



## **The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Robert Preus**

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It is a wonderful privilege for me to speak to you today on the doctrine of justification in the theology of Robert Preus. I was asked to present this paper because I know a bit about Robert Preus' theology, specifically in regard to the doctrine of justification. Now why should that be? Well, I was his student. And that's a fact. I remained his student long after his call to teach theology at Concordia Theological Seminary was taken away from him. And, of course, I was his student long before that call was first given to him. Most of what I know about his theology I know from listening to him. He was the best teacher I ever had. I don't say this only as his son, but as a Lutheran pastor who learned to love Lutheran theology from him. I have never met a man who loved Lutheran theology more than he. I don't believe he ever tired of talking theology. And I don't believe there was a Lutheran theologian of his generation and stature who avoided theological fads and hobbyhorses as well as he. Now there is really only one effective way for a Lutheran theologian successfully to avoid the various temptations to major in minors or to substitute for the pastoral care which flows through true Evangelical Lutheran theology an academic exhibitionism designed to elevate the theologian himself rather than the gospel of Christ. That is for the theologian to regard himself as a poor, miserable, unworthy, helpless, wretched, lost sinner under the eternal wrath of God who has been freely delivered from that wrath and certain damnation solely by the boundless grace of God in Christ who by his vicarious life and death truly pacified God and justified and saved all lost sinners by his perfect obedience. Robert Preus loved this doctrine, both as that which God had called him to teach – this is why he fought so tenaciously for that divine call when it was taken away from him – but more importantly as that which God in his unfathomable love had given to him to believe. Robert Preus loved the gospel of justification. He loved it as only a sinner who knows he's a sinner can love it. He loved it because in this gospel he found his Savior from sin.

My assignment is to speak for forty-five minutes on the doctrine of justification in the theology of Robert Preus. Now what is clear is that I

ought to conclude in forty-five minutes. What is not clear is whether my assignment is to summarize Robert Preus' doctrine of justification or whether it is to place the doctrine of justification in his theology by showing how the doctrine of justification affected his theology at a whole. If the task were the former, I could simply summarize for you his class notes which he followed – more or less – for over thirty-five years of teaching a course on justification first at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, and later at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield and Ft. Wayne. Such a summary, however, would necessarily be rather sparse, due to time limitations. It certainly would be of benefit to the church were his lecture notes on justification to be published in the form of a book. In the mean time, the most thorough and systematic work available that presents Robert Preus' doctrine of justification is the last essay he delivered, entitled, "Justification and Rome". Concordia Publishing House has published it as a paperback book.<sup>[1]</sup> I strongly recommend it, not only as a clear presentation of the Lutheran doctrine of justification, but also as a sober and thoroughly theological response to the breathlessly naïve acceptance of the claims of the Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians who have produced the various "agreements" on justification in recent years.

I will proceed in this way. First, I'll briefly summarize his doctrine of justification as outlined in his lecture notes. Then I will discuss the major emphases in his doctrine of justification. Finally, I will conclude with what I hope is a faithful application of his theology to issues within confessional Lutheranism today.

Robert Preus' class notes on justification were first prepared in the late fifties and revised over the next thirty years or so. The outline of this doctrine that follows is taken from his most recent lecture notes.

1. The importance and role of the doctrine of justification
2. Man's need of justification before God
3. The grace of God in Christ (grace alone, universal grace, serious grace, the Roman Catholic doctrine of grace)
4. The basis of man's justification
  - a. Christ's obedience under the law
  - b. Christ's obedience unto death
  - c. Christ's willing obedience
  - d. Active and passive obedience

5. The substitution
  - a. The vicarious active obedience of Christ
  - b. The vicarious passive obedience of Christ
  - c. "For us": the importance of a preposition
  - d. Christ our offering and sacrifice
6. The atonement (the results of the substitution)
  - a. Redemption
  - b. Propitiation
  - c. Reconciliation
  - d. Atonement
  - e. Various objections to the vicarious atonement
7. World reconciliation
8. The justification of a sinner
  - a. The meaning of the word
  - b. Forensic justification
    1. The imputation
    2. Foreign righteousness (Christ's righteousness)
  - c. Real forgiveness
  - d. Full forgiveness
  - e. Continual forgiveness
9. The appropriation of justification
  - a. Faith
  - b. Faith and repentance
  - c. Faith and its object (Christ)
  - d. Faith's role in justification
    1. Not a work
    2. An instrument, an empty hand
  - e. Faith as God's work
- f. Faith and good works

