1849, when she was nineteen and Herman was twenty-three, they became engaged to be married. They were married on May 5, 1851. Pastor Magnus Landstad, a family friend,

officiated. Landstad authored several hymns, including: "When Sinners See Their Lost Condition" and "There Many Shall Come From the East and the West." In describing her wedding, Linka said, "Pastor Landstad spoke briefly and appropriately."[\[4\]](#)

During their two-year engagement Herman and Linka were preoccupied with one particular topic: America. The question was both whether and when they would go there. Herman wanted to serve as a pastor in America. He had heard of the settlements of Norwegians on the American frontier of Wisconsin. His countryman, the Rev. J. W. C. Dietrichson, had been ordained in the Church of Norway in 1844 after which he went to America to serve the Norwegian immigrants in southern Wisconsin. Herman corresponded with Pastor Dietrichson about serving as a pastor in Wisconsin. Dietrichson had assured him that congregations were in need of pastors and that Herman would be receiving a call. But matters were not quite so simple.

Dietrichson was a disciple of the maverick Danish theologian and hymnist, Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig. In addition to authoring such powerful hymns as "Built on the Rock the Church Doth Stand" and "God's Word is Our Great Heritage," Grundtvig also came up with an interesting doctrine that became known in the old Norwegian Synod simply as the "Grundtvigian error." He taught that the Apostles' Creed, which is the baptismal creed, was the living word of Jesus in contrast to the Holy Scriptures that were a dead word. Grundtvig was a strong opponent of rationalism as well as a proponent of congregational autonomy over against the authority of the state church. He was in many respects a confessional Lutheran and he gained a following from among confessional Lutheran pastors in Norway, Dietrichson being one of them. Dietrichson had brought the Grundtvigian error with him to America and had established it there. When visiting with Herman Amberg Preus in Norway during September of 1850, this particular theological topic took center stage in their discussions. Herman asked Dietrichson about a call to America. Apparently, Dietrichson wanted Herman to endorse the Grundtvigian opinion about the "living word" as a condition to receiving a call to America. When Herman objected and argued against this error, Dietrichson became furious with him and informed him that he couldn't give him a definite answer about a call to America until November of that year.[\[5\]](#) So Herman was left hanging, uncertain of where he stood. He describes the turmoil he was experiencing in these words:

The dream of my youth was: By the side of a beloved wife, to pass the "Green Years" in the midst of a faithful congregation, proclaiming to them the Good Tidings of the Lord. That thought had become so much a part of me that there seems to arise a void in my soul at the idea of giving it up. And now, perchance, my hope is to wither and be moved out into the dark future. For I am still terribly uncertain

that I can defend before God and my conscience the acceptance of the call to America on the condition laid down, a condition to which I have not up to this time felt able to assent. Nevertheless, it seems strange to me, indeed incredible, that men who are enlightened and whose entire activity bears witness that they are saturated with the spirit of truth – men with whom I am in church fellowship, in fact in the same Department – could lay down such a condition with reference to the administration of the Ministerial Office, that I, on account of it, cannot accept the call, since I believe I am thereby acting contrary to my Christian faith. – God enlighten me and cause me to know His will![\[6\]](#)

At the age of twenty-five, Herman saw himself throwing away the future that had occupied his thoughts and affections for years. But he could not help himself. His problem was his doctrinal inflexibility. Nothing marks his life more than his refusal to compromise on doctrine. The reason he could not tolerate the Grundtvigian opinion was that it contradicted the principle of Scripture alone. The fact that this error was held by men whom Herman admired could not alter what was for him a matter of principle. A Lutheran pastor could not compromise on doctrine, regardless of what the consequences might be.

As it turned out, the consequences for Herman were not so dire, after all. Just a few months later, on January 1, 1851, he received the call to be the pastor of the congregation in Spring Prairie, Wisconsin, a congregation that he served until his death some forty four years later. This is what Herman wrote the day after receiving the call:

On New Year's Day, I received a letter – my heart beat fast. It was a letter of call to me to become pastor at Spring Prairie, Wisconsin. While reading the letter, my arm was about her whose love would ease life's sorrow and sweeten its joys and who did not shrink from sharing all with me. In that hour our hearts beat strongly, and our eyes expressed what the lips could not utter.

This was indeed the most serious and solemn hour in all my experience. I had become a minister; I had a congregation! What significance, what responsibility, in those words! A congregation of souls was turning to me in matters pertaining to their salvation; their spiritual welfare rested on my heart. The Lord shall require their souls at my hand. I shall address them in God's own Word of reproof and of blessing. The Lord says, "lovest thou Me? Then feed My sheep."

O Father in heaven, give me strength and Thy blessing that I may truthfully say, "yea, Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee"; that in due time, in the midst of right many of my flock, we may gather with the great flock of the supreme Shepherd, saying, "Here, Lord, are those whom Thou gavest me!"^[7]

These words may sound to our ears just a bit flowery and the piety a bit more explicitly expressed than we are used to hearing. I suggest to you that these heart-felt sentiments of that young man were much more than a passing emotional reaction to receiving the call that he had so eagerly desired. These sentiments define the legacy of Herman Amberg Preus. If we are to understand H. A. Preus' legacy, we can do no better than to begin right here. He wanted to be a pastor. This lifelong desire permeates his approach to theology. The theological task and the pastoral task were for him one and the same thing. He received an excellent theological education. He was immersed in the Lutheran Confessions and the writings of the Lutheran fathers. He admired and relied on the efforts of confessional Lutherans of great scholarly achievement. But Herman Amberg Preus did not conceive of theology primarily as an academic discipline. He was a down to earth theologian who had no time or patience for the kinds of theological abstractions and nuances that so frequently occupy the minds of men who aren't actually engaged in the feeding of the flock. Every theological issue was for him an issue of pastoral care. Herman wanted to be a faithful pastor. And he was quite intolerant of those who would stand in his way.