You will notice that the doctrine of justification is placed almost entirely in the area of Christology. Any talk of the sinner's justification before God is talk of Jesus. All talk of Jesus is talk of the sinner's justification before God. It is not until the full christological foundation has been laid that Preus brings into the discussion the role of faith in appropriating justification. This christological emphasis is constant. It is, of course, the confessional pattern. Rome disagrees. It places justification in the area of pneumatology, that is, entirely within the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of the Creed. The Lutheran Church, beginning with the Augsburg Confession and especially its Apology, began to move the topic from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article into the 2<sup>nd</sup> where

it must remain if both the glory of Christ and the comfort of the penitent are to be safeguarded. Robert Preus knew this, and his theology throughout his entire life reflected it. All discussion of justification should focus on the person and work of Jesus. We will illustrate this in the life and theology of Robert Preus by examining his teaching, throughout his life, on various topics that relate directly to this christological foundation for justification. The reason the doctrine of justification for Robert Preus – and, indeed, for every other Evangelical Lutheran theologian – is of necessity, a thoroughly applied Christology, is four-fold.

First, the doctrine of sin that renders impotent any free will in spiritual matters forces justification out of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article into the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Secondly, there can be no grace or justification of the sinner without cost and only Christ can pay the cost. Thirdly, the redemption, propitiation, atonement, and reconciliation of which Scripture speaks is descriptive of that which is literally true; these are not merely various metaphors of something else. And fourthly, the justification of the sinner, by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to him, really makes that sinner righteous. These four emphases in Robert Preus' doctrine of justification flow into and out of the christological center of this doctrine.

## **1. The Doctrine of Sin**

The doctrine of sin forces justification out of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of the Creed into the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Why is this? It is because the justification of the sinner cannot occur within the sinner precisely because he really is a sinner, that is, wholly and completely corrupted by sin. Placing justification into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of the Creed, that is, setting as the foundation or focus of this article what the Holy Spirit does within the sinner will, of necessity, vitiate the true righteousness that avails before God. One could, of course, construct a theological system in which this does not occur, but Robert Preus was not a great supporter of theological systems. He was a very realistic theologian who understood what happens in the actual teaching of God's word. When we talk about Jesus, the Holy Spirit does his work in creating, sustaining, and confirming justifying faith. When we talk about the Holy Spirit, the sinner is diverted from his attention to the person and work of Christ and begins to look within himself for the foundation for his justification before God. This is just the way it is. When the topic of justification must focus on the sinner who is being justified rather than on

Christ whose righteousness is being imputed to the sinner, that is, when justification has been taken out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of the Creed and put into the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the flesh of man (which always belies the true work of the Spirit) parades itself and its own efforts as the one thing needful, replacing the blood and righteousness of Jesus. There can be no basis in the sinner at all for his justification.<sup>[2]</sup> Justification therefore cannot be primarily what the Holy Spirit does in the sinner, though obviously the appropriation of justification by the sinner through faith is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Robert Preus hated all forms of synergism, the teaching that man's justification and salvation was in part due to his own cooperation with or non-resistance to the Holy Spirit. The truth concerning man's utter depravity and spiritual helplessness was for him non-negotiable. Every form of synergism was intolerable. No other issue had a greater impact on his ministry and life than his opposition to synergism.

When he died three and a half years ago, it was obvious that he was best known throughout Lutheranism and also within Evangelical Reformed circles as a proponent of a high view of the inspiration of the Scriptures, including the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. That should not be too surprising. The "Battle for the Bible" as Harold Lindsell put it, was the chief topic of debate in the Missouri Synod from the early sixties to the mid seventies. It was during this time that Robert Preus established himself as a leading conservative theologian within the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Much of what was written about him upon his death focused on his contribution in defending the historic Lutheran doctrine of inspiration, both as the author of The Inspiration of Scripture, and as a frequent speaker and lecturer on the subject. I recall visiting with my cousins, my Uncle Jack's children, at his funeral in St. Louis a few years ago, and one of my cousins expressed annoyance that her dad seemed to be known almost exclusively for the position he took in the Missouri Synod controversy over biblical inerrancy. I told her that that wasn't a bad thing to be remembered for. So I am not complaining when I mention how my father was known largely for the same thing. His opposition to the Historical Critical Method with its biases and presuppositions that attacked the supernatural origin of the Bible was well known. His name will always be joined to that particular controversy. I bring this up, however, to point out that, while his championing of biblical inerrancy received much attention at the time of his death, his stand on justification was far more significant, and I don't mean just as an article of Christian doctrine. His

actual stand on justification had a much greater impact on his ministry, both at its beginning and at its end, than his stand on any other topic. Any serious study of the theology or life of Robert Preus must take this into account.

One would have expected Robert Preus to join the Evangelical Lutheran Church upon his scheduled graduation from Luther Seminary in 1947. The ELC operated Luther Seminary with which his family had been strongly associated throughout the seminary's history. That did not happen. While studying at Luther, Robert Preus decided that he could not in good conscience seek ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church with which Luther was affiliated. The reason? Because of the synergism taught at Luther Seminary. This is a portion of what he wrote in a letter to the Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America dated January 25, 1947 when Robert Preus was twenty-two years old.

I, a corrupt, miserable, contemptible and helpless sinner claim no responsibility

whatsoever as over against the faith which I confess, but I believe with all my

heart that it is solely a work and gift of the Holy Spirit in me. At Luther Theological Seminary I have been taught that this my conviction on the important doctrine of conversion is not in accordance with the teaching of the Holy Scriptures but is sectarian, and that, in a sense, my salvation – and indeed that of every other person on earth whether unregenerate or regenerate – depends on me in that I am responsible as over against the acceptance or the rejection of grace. I have been taught that the unregenerate man under the influence of the Holy Spirit has a free will either to accept or reject Christ. I have often been told in class that faith is not a gift or work of the Holy Spirit in me, and the whole class has been challenged to find a single Bible passage which teaches otherwise (Comp. Eph. 2. 8,9; Phil. 1. 29; Formula of Concord, II, 48). It also has been stubbornly maintained that the unregenerate man is not spiritually dead, dead in his sins, but is only asleep (Com. Eph. 2.1,5; Formula of Concord II, 11). It has also been publicly stated to the whole senior class that this teaching, that man is responsible for

the acceptance or rejection of grace, is the official position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church...

...for conscience sake, I cannot present myself as a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. I make this decision only after prayerful and sincere study of God's Word, and it is with sorrow and regret that I terminate fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church.[\[3\]](#)

Shortly after writing this letter, he was admitted to Bethany Lutheran Seminary in Mankato, Minnesota. Later that year he became the first graduate of that seminary and was ordained into the Lutheran ministry as a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod at First American Lutheran Church in Mayville, North Dakota. He also served Bygland Lutheran Church near Fisher, Minnesota. By a mysterious movement of the gracious providence of God, I am presently serving both of these congregations, as pastor of River Heights Lutheran Church in East Grand Forks, Minnesota, and vacancy pastor at First American Lutheran in Mayville, North Dakota. Out of respect for my father and the fact that he served these congregations fifty years ago, I try to keep false doctrine to a minimum in my sermons, at least when preaching on justification.

His hatred of synergism never abated. As one of many conservative theologians in the Missouri Synod who opposed fellowship with the American Lutheran Church in 1969, he, more than any other, focused on the synergistic denial of the doctrine of grace alone tolerated within the ALC. He wrote two major essays in opposition to fellowship with the ALC. His first essay, "To Join or Not to Join"[\[4\]](#) was delivered in 1968 before the Missouri Synod declared fellowship with the ALC. His second, "Fellowship Reconsidered,"[\[5\]](#) was delivered in 1971 after the Missouri Synod had been in fellowship with the ACL. In both essays, the first doctrinal reason he gave for his opposition to fellowship with the ALC was the tolerance of synergism within that church. His commitment to "grace alone" is what kept him from joining the ELC in the 1940's and it remained an important issue twenty years later. The debate about the Bible received the most press, both in the church and secular media, in reports about tensions between the Missouri Synod and the ALC and later the ELCA. For Robert Preus, however, the synergistic leaven within the ELC (which later became part of the new ALC and later became part of the new ELCA) remained the most significant obstacle he had to expressing



fellowship with that church. It would be grossly inaccurate to say that Robert Preus' main criticism of the ELCA was its low view of biblical inspiration. It was rather the weakness of its doctrine of justification.