As we can see from the words he recorded on the day after receiving his call, Herman believed that the call from the congregation was the essential element in the placing of a man into the pastoral office. He writes, "I had become a minister, I had a congregation!" As a matter of fact, he would not actually become their pastor for another seven months. He wasn't even ordained yet and he talked as if he was their pastor. This should not be construed to suggest that Herman did not believe he had to be ordained. While he believed that the office belonged to the church and not to a clerical hierarchy, he could not have imagined going to America to serve as a pastor without first being ordained. In fact, after arriving in America, one of the first issues young Herman would have to face was that of laymen who were not called and ordained preaching publicly in the church.^[8]

Not everyone shared Herman's eagerness to serve, however. In February of 1851 he asked Bishop Arup of Kristiania if he would ordain him. The bishop refused. Listen to Herman describe why:

Today I was out to see Bishop Arup, to request ordination to the Holy Ministry. I have always regarded him as a serious, zealous Christian, burning for God's cause, but it is difficult for me to be of that opinion any longer. For he told me that he neither could nor

would grant my petition. And what were his reasons? He said he would not ordain me unless there were ordained simultaneously another minister who should be engaged here at home, since he, as Bishop of Christiania Diocese, might be called on to officiate at too many ordinations, if he should permit himself to ordain me, who, he said, was none of his concern. As though he were completely indifferent to one who wishes to dedicate his life to the service of the same God whose servant he himself must admit that he is. I am almost led to believe that it is because he does not want to give a dinner – or else he does not wish to be put to the inconvenience connected with such an occasion. Whether it is one of these reasons, or that he has not grasped the significance of the justifiability of missions in the Church – he has at least compromised himself in my eyes and discredited not only himself but also the clergy, whose head he is, if indeed we can suppose there is anybody who approves his conduct. . . . However, I am sure the Lord will give me His blessing even if Arup will not.^[9]

He discussed with Linka the possibility of going to Kristiansand to be ordained by Bishop Jacob von der Lippe. Apparently, Bishop Arup had a change of mind and Herman modified his severe judgment of him a couple of months later when Arup finally ordained him. Herman wrote that Bishop Arup was a man who would surely want to do what is right if only he could see it clearly. Still, Herman added, “But he has a not too clear theological insight and probably suffers from a little indolence where something beyond his duty is required.”^[10]

Indolence is one vice of which nobody ever accused Herman Amberg Preus. He was an indefatigable workhorse. He despised laziness, apathy, and disinterest in connection with the preaching of the gospel and the caring for souls. If he was intolerant of others in this respect, he drove himself even harder. While not always receiving praise for such things as diplomacy, eloquence, or delicacy of expression, Herman Amberg Preus was admired by friend and foe alike for his constancy in the face of duty.

Part Two: The Theology of Pastor Herman Amberg Preus

Herman and Linka crossed the Atlantic together just three weeks after they were married in May of 1851. Herman was installed as the pastor of Spring Prairie Lutheran Church in August of that year. He preached his first sermon on August 10. It was the Eighth Sunday after Trinity. The Gospel Lesson for the Eighth

Sunday after Trinity is Matthew 7:15-23. Herman preached on verse 15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves." Listen to the opening words of this sermon. While Herman preached this sermon at the age of twenty-six, it typifies the theology and pastoral approach of his entire life.

Christian friends!

Two thousand years ago have soon passed since a Man whose name was Wonderful and the Prince of Peace, from whose lips flowed words like milk and honey and who spoke the words we have heard read, stepped forward at the River Jordan. What was it really which drew people to him every time he came into their region? What was it which made crowds flock around him from far and near and in silent anticipation listen to the blessed words which came from his mouth, to the kind voice which spoke to them? What was it which made many of them who had come to him never want to leave him but rather to forsake everything they had and to follow him and to cling to him with all their soul throughout their lives?

We know what, friends! It was a constant, deep, earnest need, a strong and inner yearning which did not allow them any peace but which urged them on. It was because they believed they would find in him, and many times they did find it, what their hearts had desired in hours of pain, that which they knew made up for all their shortcomings and which had healing in itself for the sicknesses, the evil which gnawed at their innermost heart. It was because they had to acknowledge that he did not speak as the scribes but as one who had authority and because the words which he spoke were like heavenly manna for their hungry souls, and poured soothing balm into their wounds and brought a peace hitherto unknown to them, and salvation to their troubled, fearful hearts. Yes, my friends, because they felt that the serpent of sin was devouring life at its root and that the angel of death had laid his hand upon them, that's why they fled to him in the pain of despair as the Rock of their salvation and their source of blessedness! That's why they listened to those words of life which wonderfully refreshed them and which, when they accepted them in faith, let them feel the powers of life surge through them, chase the angel of death away and bring life into everything which before was dead. Then they recognized that the Lord was a gracious God who does not desire the death of sinners but rather that they should live, and that for their sakes he revealed himself as a man, since he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to the world.[\[11\]](#)

Insofar as it is a feature of pietism to focus in on the personal spiritual needs of the individual Christian, we can see such an influence on Herman Amberg Preus. But his theology is not centered in feelings, even if he makes liberal reference to the feelings of his hearers. It is centered in Christ. The overarching pastoral concern to which Preus gave evidence throughout his life was that his hearers should know Christ, trust in His righteousness, be set free from Satan's bondage, and be saved eternally. Herman Amberg Preus was first and last a pastor. For this reason we must understand his theology within the context of the pastoral task because that is how Preus viewed theology. This did not make him an adherent of what passes today as pastoral theology with its fixation on successful methods for doing this, that, and the other thing. Rather, the theologian who subsumes all theology under the single objective of caring for souls is a man who understands the radical nature of confessional Lutheran theology. If Herman Amberg Preus is the epitome of a confessional Lutheran pastor, this is what we can say a confessional Lutheran pastor is. He is dogmatically inflexible. He submits to the clear word of God and urges others to do so. He believes in the supremacy of doctrine over life because he knows that the righteousness of Christ, in which the pure doctrine is centered, is reckoned by God to sinners who have no righteousness of their own and by this gracious reckoning, which faith receives, sinners are justified and saved. This is why the confessional Lutheran pastor preaches the gospel without attaching any conditions to it and insists that his brother pastors do so as well. The confessional Lutheran pastor believes in the inherent efficacy of the means of grace. He defends the freedom of the Christian and the Christian congregation. He is conservative, giving more credence to the fathers than to the theological fads of his own day. He is stubborn. He will neither yield nor be silent on any article of Christian doctrine regardless of the price he will be required to pay for his stubbornness. All of these features of the confessional Lutheran pastor are seen in the life and preaching of Herman Amberg Preus and are all interwoven in the same fabric of the pastoral care for souls that marked Herman's entire adult life.

To attempt a chronological recounting of Herman's life in America would entail telling the history of the Norwegian Synod inasmuch as he served as president of the Norwegian Synod for over thirty of the first forty years of its existence. I would not presume to make such an attempt especially in the presence of our other speakers, President Orvick and Professor Teigen, both of whom have probably forgotten more about the Norwegian Synod than I will ever know. Instead, I would like to set before you the teaching of H. A. Preus in the following interrelated areas: the importance of the pure doctrine; the authority of the Scriptures and confessional subscription; the meaning of the gospel; church and ministry; unionism and syncretism; and slavery.