I say this not to downplay his high view of the Scriptures and his commitment to biblical inerrancy. His writings on justification – especially his lecture notes – show, however, that he found much to say in favor of Karl Barth's writings on justification because Barth took seriously the doctrine of sin and justification. So Preus would quote Barth against, for example, Schleiermacher with his weak doctrine of sin and atonement. Preus certainly wasn't endorsing Barth's doctrine of Scripture, but when the man wrote something about justification that was worth repeating, Preus would do so.

The first reason why the doctrine of justification was for Robert Preus a thoroughly applied christology is that man is completely and helplessly wicked and cannot do, effect, contribute, offer non-resistance, or in any other way make his justification by God possible. Still, a righteousness is required. This requirement of righteousness is not an arbitrary requirement of God's inscrutable will. It is simple justice. God cannot be God, nor can he be trusted, if he is not just. This brings us to the second reason why justification must be a thoroughly applied Christology.

## **2. The Cost of the Sinner's Justification**

The second theme or emphasis that one finds in Robert Preus' doctrine of justification is the stress that he places on the cost of the sinner's justification. He repeatedly opposed any notion of absolute grace. God's grace cannot stand alone, independent of Jesus. There can be no justification of the sinner by an absolute decree of God. Preus frequently condemned the teaching of the Socinians, 16<sup>th</sup> Century Unitarians who promoted the doctrine of absolute grace, that is, a grace without cost, without the necessity of Christ's suffering. Grace has a cost. There is the need for payment. God must be propitiated. The world must be redeemed. Jesus must intervene. Christ and only Christ must be the payment, the cost, the propitiation. There can be no talk of Christ-less grace or justification. There is no love without cost, for God's love is never abstract, nor is his justification of the sinner merely an idea. It is the chief act of God's love. Preus loved to quote the words of Brand from Ibsen's play by the same name:

Of what the paltering world calls love,  
I will not know, I cannot speak;  
I know but His who reigns above,  
And His is neither mild nor weak;  
Hard even unto death is this,  
And smiting with its awful kiss.  
What was the answer of God's love  
Of old, when in the olive-grove  
In anguish-sweat His own Son lay;  
And prayed, O, Take this cup away?  
Did God take from him then the cup?  
No, child; His Son must drink it up!

This beautiful quotation found its way into many sermons. Preus frequently quoted Luther against the idea that God could justify the sinner without a cost,<sup>[6]</sup> where Luther labeled such a notion a “miserable and shocking opinion.” Preus often quoted as well from the famous Luther hymn, “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” the words,

Then God beheld my wretched state  
With deep commiseration;  
He thought upon his mercy great,  
And willed my soul's salvation;  
He turned to me a Father's heart;  
Not small the cost! to heal my smart,  
He gave his best and dearest. (Lutheran Hymnary, #526 stanza 4)

Just as the doctrine of sin requires the justification of the sinner to be grounded in something outside of the sinner himself, so also the doctrine of sin presents us with the enduring reality of God's wrath. This is the presupposition for the necessity of a cost. The denial of the wrath of God against sinners and the need for a propitiation is a denial of the doctrine of justification. In response to Albrecht Ritschl's argument that “it is impossible to conceive sinners, at the same time and in the same respect as objects of both God's love and God's wrath,” Preus says, “That a teaching is inconceivable is a poor reason for rejecting it. Ritschl cannot harmonize the wrath and love of God, so he denies the wrath of God.”<sup>[7]</sup> Preus then goes on to show the implications of denying the wrath of God. The gospel is soon lost, for if there is no wrath there is no need for a

propitiator, and if there is no such need, there is no need for Jesus. The cost of forgiveness in Robert Preus' theology was not merely a logical dogmatic prerequisite for the forgiveness of sins. He said, "Various attempts have been made to harmonize God's righteousness with his mercy, but I am not sure they amount to much."<sup>[8]</sup> Preus did not present his theology by means of fitting the various points and sub-points into a system. Rather than to harmonize God's wrath and love, he simply cited Scriptural text after text that taught that Christ was indeed the cost of our justification. The cost of forgiveness is not, as Preus would frequently say in criticism of the Roman teaching, simply some kind of remote and far removed cause which has little bearing of the doctrine of justification. No, the cost is the very revelation of God himself. For the cost is Jesus. Jesus is the answer to sin. He is the answer to the justice of God. His is the righteousness that avails before God. And this means that Christ's righteousness is real. This brings us to the third reason why for Robert Preus justification was a thoroughly applied Christology and it is closely tied to the second.

### **3. The Vicarious Atonement of Jesus Christ is Literally True**

This cannot be stressed enough. Preus' life-long battle against the Historical Critical Method was not only on account of its bias against various miraculous events that the Bible reports. It was primarily on account of its bias against the theological foundation for the gospel itself. The gospel must be grounded in the atoning work of Jesus, and if the gospel is to have any substance to it, the atonement must be a real atonement.

Preus' class notes on justification contain hundreds of citations from the Scriptures, Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, the Lutheran Fathers, and more recent theologians, notably Karl Barth. By far the most biblical citations are found in his discussion of the vicarious atonement. He leads into the topic by a thorough discussion of Christ's vicarious obedience, active, passive, and willing. He distinguishes between Christ's active and passive obedience, but insists that they cannot be separated. He deals extensively with the meaning of the Greek preposition, hyper, usually translated into English as "for", but meaning "in the stead of", in order to show the substitutionary or vicarious nature of Christ's obedience. He thereby sets the foundation for his emphasis on the reality of Christ's atoning work. He points out that the various soteriological terms used to describe what Jesus has done (redemption, atonement, propitiation,

reconciliation) all mean the same thing. It is the same reality regarded from different angles. What must be emphasized is the reality of it all.

This comes through clearly in his lecture notes as Preus criticizes the notion promoted not only by most modern theologians and Karl Barth, but also by Lenski and many conservative Lutheran theologians, that God's wrath was not really set aside by the atonement of Jesus. Lenski, for example, argues that the atonement effected a change in our status, but that God was not literally reconciled. Preus disagrees. After presenting the Old Testament teaching concerning the mercy seat, Preus writes about the propitiation:

It is God who is propitiated by the sacrifice of Christ. God who is angry with sin is propitiated and made gracious. This is obviously what the publican in the temple thought when he said, "God be propitiated . . . to me, the sinner." Luke 18, 13. And this is the main meaning of the concept in both the Old and New Testaments. There have been many who don't care for a theology which speaks of an angry God being propitiated, of a God who turns away His wrath and forgives. But this is precisely what happens.[\[9\]](#)

Preus then quotes from Psalm 78:38, cites a hymn verse, and provides a good Luther quote. The literalness or reality of the vicarious atonement flows into the reality of the righteousness that is imputed to the sinner. Preus brings this together in his final essay on justification after quoting from the Formula of Concord's endorsement of Luther's doctrine of the imputation of Christ's foreign righteousness. Preus writes:

The imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer is not a metaphorical motif to Luther but a non-figurative description of what actually takes place when a sinner is justified for Christ's sake. And there is no other way in which a sinner can be justified and become righteous before God except by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Furthermore, the setting for the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer is not figurative. Sin, God's judgment, grace, redemption, Christ's obedience and life and death are not figures of speech. The "blessed exchange" motif, however, while not metaphorical in itself, is set in a metaphorical pattern of thought (marriage, union with Christ, crucifixion of Law, sin, and death, etc.). Therefore we can conclude that Luther is not mixing metaphors or confusing two motifs at all. Rather, he is grounding the blessed exchange whereby the believer receives forgiveness and spiritual blessings

from Christ and Christ in turn receives the sinner's sin and guilt and punishment in the fact of the believer's justification before God for Christ's sake. In other words, God for Christ's sake, imputes to the believer Christ's righteousness and imputes to Christ the believer's sin and guilt.[\[10\]](#)

This emphasis on the reality of it all is not only in response to the tendency of modern theologians to turn concrete soteriological realities into metaphors or images of some kind of nebulous "unconditional love," but also a Lutheran defense against the classic Roman attack on the Lutheran doctrine of justification. This brings us to the next feature of Robert Preus' doctrine of justification.