The Importance of the Pure Doctrine

The French have a saying, “Plus ca change, plus c’est la meme chose.” The more things change, the more they stay the same. In his presidential address to the Norwegian Synod in 1884, President Herman Amberg Preus speaks directly to our generation:

Many people are confused in their simple Christian faith and ask in doubt: “Yes, what is the truth?” Base elements, which must be found in congregations, step forward who quickly gain support and attempt to make themselves influential. Respect for the ordinances of the church and for Christian morality is dulled. Doctrinal discipline and the little church discipline which is to be found, are relaxed. Agitation and church politics are promoted. Majorities decide matters instead of the Word of God. Thus we stand in danger of a general demoralization. Suspicion, disunity and conflict arise between members of the same congregation, yes, of the same family. Factions are formed which lie in wait for each other and try to get the best of everyone. Splits in congregations and deposing of pastors have even occurred because of the controversy.[\[12\]](#)

Sound familiar? Pastor Preus spoke from personal experience. He and his son Christian served as pastors of Norway Grove Lutheran Church in Dane County, Wisconsin. Herman had served the congregation for thirty years. Agitators from the so-called Anti-Missourian Brotherhood stirred up certain members of the congregation to demand that their pastors repudiate the confessional Lutheran doctrine on election. They refused. On Good Friday 1883, Pastors Herman and Christian Preus were not only deposed by a majority of the congregation. They were bodily removed. The congregation later repented of their sin.

One does not fight for doctrine for the sake of fighting. For H. A. Preus, defending the pure doctrine was a matter of defending life itself. Pure doctrine could not be understood apart from Christ the Savior. It was always for the sake of faith in Christ and the eternal life that this faith receives that Preus argued so vigorously for defending the pure doctrine. As Preus put it in an address to the Synod in 1864:

But friends! How should we better be able to render each other such help than to build up each other in the doctrine of the one saving faith through mutual consultation and mutual instruction from the Word of God? For where is the Lord, so that we can turn our eyes to him? The apostle John says: “No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.” (Jo. 1:18.) But it is in

the Word in which he has wrapped himself. The Gospel is his clothing in which he who is the express image of the Father reveals himself to us full of grace and truth, one God, for the salvation of many. Yes, the more we gaze at him there and learn to know his essence, attributes and works, yes, the more we thereby are strengthened in the true faith and pure doctrine, the more should we also learn to turn our eyes to him and look to his hand alone.[\[13\]](#)

The pure doctrine of the gospel was the clothing in which Christ was dressed. Only in knowing Christ in this clothing could a sinner find his Savior. There could not possibly be any true Christian living apart from faith in the Christ revealed in this pure gospel. Responding to the false antithesis so often advanced between concern for pure doctrine and pure living, Preus went on to say:

The Lord himself says also, "My words are spirit and life" (Jo. 6:63) and again, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth," (Ja. 1:18) and John says, "This is life eternal, that they might know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (17:3). In these passages the Lord teaches us to get the relationship between his Word and life clear, namely that his Word is life and gives life and that the proper acknowledgement of the Lord and God revealed in the Word, exactly that, is true life.

Or, where really does life with all that is good, holy feelings and emotions, with its self-denial and sacrifice, its humility and patience, its love to God and men, where does it really come from except from the faith which appropriates to oneself the love of God to us and believes that God is both so incomprehensibly great that he has in Christ offered himself for us, and for the sake of Christ forgives us all our sins? Thus the apostle says also, "We love him, because he first loved us." (1 Jo. 4:19.) But this faith which is the fountain of life in us from which streams of living water spring, is, of course, worked by the Spirit of God just through the Word as Paul teaches in Romans 10, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Verse 17.) How earnestly do not also the Lord and the apostles admonish us to take heed to the Word and to continue in the pure doctrine. Yes, in John's Gospel the Lord sets this as a mark of those who are his true disciples! And Paul says in Galatians 1:8: "Cursed is he who preaches another gospel than that which we have preached to you." How do the Lord and the apostles not warn throughout the entire Scriptures against false prophets and the leaven of false doctrine![\[14\]](#)

Preus saw clearly that the holy living advanced by the denigration of the pure doctrine was a sham. He had a profoundly Lutheran understanding of sin and its effects. He despised all forms of moralism. The very idea that there lay anything within man from which he could contribute anything at all to his conversion, preservation in the faith, or final salvation was abhorrent to Herman. His piety grew out of a deeply ingrained consciousness of his own personal sin and unworthiness. In a sermon he delivered at the ordination of two men in July of 1865, Herman said:

. . . we must take heed to ourselves so that we do not look the other way and excuse our own errors and sins, but that we denounce them sharply and condemn them in ourselves so that we should not be condemned with the world. Surely the more we acknowledge our own sins and our own soul's need the more we shall be able to understand the imperfections and hurt of others and have compassion upon everyone. And the more sharply we judge ourselves, shall we not be able to chastise others with greater candor, but at the same time shall we not be able to show greater gentleness and patience toward the weak?[\[15\]](#)

Contending for the pure doctrine was not therefore an intellectual battle in which one theologian sets out to score points against another. Nor was it a church-political debate for sectarian purposes. It was literally a battle against the lies of Satan who designs the destruction of every Christian by tearing him away from Christ. It was not a battle of the flesh for fleshly goals. It was rather from within the context of the Christian's personal struggle against his own sin and doubts that this battle found its shape. Far from evidencing pride and a cock-sure know-it-all attitude of smug self-righteousness, Herman's doctrinal inflexibility was inseparable from his own personal faith, a faith born in contrition

Linka gave expression to the deeply penitential nature of this faith in an entry in her diary on October 5, 1852. She had had a bad day. She wasn't happy in America. She was eight months pregnant with her first child, she was homesick, tired, and generally feeling sorry for herself. She was afraid of dying and she was afraid of the Judgment. Her words open for us a little window into the heart of this pious Christian lady whose faith would be fed by the word of God her husband would preach to her for the rest of her life. Listen to how Linka describes her spiritual struggles:

Again, Selfishness and Pride direct my step; and can these do that which is well pleasing to God? No; and again no! What then remains for me? Nothing, except the knowledge that I am a sinful creature who constantly deserves to be punished by God, instead of being an object of His love. Would that in a truly contrite heart I

might feel this! I do say: "Thou are truly a miserable, perverse creature, Linka!" But do I sincerely feel the abomination of being as I am? I am afraid I do not; if I did, it would seem that humility would have taken root within me; bitter tears of repentance would then freely flow down my cheeks; and within me would be the same spirit that dwelt in the publican, who, when he recognized his unworthiness, did not dare lift his eyes toward heaven, but with eyes cast down cried out, "God be merciful to me a sinner." – God be merciful to me a sinner! This is my cry to Thee, my God, now and ever, but it does not seem to come from that contrite and broken heart which alone is well pleasing to Thee, O God my Father!