#### **4. The Justification of the Sinner Makes the Sinner Righteous**

On this point, Robert Preus subscribed to the words of that cute, conservative, Christian plaque that is found in pious family rooms and bathrooms all over America: "God said it; I believe it; that settles it." (Although, he might have taken the "I believe it" out, so as to avoid suggesting that faith contributes to one's justification.) In other words, if God says that a sinner is righteous, that sinner really is righteous. Listen to the lecture notes on this point.

There is of course a reason why the dogmatists used this outside-inside language. They were combating Osiander and Rome with their confusion of justification and sanctification. Therefore they would say that anything happening in us is sanctification or regeneration or conversion. But the extrinsic-intrinsic language is unfortunate when applied to justification. The question is not where I am justified by God. I am actually justified outside and inside and everywhere, so far as that is concerned. The question is that I am justified; and if I am justified, I am just, not merely regarded as just. And the question is not whether I am regarded as righteous or made righteous. If God regards me as righteous He has made me righteous. The Apology says (IV 72), "To be justified means to make righteous men out of unrighteous . . ." The Confessions and Luther have no qualms about saying that in justification God makes us righteous. But they always mean that in justification we are made righteous by imputation. (Emphasis in the original)

What follows in the lecture notes are several pages of Luther quotations where he uses very realistic imagery of an infused grace and righteousness while teaching the same doctrine which the dogmatists later taught without using the scholastic terms with which Luther was raised. You will also find a very thorough discussion of this in Justification and Rome chapter nine. Much of this chapter is from his lecture notes. The Roman doctrine of justification has always insisted that the Lutheran doctrine of justification is merely a “legal fiction” on account of the fact that the sinner isn’t changed into a righteous man. The Quenstedt quotes that Preus provides establish quite well that there is nothing fictitious about it. Christ’s real righteousness is really reckoned to real people. Therefore, they are really righteous. If I may use my own illustration from the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. The Lutheran rejection of the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation by no means suggests that Lutherans have a weaker doctrine of the Real Presence than does Rome. In the case of the doctrine of justification, Rome insists on a definition of reality taught by neoplatonist-influenced theologians. In the case of the doctrine of the Real Presence, Rome insists on a definition of reality taught by aristotelian-influenced theologians. Lutherans refuse to permit pagan Greeks to define reality for them. The righteousness by which the sinner is justified is real, the imputation is real, the verdict of God is real, and the word of the Gospel really does bestow and seal upon the believer this real righteousness so that he becomes thereby really and truly righteous.

It was his abiding concern about the reality of the sinner’s justification by God that led Robert Preus to defend William Beck from the charge that he taught some Osiandrian notion of justification by translating the Greek word, dikaiow, as “make righteous” rather than as “declare righteous”. Beck argued that “make righteous” was the best translation of the Greek. He claimed that the “ow” ending verbs in Greek, just like the “ify” ending verbs in English, mean to make something so. To clarify means to make clear, to solidify means to make solid, and so forth. Beck was making a philological argument. Without claiming sufficient knowledge of Greek to pass judgment on Beck’s opinion, Robert Preus did defend him on theological grounds, citing the arguments he had used for years. There might be some confusion on this matter on account of the fact that Beck’s translation of dikaiow became an issue about the time that Dr. J. A. O. Preus, II, then president of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, made

public his concerns about the teaching of Dr. Walter A. Maier, Jr., a professor at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne where Robert Preus served as president. Christian News editor, the Rev. Herman Otten, had been quite critical of Jack Preus for making public his criticism of Walter A. Maier. It was Christian News that had published Beck's Bible, although his New Testament with the controversial translation of dikaio had been translated years earlier.

After Jack Preus publicized his concerns about Walter A. Maier's teaching on justification, a controversy ensued. The details of this controversy cannot be recited here and now due to limitations of time. It ought to be said that while Jack Preus and Robert Preus did disagree on the proper way to deal with Walter A. Maier's teaching, there was no difference between the Preus brothers on the doctrine of objective justification. Not only did they agree on this doctrine, they agreed as well on the seriousness of Maier's rejection of objective justification. Maier most certainly did reject the doctrine of objective justification. He taught what he called a universal redemption, but denied the necessary implications of this that the entire world had been justified by Christ's death and resurrection. Indeed, Maier, in teaching his class on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans during the summer of 1977 wrote on the blackboard, "Redemption + Faith = Justification." On several occasions, however, Robert Preus did tell inquiring people that no one had charged Maier with false doctrine. Certain disciples of Maier, who along with their teacher rejected the doctrine of objective justification, reported that Robert Preus supported Maier's teaching and that he believed that Maier did not teach false doctrine with his denial of objective justification. This is not true. He said no such thing. His argument with his brother was over his brother's refusal to charge Maier with false doctrine or to have anyone else charge him with false doctrine. Robert believed in due process. He repeatedly said that he would not be used to deny due process to Walter A. Maier. He also expressed his opinion that his efforts to bring Maier to an orthodox formulation of this doctrine with the help of such eminent theologians as Dr. Harry Huth, the great Missouri Synod Confessions scholar, would bear more fruit than his brother's approach. At any rate, the controversy wasn't entirely harmful to the church inasmuch as it did yield a fine statement from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod on the doctrine of justification, authored by none other than Robert Preus.

If we understand that for Robert Preus the doctrine of justification was nothing else than a thoroughly applied and realistic christology, we can also readily see how it defined and shaped his ministry also to the very end of his life. His opposition to the Church Growth Movement was not based on aesthetic, cultural, or even, strictly speaking, liturgical considerations. It was its Arminian theology that he fought. His defense of the historic liturgy was also for the sake of the pure proclamation of the gospel. I began by suggesting that Robert Preus' success in avoiding theological fads and extremes was due to the place that justification had in his own personal faith and thus as well in this theology as a whole. The final years of his life bear this out. His decision to fight his removal as president and tenured professor at Concordia Theological Seminary was made in full knowledge that he would lose much of the respect that he had acquired as a prominent teacher of the church. And he did. It is amazing how many people think that it is a virtue meekly to acquiesce to the will of ecclesio-political gangsters, as if such submission were a reflection of Christian humility. Robert Preus didn't think so. But when your justification by God is the focus, theme, and foundation of your life, you don't need anything that any man can take away. It's as simple as that. He fought a fight that could not but leave his reputation severely damaged. Yet he did so with the prior knowledge that he had all the righteousness he needed in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to him.

There is so much more that should be said: the role of faith in justification, faith and works, and other facets of this article that I have largely ignored. But I would like to close by addressing one item of unfinished business in the doctrine of justification in the theology of Robert Preus. During his last years he repeatedly expressed concern about where the liturgical movement was heading. The liturgical renewal was widely regarded by its supporters as the flip side of the confessional renaissance that had begun, with Robert Preus as its chief spokesman, during the mid-seventies. Along with a greater appreciation for the historic liturgy (in opposition to those who would toss it out) there came as well a renewed study of Luther, the Confessions, and the Lutheran Fathers. So far, so good. The liturgical renewal also included a high view of the pastoral office with an emphasis on the pastor really speaking in the stead and by the command of Jesus. Robert Preus' realistic theology with its christological foundation appeared to jibe quite well with the liturgical renewal of the 80's and 90's.



But where was and where is that movement moving? Does it acknowledge the centrality of justification? Or is it locating the forgiveness of sins more and more in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of the Creed and less and less in the 2<sup>nd</sup>? Consider what one hears these days of incarnational and sacramental theology. What is being said? These words certainly are appealing. But surely they must be more than a kind of mantra to be repeated again and again to mark one as being on the right side in the church wars! How can one speak of the incarnation without thereby speaking as well of the atonement? And how can there be any discussion of sacramental theology that neglects to emphasize that foreign righteousness reckoned to the sinner? There appears to be growing, not yet beyond its embryonic stage, a new pietism, a liturgical pietism if you will, that is really no different than its earlier incarnations in Germany and Scandinavia and, of course, northern Minnesota. It does not focus on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus and the reckoning to the unworthy sinner of his righteousness that avails before God. No, it finds itself quite comfortable focusing instead upon a vague presence of Christ, a sacramental, incarnational presence that is to be had by partaking in liturgical rituals.