Thus it appears that I do nothing, nothing, which is good in Thy sight; which I ought to do, if I loved Thee; and still I say that I love Thee! Alas, there is no truth in me! Help me, Lord Jesus Christ, lest I be cast into the fiery pit! My hope and my comfort is that Thou who didst die upon the Cross, even for me, Thou wilt not forsake me, but be at my side when I shall stand before the throne of the Judge. For Thy sake shall my utterly countless sins be forgiven; in Thee, and in Thee alone, shall I be able to stand in the hour of reckoning. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Because of this I can without fear look death in the face.[\[16\]](#)

Linka's piety shows some of the influences of pietism's preoccupation with a pure penitential spirit. It also shows the simplicity of her faith in the truth of the gospel. Herman knew his wife and he understood her spiritual needs. They were not that she should spend her time attempting to prove to herself the sincerity of her contrition. That road could lead only to despair, and Herman knew it. What animated his forceful defense of the pure doctrine was his desire that those Christians under his pastoral care, such as his dear Linka, should have the assurance of salvation. That the gospel is true means that it can be relied upon in the face of death. It means that faith can appeal to God's doctrine whenever doubts arise. Doctrinal uncertainty was incompatible with faith. Therefore, doctrinal inflexibility was required for the faithful pastor.

Why not compromise on doctrine? Souls are at stake. To acquiesce to the compromise of God's doctrine at any point would be to set aside the proper care for souls. Even while pastors and congregations were defecting from the Norwegian Synod because of her doctrinal inflexibility, Preus argued against any compromise. In his presidential address to the 1869 convention of the Norwegian Synod he explained why the Synod could not yield in the slightest in the clear confession of the pure doctrine of God's word. He said:

The Word is not ours which we can do with as might please us. It is the Word of the holy, righteous God which He has in grace and indescribable love committed to us pure and unadulterated which we therefore are also to proclaim *pure and unadulterated* without addition, without suppression, without obscuring, without distortion, and which we are to preserve unfalsified and unabridged as our most precious heritage to our descendants. Surely there is no communion between Christ and Belial, light and darkness, truth and lies. In order to show honor to the Lord and his Word and love to the brethren as well as the opponents, it behooves us, much rather, it is our Synod's unalterable duty to confess the truth of the Word of God with all the certainty, clarity and precision we have at our disposal, and above all, the truth that the Word of God is not an uncertain word of men which requires the explanation and interpretation of men, but the Word of the God of Truth, the truth unto salvation, clear, simple and intelligible to everyone who uses it correctly, be he lay or learned.^[17]

Preus and the Norwegian Synod suffered from a great deal of vicious calumny on account of their doctrinal integrity. Professors August Weenaas and Sven Oftedal from Augsburg Seminary of the Norwegian-Danish Conference wrote scathing attacks on the Norwegian Synod for various alleged ecclesiastical sins. The Norwegian Synod was accused of an "anti-Christian tendency" called Wisconsinism, named after the State where the Norwegian Synod was centered. Wisconsinism was supposedly a blend of Grundtvigianism and Missouriianism. While Preus willingly embraced the Missouriianism of C. F. W. Walther – and paid dearly for so doing – he was instrumental in removing the Grundtvigian error from the constitution of the Norwegian Synod. What was really under attack was the Norwegian Synod's uncompromising confessionalism. The charge of Wisconsinism included the allegation that the Norwegian Synod was guilty of a papistic principle, theoretical and practical Catholicism, religious indifference, hierarchy, pastoral despotism, and a contempt for spiritual life in the congregation. For defending the inherent efficacy of the absolution, the Norwegian Synod was accused of seeking to establish "the papacy's chief cornerstone: the sacrament of the Ministry."^[18] For teaching objective justification, the Norwegian Synod was accused of teaching universal salvation for everyone, whether he believes or not. The Norwegian Synod was called "an organization which is a blotch on Christianity and a disgrace for the Norwegian people."^[19]

Herman saw the violent attacks against the Norwegian Synod as God's means of humbling them. He acknowledged that contending for God's truth brings unpleasant consequences from which we naturally turn away. The desire to shrink from theological battle was based on an ignorance of God's word. This ignorance was due to a lack of a love for God's truth. So when the Norwegian Synod suffered persecution, Herman saw this as a discipline from God designed

to purify His church. The correct response to persecution in the face of contending for God's truth was a rededication to catechizing the laity in the pure word of God.[\[20\]](#)

The Authority of the Scriptures and Confessional Subscription

Herman Amberg Preus was a traditionalist. He was a father's theologian. His severe judgment against rationalism was directed not only against their denial of the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures, but also against what he called their "haughty" and "flippant" attitude toward the Lutheran Confessions.[\[21\]](#) He did not view the Bible in isolation from the Lutheran Confessions and the Lutheran fathers. In a scathing attack on the spirit of religious unionism, Preus describes the "enlightened" person of his day who does not want to be a heathen (but doesn't really want to be a Christian either) as opining:

No, one must hold fast to Christianity, but not the kind of Christianity which was set forth by the apostles in the barbaric ancient times and interpreted literally according to the dogmatic restrictions and prejudices of the 16th century. But the kind which the new Bible Criticism has created.[\[22\]](#)

For Preus there was no dichotomy between the apostolic teaching and the Lutheran dogmatic tradition. The notion that the pastor should attempt to approach the Holy Scriptures with perfect exegetical neutrality, ignoring the guidance of the Lutheran Confessions in the theological task, could not have occurred to him. On the contrary, Preus joined together into one activity the reading of the Holy Scriptures and the study of the Lutheran Confessions. He said:

Therefore the apostle also says, "Give attendance to reading." (1 Ti. 4:13.) And he must do that above all through the reading of the Holy Scriptures, the Book of books, the fountain of revelation, and next, from the Confessions of the church, from the good writings of the fathers and others through which he can be led into the treasure chambers of the Holy Scriptures, become familiar with its precious treasures and learn to draw from them old things and new for every situation which he faces.[\[23\]](#)

Preus was a conservative. He followed the same approach to making a theological defense of his teaching as that followed by C. F. W. Walther. First,

he would set forth the clear Scriptures. Then he would appeal to the Lutheran Confessions. Then he would appeal to the Lutheran fathers.^[24] The Scriptures were authoritative because they were the word of God. The Confessions were authoritative because they agreed with the Holy Scriptures. The fathers were authoritative as they correctly set forth the biblical teaching of the Lutheran Confessions. While he served as the president of the Norwegian Synod for over thirty years and wholeheartedly endorsed her doctrine at every point, he did not appeal to synodical authority in defending his doctrine.