This is déjà vu all over again! The Pietists located the one thing needful within the experience of the awakened. The Charismatics located it within the experience of those baptized in the Holy Ghost. The Church Growthers located it in the discovery and release of the spiritual gifts within. And now where is this one thing needful? Is he standing in the Pulpit? Before the font? In front of the Altar? No, please don't take offense at these questions! The pastor is nothing and he never was anything! He is there only to talk about Jesus! There is nothing more to him than that talking! Justification is to be located in the Second Article, and this is not just an academic point. Our very lives depend upon it. The Holy Ghost has only one Person to reveal and that is Jesus. He doesn't talk about himself. And so we don't. We talk about Jesus. Do you want to promote liturgical, sacramental, theology? Talk about the crucifixion! Do you believe in promoting private confession and absolution? It is nothing, baptism is nothing, the pastoral office is nothing and means nothing if we are not talking about the substitution of Jesus, the obedience of Jesus, the merits of Jesus, the suffering of Jesus for us, the payment of the cost of our redemption by Jesus, the reality of the cessation of God's wrath because Jesus drank the cup down to the bitter dregs, the objective reconciliation and justification, the reality of that verdict of forgiveness,

and the real imputation of that real righteousness so that we can say without any doubt at all, I am righteous! I am righteous, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. This is Lutheran theology, and there is no sacramental or incarnational theology worth talking about that isn't talking about this.

This is my plea and gentle warning for anyone who wants to listen. Let us keep our focus on these soteriological themes, for they are the reality upon which our lives and theology must be grounded. We must locate forgiveness and justification in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of the Creed. When we speak of the justification of the sinner through faith, we are speaking of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article coming into the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Baptism, absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the preaching of the minister flow right out of this central article of true righteousness. They are and must remain subordinate to it.

It has been a tremendous privilege for me to speak to you today on the topic of Christian doctrine which was most precious to my father in his life and which brought him into Paradise upon his death. He loved to quote hymns in his teaching and preaching, so I close with a hymn verse that he loved and which so beautifully expresses the precious doctrine of justification.

I have naught, my God, to offer, save the blood of Thy dear Son;  
Graciously accept the proffer: Make His righteousness mine own.  
His holy life gave He, was crucified for me;  
His righteousness perfect He now pleads before Thee;  
His own robe of righteousness, my highest good,  
Shall clothe me in glory, through faith in His blood.  
Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary, #182, stanza 6

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[1] Robert D. Preus, Justification and Rome. Concordia Academic Press, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO 1997

[2] See Justification and Rome, PP 63-64

[3] From a letter obtained from Concordia Historical Institute entitled, "Vita Submitted to the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America." Written from 60 Seymour Ave. S. E., Minneapolis, Minnesota, dated January 25, 1947 and signed by Robert Preus

[4] "To Join Or Not To Join: A Study of Some of the Issues in the Question of Joining With the American Lutheran Church in Pulpit and Altar Fellowship" Presented at the Feb 13-16, 1968 Convention at Grand Forks of the North Dakota District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. pp. 12-18

[5] "Fellowship Reconsidered: An Assessment of Fellowship between the LCMS and the ALC in the Light of Past, Present and Future" Delivered at the April 13-15, 1971 Wyoming District Pastor's Conference. Published by Mt. Hope Lutheran Church, Casper.

[6] See, for example, Justification and Rome, p 132 and "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification" PP 166-167

[7] Lecture Notes on Justification. Walter A. Maier, Jr. used Ritschl's argument in opposition to the doctrine of objective justification. See more on Maier's teaching below.

[8] Lecture Notes on Justification

[9] Lecture Notes on Justification

[10] Justification and Rome, PP 63-64