Preus did appeal to the writings of C. F. W. Walther. He regarded Walther and the Missourians as being singularly faithful to the Scriptures and the Confessions in the American sea of heterodoxy. Already in 1864, as the War Between the States was raging, Preus publicly praised the faithfulness of the Missouri Synod. He said:

However, we must surely acknowledge with praise to God that there is, though, a German Lutheran synod, the Missouri Synod, which has not let itself be content with merely the Lutheran name but tirelessly has brought to life the testimony of the Lutheran fathers, undaunted, shown off the prayers of the Lutheran Church, the pure doctrine, zealously watched over its preservation within the synod's own bounds and fearlessly and openly as well as with scholarship defended it against opponents outside it.^[25]

Preus did not back away from his support of Missouri, but rather reiterated it throughout the rest of his life. In 1881, Preus summarized the contributions of Missouri under Walther's leadership by saying,

I especially want to call attention to some basic truths for whose preservation and carrying out, both in theory and in practice, Dr. Walther, together with the whole Missouri Synod, has lifted the banner and fought with unshaken faithfulness, namely, the freedom of a Christian man and a Christian congregation, the universality of divine grace and the total depravity of the natural man and his inability to cooperate in any way whatsoever in his conversion.^[26]

While Preus' early and persistent support of Missouri may have been the right thing to do theologically and confessionally, from a church-political point of view it was a colossal mistake on his part. He and the Norwegian Synod were hounded by charges of being lackeys of the man widely viewed among Norwegian Lutherans in America as the American Lutheran pope. The enmity against Walther on the part of many Norwegian-American Lutherans was quite intense. Walther personified the Missouri Synod, a synod headquartered in a slave state and that defended slavery. The Missouri Synod, under Walther's theological

leadership, took a strong stand against all forms of synergism and in support of the confessional Lutheran doctrine of election. That particular controversy, as it erupted in the Norwegian Synod in the 1880s, could never be viewed apart from the Norwegian Synod's close ties to Missouri and C. F. W. Walther.

Weenaas and other critics of the Norwegian Synod saw the Synod's support of Walther as a vulnerability to be exploited, and they did so with relish. It looms as a subtext of every criticism leveled against the Norwegian Synod, as if to say that they could not think for themselves. In response to the charge from Weenaas that the Norwegian Synod's support of Walther's theology made them guilty of "clinging to personalities," Preus wrote:

When we acknowledge and accept with thanks to God the gifts God has given his church in such a man as Professor Walther, then we do not rob but only give God the glory he has coming and in no way does this entitle Professor Weenaas to accuse us of "clinging to personalities" which is said to be characteristic of the mind and spirit he ascribes to us and the Missouri Synod. I dare say that a church body is not to be found in our days which carries on such a life and death struggle against all faith in and idolizing of authority as the Missouri Synod with Professor Walther in the lead.[\[27\]](#)

Preus' support of the Missouri Synod and Walther should not be mistaken for a loyalty to a particular Lutheran tradition. It was precisely Walther's confessionalism that Preus admired. He found in Walther a confessional Lutheran brother and in the Missouri Synod the same confessional Lutheran spirit that had been inculcated in him as a boy growing up in Kristiansand. When Preus and the Norwegian Synod defended the called and ordained ministry of the word in opposition to lay preachers who presumed to preach without need and without a churchly call, they did not do so in service to what Weenaas called a "rational orthodoxy" or "the system of the scholastics."[\[28\]](#) They were confessional Lutherans. Confessional Lutherans accept the clear teaching of Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession.[\[29\]](#)

That the Lutheran Confessions should serve a real normative purpose for the Lutheran pastor was for Herman Preus a pastoral necessity. He criticized the rationalists who "laid the Confessions on the shelf as an ancient curiosity [and] mastered the Word of God according to the will-of-the-wisp of their reason."[\[30\]](#) These men could not care for the souls of people who were "given to a sickly enthusiasm and emotion, or a subtle works-righteousness" because the pastors were ignorant. "The Confessions of the Lutheran Church were an unknown book to them as were all the writings of the fathers."[\[31\]](#) For Preus, the Book of Concord was a textbook in pastoral care. He read it faithfully.[\[32\]](#)

The Meaning of the Gospel

What is the gospel? Is it information about what God has done for us in Christ to which must be added the correct response of faith? Is the gospel a promise of what God will do if we believe in Christ? Or is the gospel the actual imparting of the forgiveness of sins that Jesus has won for us all? For Preus, the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus Christ was meaningless unless God has, for Christ's sake, forgiven the entire world of sinners. This is objective or universal justification. Preus defined the doctrine of objective or universal justification in these words:

By this we understand that by raising Christ from the dead God declares him righteous and at the same time acknowledges and declares all people, the whole world, whose Representative and Substitute Jesus Christ was in his resurrection and victory as well as in his suffering and tribulation ("He was delivered for our offenses and raised for our justification"), as free from guilt and punishment, and righteous in Christ Jesus.[\[33\]](#)

This doctrine was and is an offense to many. Those who promote it have been falsely accused of denying the necessity of faith. Preus, along with the rest of the Norwegian Synod, always taught the necessity of faith to receive and be comforted by the forgiveness of sins. He taught justification by faith alone. This did not prevent critics from claiming that the doctrine of objective justification "separates justification in Christ from faith."[\[34\]](#) Preus argued that if objective justification is not true, faith cannot be the means by which the sinner merely receives God's forgiveness, but it must become meritorious. The denial of objective justification turns faith into a work. God will not justify the sinner solely on the basis of Christ's redemption, but will justify the sinner only when the sinner meets the condition of having faith. Thus, the redemption of Christ does not actually cause God to forgive anyone, but merely makes God willing to forgive if sinners perform the necessary work of believing. Faith becomes a work.[\[35\]](#) The merit of Christ is denigrated. His satisfaction is insufficient.

Preus points out the irony of insisting that God does not forgive anyone prior to faith. He writes,

Since faith is worked only by God through his proclaiming to people that he forgives them and is no longer angry, then according to Professor Weenaas' claim, this message must not be spoken to people before they have come to faith, then a person can never come to faith through

Professor Weenaas' gospel. Because then there is no Gospel of God through which it can be worked.[\[36\]](#)

In other words, if God has not forgiven all sins of all sinners for Christ's sake, it is not possible to preach the gospel.

What is especially noteworthy here is that for Herman Amberg Preus the debate about objective justification could not be disjoined from the pastoral care for souls burdened by sins and in need of a pure gospel. It is as the physician of souls that Herman's mind conceived of the issue and its implications. Any gospel that is dependent for its truth or validity upon the correct human response is no gospel at all. The gospel must have the power to confront and overcome the abiding and unfathomable unbelief that clings so stubbornly to the flesh. Preus advocated private confession and absolution[\[37\]](#) and regularly confessed his own sins to a "father confessor" (young enough to be his son!)[\[38\]](#) because he knew his own carnal weakness and he wanted his faith to rely solely on the word of God. At no other point in Herman's controversy-ridden ministry was the essence of the Christian doctrine so clearly revealed than in the absolution controversy with pastors of the Augustana Synod.[\[39\]](#)

The absolution controversy encompassed several topics at the same time. It was a debate about the nature of the pastoral office as well as the meaning of the rite of absolution. The fundamental issue, however, was the content and the essence of the gospel itself.[\[40\]](#) The debate about objective justification was a debate about what the gospel was. The debate about absolution was a debate about how the gospel is given. Is the gospel a real and unchanging declaration from God? Is it true and inherently efficacious on account of what it is? Is the absolution of the pastor the very absolution of sins from God Himself? Or are the truthfulness and efficacy of the gospel contingent upon something in the sinner to whom the gospel is addressed? In defense of the Norwegian Synod's objective gospel, which was true whether anyone believed it or not, Preus appealed to the words of Jesus about casting pearls before swine. He wrote:

But at the same time we hold firmly to it as the teaching of the Word of God, that God's forgiveness also occurs without faith being present, in other words, that the absolution spoken in the name of God to a hypocrite (who surely does not have faith), is however God's absolution. When the Savior warningly says: "Do not give that which is holy to dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine, so that they should not trample them with their feet," then he presupposes as a given, that it can happen that the pearls and sacred things can be cast before swine and dogs. If that could not possibly happen, as Professor Weenaas thinks, then the Lord would not have given such a warning. For what else are the pearls and the holy things than the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins, and who else are

swine and dogs than the unbelieving and the ungodly? But now if the pearls, i.e. God's act of forgiving sin were thus bound to faith, as Professor Weenaas claims, then surely the pearls cannot be cast before swine and then neither is any such warning needed, because even if the forgiveness were then promised to an unbeliever, therefore it surely was not God's act of forgiving sin, thus there surely were no pearls; not pearls, but only a husk were then cast before swine. The apostle Paul teaches otherwise when he says in Romans 3:3 that man's unbelief cannot make God's trustworthiness of no effect.[\[41\]](#)

The denial of objective justification makes it impossible to preach the gospel. The preacher may not tell anyone that his sins are forgiven. No pearls can be given to anyone at all. How can the pastor ask the penitent, "Do you believe my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" if the pastor cannot give forgiveness except to the believer? The pastor cannot see faith. A pastor who does not know he has forgiveness to give, regardless of the spiritual condition of the one to whom he is speaking, can only give stones, not bread. Pastor Preus asks,

How shall the troubled person, who surely is hovering in doubt precisely about his faith and his sincerity, find comfort in the absolution and strength in his misery through such teaching? He must surely despair completely.[\[42\]](#)

The gospel must be preached. And when it is preached, it cannot be conditioned by any legal restrictions or it is no gospel at all. Salvation is at stake. God saves sinners by means of the gospel that is preached to them. This is how Preus told preachers they should preach:

But you are also to proclaim the Gospel in its truth and purity, free and unconditioned, sweet and pleasant as God has given it to us. Woe to the blind guides who out of ignorance or from pride, since they rely upon their own works, set up all kinds of conditions and restrictions around the Gospel of God and build a fence around Golgotha just as there was around Sinai. They forbid other people access to the kingdom of heaven and do not want to enter it themselves. They make the Gospel into a Law and instead of luring the anxious and frightened sinner to faith, to the freedom and salvation of children of God in Christ Jesus by holding before him the undeserved and unending love of God in Christ Jesus which he has earned for everyone and which he wants to give everyone so that everyone can be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, they place a new burden upon him which he can as little bear as the former. Therefore, let us above all apply ourselves so that we proclaim the pure and unabridged Gospel of Christ. It justifies. It gives life. It

saves. It also makes holy and pious people, and nothing but the Gospel of Christ does such a thing.[\[43\]](#)

Church and Ministry

Preus was a practical theologian. That is to say, theology was practice and practice was theology. The “chicken or egg” debates that erupted a generation or so after his death concerning the means of grace and the church would have held no interest for him. Does the Christian congregation have the means of grace because she is a Christian congregation or is she a Christian congregation because she has the means of grace? I suspect Herman Preus would have given a stern “yes!” for an answer that might just have silenced the questioner and prevented any more abstract theologizing.

Preus believed in the divine institution of the local congregation. In his presidential address to the Norwegian Synod in 1865 he listed seven reasons why Christian congregations should join together to form synods. But he made it clear what was by divine command and what was not. He said:

. . . the forming of congregations is ordered and commanded by God himself in his Word, and therefore in the proper understanding of the word are an institution of the Lord, a work of the Lord, while the coming together of individual congregations into a larger church body, be it a state church or synods, is not commanded by God.[\[44\]](#)

Preus taught that the Christian church, which is essentially invisible because it is made up only of the faithful, is recognizable by the means of grace, the gospel and sacraments. From this foundation, he concluded that it was necessary for Christians to belong to orthodox congregations with orthodox pastors. Herman Amberg Preus regarded theology as too serious a business to let it become captive to academicians preoccupied with refined distinctions. He made no distinction between the preaching office and the pastoral office. For Preus, the preaching office was the pastoral office. In an ordination sermon preached in 1868, Preus used the terms: shepherds, teachers, overseers, and ambassadors to refer to parish pastors, that is, to incumbents of the ministry of the Word. The pastors were God’s gifts to and servants of the church. He rejected all forms of clericalism that would take away from the laity of the local congregation the right to judge doctrine.[\[45\]](#) Speaking on what a “true Lutheran” knows about the church, Herman said:

With the fathers in the Augsburg Confession, [the true Lutheran] says that the church is a “communion of saints,” whether or not they hold the office of pastor. He says that the ministry of “preaching the word and administering the sacrament” is entrusted to all the church and that the administrators of the ministry, the pastors, are gifts granted to the congregation by its Lord, Christ.[\[46\]](#)

God instituted the pastoral office and the local congregation. God gathers Christians together in congregations. Synods are, by definition, adiaphorous organizations instituted by men.[\[47\]](#) The keys are given to Christian congregations which may delegate their use to princes, bishops, state churches, synods, and the like, but the keys do not belong to such entities except by delegation from the congregations which always retain the right to take back the authority they have delegated.

Preus believed that God had provided the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America a unique opportunity to develop the spiritual priesthood of the laity. While one searches in vain in his writings to find anything like the concept of “Voters’ Supremacy,” he most certainly did teach that the laity had the right to judge the doctrine of their pastors and that it was their sacred obligation to do so.[\[48\]](#) Unfaithful pastors must be removed from office. While, as noted, Preus himself was fired as a pastor precisely because of his faithfulness to God’s word, he was far more concerned about pastors abusing congregations than congregations abusing pastors.[\[49\]](#)

One of the most undeserved of all the calumnies directed against the Norwegian Synod was the charge that they were papistic, hierarchical, setting up pastors as tyrants over the people. The controversy over lay preaching in the Norwegian Synod was not a debate about whether or not the preaching office belonged to the whole church and to every local congregation. It did. Preus and the Norwegian Synod were crystal clear on that point. The issue was rather that souls must be fed with the wholesome and life-giving words of God and that therefore the divine institution of the pastoral office (AC XIV) must be honored.[\[50\]](#) Preus and the Norwegian Synod defended the right of laymen publicly to assume the pastoral office without a call from the church when the needs of faith required it. In emergency situations laymen became pastors to meet the need.[\[51\]](#)

To understand H. A. Preus’ doctrine of church and ministry, one needs to understand his primary concern for the need of the Christian to have the assurance of salvation. This requires pastors who are devoted to the pure doctrine. This requires congregations to hold their pastors accountable to teach only the pure doctrine. The faith of God’s children in the gospel of the

forgiveness of sins is the underlying concern of Preus' doctrine of church and ministry.

Unionism and Syncretism

The issue of religious unionism looms large in the demise of the Norwegian Synod after Preus' death. For Preus, the unionistic spirit, the spirit of doctrinal compromise for the sake of the appearance of unity, was of the devil. In a powerful address to the 1870 convention of the Norwegian Synod, Preus says that divisions in the church are caused by disloyalty to the truth. This is devil's work. He insists on granting lies equal rights with the truth. This is the essence of unionism.^[52] The devil attacks any kind of Christian conviction, turning men in on themselves and away from God's word. Preus anticipates the "self-esteem" gospel of our day as he gives voice to the devil's argument.

"There is no God. Love for self is the basis of all human relationships. It brings everyone together." Voltaire especially advocated this principle in the previous century. It has now become obvious, it must be admitted, that self-love brings no union but brings rebellion, war and bloodshed.^[53]

What would Pastor Herman Amberg Preus have thought of the Prayer Service at Yankee Stadium that precipitated so much controversy in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod? Let him speak for himself:

On the other hand, if [the devil] is working with ungodly people of the more refined type, of which Christianity is full in our days, then this is written on the banner: "We all believe in a higher being, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and heathen. We are surely all children of the same Father. We are all brothers. The Christian Church is terribly intolerant. It considers only its own people as brothers. Our brotherhood extends over the whole world and we all worship the same god whether we say that he is three persons or only one, whether we call him the Lord Jesus, or Jehovah, Allah, or Brahma."^[54]

Slavery

On no issue did the Norwegian Synod receive more vehement criticism than on the position she took on slavery. It was called the "rotten fruit"^[55] of Wisconsinism, epitomizing everything that was wrong about the Synod. The fact

that many Norwegian Lutheran immigrants lost men fighting for the Union during the War made the Norwegian Synod's refusal to condemn the South's "Peculiar Institution" an apparent repudiation of the freedom for which so many men had given their lives. While the Norwegian Synod had nothing good to say about the enslavement of Africans in the American South and did not defend the South, neither could the Synod agree in principle with the arguments against slavery that were being advanced. Here is how President Preus presented the issue to the synodical convention of 1869:

This matter first became important for us when we realized that those who were opposing us were proceeding from principles that were directly opposed to evangelical doctrine, namely, from the standpoint of absolute innate human rights, the necessity of outward freedom, and similar propositions of the spirit of the times which have their basis precisely in this, that the complete culpability of sinful man, and loss of *all* right to *all* good, is not acknowledged, so that of necessity neither the doctrine of God's grace nor of Christ who is the sinful man's One and All, could be given its due. Our duty not to yield in this controversy became even clearer to us when the spokesmen for our opponents showed very plainly that in order to defend their position they did not hesitate to assail this basic principle about the Word of God as the only infallible and clear source for all faith and doctrine.[\[56\]](#)

Even in the face of serious attacks for supporting an immensely unpopular position, Preus and the Norwegian Synod could not compromise the sola Scriptura principle, the teaching of man's total depravity, and the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Similarly, Herman preached against socialism because it was based on the egalitarian lie that all men can become equal in this world.[\[57\]](#) The theological task of the church could not be confused with or distracted by any political creed or ideology.

Part Three: The Legacy of Herman Amberg Preus

Christian Keyser Preus was Herman's first born son and my great-grandfather. He has not fared as well as Herman Amberg within the various oral histories of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in large part because, despite his impeccable orthodoxy and devotion to the same doctrine as his father, he chose not to join the little Norwegian Synod. I am not going to defend his decision. Rather, I would like to share with you just a bit of family history that might put into perspective the implications of that decision.

Christian Keyser Preus died three years after the “Little Norwegian Synod” (the ELS) was born and three years before my father was born. He died broke and in debt. He had indebted himself by publishing, at his own expense, theological arguments in defense of the confessional Lutheran doctrine of grace alone. He fought against the merger of the Norwegian American synods that formed the old ELCA (ELC) in 1917. After he was persuaded that he could continue to contend for the pure doctrine within the newly formed church body, he decided to join. His son, my father’s Uncle Herman, lived to be over a hundred years old and continued in the confessional Lutheran theology of his father and grandfather. He wrote an excellent volume on Luther’s theology entitled, [A Theology to Live By](#), sadly out of print.^[58] All of Christian’s sons save one spent their entire lives within the ELC, later to become the ALC, and finally, the new ELCA. While much has been said about Uncle Herman’s theology and salutary influence – he spoke at these Reformation Lectures on more than one occasion – little is known or said about the theology of his older brother Jacob, my grandfather, though it is quite significant in the legacy of Herman Amberg Preus.

Jacob Aall Ottesen Preus was thirteen years old when his grandfather, Herman Amberg Preus, died. He was forty-nine years old when his father Christian Keyser Preus, died. He was serving his first of two terms as Governor of Minnesota. When his father died, he paid off his debts. He was a bit soured by the church-political machinations of those days and developed a rather interesting doctrine of his own. “I believe in the invisible church,” he would say. He refused to join any synod or any congregation. But he never missed church and he attended only orthodox Lutheran congregations.

After leaving government service, my grandfather moved to Highland Park, Illinois where my father and uncle were raised. He was the only son of Christian Keyser Preus to leave the ELC and join the Missouri Synod, but then he would have argued that he never did that. J. A. O. Preus didn’t believe in synods. He was pontificating on the subject one day with the pastor of the Missouri Synod congregation that he attended every Sunday with his family. When the pastor pointed out to Grandpa that he was a member of a Missouri Synod congregation, Grandpa denied that he was. He didn’t belong to any particular church – only to the invisible church. “But am I your pastor?” the pastor asked. Grandpa was stunned by the question. “Of course, you’re my pastor!” Well, that settled that! Grandpa Preus went to where the pure marks were to be found, and it just so happened to be in a congregation belonging to the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.

So it came to pass that my father grew up being catechized in the same theology of C. F. W. Walther that his great-grandfather Herman and his grandfather Christian held dear. Robert Preus grew up with the same convictions concerning the pure doctrine and the Holy Scriptures held by the patriarch of the Preus

family in America. When Robert Preus attended Luther Seminary, he confronted the same synergism that Herman Amberg Preus had confronted two generations earlier^[59] and it led him out of the ELC into the ELS and the Missouri Synod.

Before Robert Preus died, he had written several books, numerous scholarly and popular articles, and hundreds of sermons that reflected the theology of Herman Amberg Preus. While it is fashionable to praise the scholarly achievements of Robert while minimizing the theological capabilities of his great-grandfather, these two men were very much alike. Call it an attitude. It is a resolve, usually calm and determined, but occasionally erupting into a zealous eloquence. It is intimidating to some but deeply comforting for others. It is a conviction. It is a confidence not only in the truthfulness of the word being proclaimed but also in the need to proclaim it. God's doctrine is not so high above us that we cannot know it. It is right here. It is stated plainly in the Holy Scriptures, the inerrant word of God. It is confessed faithfully in the Lutheran Confessions, which agree in their every doctrinal assertion with God's word. It is to be preached to wholly unworthy and undeserving sinners. It is the gospel of God's justification of the ungodly by reckoning to him the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is the ground of faith and the assurance of eternal life. To teach it, preach it, defend it, and die confessing it is what brings the greatest joy in life and the greatest comfort in death. That is the legacy of Herman Amberg Preus.

^[1] Herman Amberg Preus: A Family History, by Johan Carl Keyser Preus, 1966. Privately printed and distributed by the Preus Family Book Club. Pages 2-6.

^[2] Vivacious Daughter: Seven Lectures on the Religious Situation Among Norwegians in America, by Herman Amberg Preus, Edited and translated by Todd Nichol, 1990, The Norwegian-American Historical Association, page 4.

^[3] Linka's Diary: On Land and Sea (1845-1864), translated by Johan Carl Keyser Preus and Diderikke Margrethe Preus, 1952, Augsburg Publishing House.

^[4] Linka's Diary, page 131.

^[5] Linka's Diary, page 106

^[6] Linka's Diary, pages 108-109

^[7] Linka's Diary, pages 116-117

[8] Vivacious Daughter, pages 119 to 131

[9] Linka's Diary, pages 119-120

[10] Linka's Diary, page 124

[11] H. A. Preus Sermons, Larson, pages 5-6. While I was preparing this paper, the Rev. Herbert Larson, retired pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, emailed to me his translations of much material written by Herman Amberg Preus. Originally appearing in issues of the Norwegian Synod's *Maanedstidende* and *Kirketidende*, Pastor Larson's translations include addresses that President H. A. Preus gave at Norwegian Synod conventions dating from 1863 to 1893 and sermons that Pastor Preus preached dating from 1851 to 1876. Pastor Larson also translated Preus' lengthy response to the "Open Declaration" of Professor Oftedal and a book by Professor Weenaas, both of Augsburg Seminary in Minneapolis, who charged the Norwegian Synod of what they called "Wisconsinism." Preus' response was entitled, "The 'Wisconsinism' of Professors Oftedal and Weenaas: Considered in the Light of Truth." This wealth of material is as yet unpublished. I wish to express to Pastor Larson my deep appreciation for his labors in providing the church with these writings in English along with my hope that they will soon be published, widely distributed, and read by a new generation of confessional Lutherans. I have received these materials in three documents: H. A. Preus Sermons, H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, and a document entitled, "Wisconsinism" (H. A. Preus' response to Prof. Weenaas). Due to the vagaries of electronic transmission of documents, the pagination in this essay may not correspond to the pagination of these documents in Pastor Larson's files or in any future publication of this material.

[12] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 65.

[13] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 9.

[14] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 10.

[15] H. A. Preus Sermons, Larson, page 15.

[16] Linka's Diary, pages 225-226.

[17] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, pages 37-38.

[18] *Wisconsinism*, page 1.

[19] *Wisconsinism*, page 2.

[20] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 39.

[21] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 27.

[22] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 42.

[23] H. A. Preus Sermons, Larson, page 16.

[24] See, for example, *Wisconsinism*, pages 35-43 where Preus argues for the doctrine of objective justification from Scriptures, the Confessions, and the Lutheran fathers – in that order. He also appeals (page 41) to *The Norwegian Church Ritual of 1685*.

[25] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, pages 14-15.

[26] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, pages 58-59.

[27] *Wisconsinism*, page 13.

[28] *Wisconsinism*, page 17.

[29] *Vivacious Daughter*, pages 124-125.

[30] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 27.

[31] *ibid.*

[32] See, for example, the personal recollections of Pastor Adolph Bredesen in *Herman Amberg Preus: A Family History*, page 106.

[33] *Wisconsinism*, page 31.

[34] *ibid.*

[35] Preus argues at length on this topic (*Wisconsinism*, pages 31-51) which leads him into a defense of the Norwegian Synod's teaching on the unconditional absolution. The argument for objective justification presented here is one of the most compelling arguments I have read on the subject.

[\[36\]](#) Wisconsinism, page 38.

[\[37\]](#) Herman Amberg Preus: A Family History, page 104.

[\[38\]](#) Herman Amberg Preus: A Family History, page 105.

[\[39\]](#) See Vivacious Daughter, pages 157-160.

[\[40\]](#) Vivacious Daughter, page 158.

[\[41\]](#) Wisconsinism, page 39.

[\[42\]](#) Wisconsinism, page 40.

[\[43\]](#) H. A. Preus Sermons, Larson, page 17.

[\[44\]](#) H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 17. Vivacious Daughter, page 47.

[\[45\]](#) Vivacious Daughter, page 148.

[\[46\]](#) Vivacious Daughter, page 146.

[\[47\]](#) H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, pages 17-19.

[\[48\]](#) He predicted that the Synod's schools of higher learning would fall into error if and when the congregations of the Synod lost their zeal for the pure doctrine. He said in his presidential address to the 1864 Synod convention: "But it is, however, really the prevailing spirit in the congregations which always will be not merely exerting powerful influence, but also the determinative influence. If this is of the truth then it will well watch over that the truth is also prevailing at the school and knows how to sweep out the errors and false tendencies which might creep in there. But if the congregations founder off into religious indifference and carelessness for pure doctrine and tolerate all kinds of errors and false tendencies in its bosom, then the synod's school cannot possibly remain untouched by it in the course of time, and preserve purity of doctrine. The false spirit of the church body will swarm up to the chair and make the school a synagogue of the devil. Also for this reason are we challenged to place importance on the appropriation and preservation of pure doctrine with all earnestness." H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 15.

[49] Vivacious Daughter, pages 98-99.

[50] Wisconsinism, pages 55-56.

[51] Vivacious Daughter, page 125.

[52] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, pages 40-41.

[53] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, pages 41-42.

[54] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 42.

[55] Wisconsinism, page 66.

[56] H. A. Preus Presidential Addresses, Larson, page 36.

[57] H. A. Preus Sermons, Larson, pages 52-53.

[58] A Theology to Live By: The Practical Luther for the Practicing Christian, by Herman A. Preus, 1977, Concordia Publishing House.

[59] See "The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Robert Preus" by Rolf Preus, pages 4-5 at <http://www.christforum.org/Papers/Content/justificationRPreus.html> Also "The Life and Teaching of Herman Amberg Preus as Instruction for the Church Today: Reflections of His Great Great Grandson," by Daniel O. S. Preus (undated) pages 8-10

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