

'A Statement' A Mis-Statement

Edward H. Schroeder and Stephen Hitchcock

[A Discussion Paper from Evangelical Lutherans in Mission. 1976]

Synodical president. Dr. Jacob Preus, seldom mentions any longer the doctrinal issues in the controversy rocking the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Yet his "*A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*" – first offered in March 1972 – continues to add fuel to the ongoing conflict in the Missouri Synod.

Dr. Preus at first indicated that "*A Statement*" was to be a yardstick for measuring the alleged false teaching of "the faculty majority" of the old St. Louis seminary. But it turned out to be more than that: the 1973 New Orleans convention made "*A Statement*" binding on everyone in Resolution 3-01.

Since then, many pastors, teachers, and professors have been measured by "*A Statement*" and found wanting. For some, it has meant the loss of jobs and ministries. And its vision of the church continues to shape – and limit – the life and mission of the Missouri Synod.

We contend that this far-reaching statement is really a "mis-statement" of what it claims to be. Dr. Preus asserts that his statement is a summary of orthodox or correct Christian doctrine. But he mis-states and mis-uses that orthodox doctrine in such a way that we lose sight of the very **heart** of the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions – the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ.

What is wrong with "*A Statement*" is that it **fails** to fulfill the

primary purpose of all Christian theology: to show us that Jesus Christ is the true source of comfort and hope in our lives.

The Apostle Paul made the same criticism of his opponents in his letter to the Galatians. It was not that those in Galatia were denying the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather, Paul charges they were misusing that history of Jesus by tacking on a legalistic addition, an alien “caboose” to the “Gospel Train.” This legalistic addition (that Christians must be circumcised) was so serious as to cause Christ to have “died in vain.” By adding an alien caboose, they had derailed the whole train, engine and all.

The situation at the time of the Reformation was very similar. In their first public confession at Augsburg in 1530, the Lutherans cheerfully conceded that their opponents had an orthodox doctrine of Christ. But, the Lutherans contended, this doctrine was used in such a way that it was made “worthless.” The merits and benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection were “wasted.” The same concern is reflected in all the documents we call the Lutheran Confessions.

Thus if we are to continue to focus our faith on the saving Christ proclaimed in the Scriptures and Confessions, “*A Statement*” must be closely scrutinized.

Article One

Christ as Savior and Lord

“A STATEMENT”

Dr. Preus begins this article by confessing **Christ alone**— apart from Christ there is no Good News of salvation – **and faith** alone – apart from faith in Christ, no one gets the benefit of that salvation.

Yet Dr. Preus does not keep our focus on this central Christian doctrine. Rather he concentrates almost exclusively on life after death. "A Statement" uses "Christ alone" to get people to change their minds about the "afterlife." What a waste!

Faith alone also gets mis-used in 'A Statement' just as does "Christ alone." Faith is equated with accepting doctrines. This is what the Lutheran Reformers condemned as "faith in facts."

"Faith alone" does not mean "you had better believe this teaching about heaven or hell – or you are lost." Nor does faith mean accepting all the additional requirements that "A Statement" and the Preus administration have, in effect, **added** to "Christ alone and faith alone" – bylaws, synodical "tradition," views of Biblical interpretation, and much more.

SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSIONS

We do not deny Biblical teaching about heaven and hell. Rather we are saying, take a hint from Jesus' own teaching. All of Jesus' references to the afterlife, such as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), are urging us to faith alone in Christ today. The Lutheran Confessions also remind us of our continuing need to take full advantage of the merits and benefits of Christ **in this life**.

"Faith alone" means that the only way to have salvation at all is to trust Christ now. Salvation is not something Christians hope to possess for the first time beyond death. When sinners place their trust in Christ, and not in some collection of doctrines or way of interpreting the Bible, they have salvation, their sins are forgiven, and they are made alive to God **right now**.

In the face of all these "caboose" added by "A Statement" to the "gospel train," we can join Paul in confessing, "If anyone

is in Christ, he is a new creation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Confronted with additional requirements, we can trust that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Article Two

Law and Gospel

“A STATEMENT”

Although “*A Statement*” affirms the “due distinction” between God’s Law and God’s Gospel, it never makes use of that distinction. Dr. Preus, for example, rightly calls the Law God’s “immutable will” – the very term used by the Lutherans in the Formula of Concord in 1577. But Dr. Preus understands “immutable” to mean that God never changes His legislation or rules. Thus the Law becomes a “rule for righteous living,” the way Christians are to act after they have received Christ’s forgiveness.

In effect, “*A Statement*” suggests the following: The **Law** is God’s immutable legislation for our behavior. As sinners we do not live up to that expected behavior. The **Gospel** forgives our failures and enables us to live up to the Law’s expectations. This understanding of the Law Gospel is clean contrary to both the Bible and our experience.

SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSIONS

The Scriptures and the Confessions assert that the “due distinction” between Law and Gospel is this: God’s **Law** is “immutable” in demanding that we be righteous. It is not that God’s rules and regulations never change. Rather, it is God’s activity of judging and sentencing sinners that goes on and on.

The **Gospel** is God Himself in His Son suffering the death

sentence we sinners deserve. In other words, God “trumps” His own criticism of sinners by taking it upon Himself. God reconciles us to himself by making Christ to be sin for us that we might be righteous (2 Corinthians 5).

The Gospel is therefore distinctively “law-free.” Dr. Preus concludes that God’s Gospel gives us freedom **for** the Law. The New Testament and the Lutheran Reformation, in contrast, claim that the Gospel frees us **from** the Law. That’s Good News! That’s the “due distinction” between Law and Gospel.

ArticleThree

The Mission of the Church

“A STATEMENT”

“A Statement” mis-states Christ’s great commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) when it downplays “the ministering to men’s physical needs” as something **secondary** in the Christian mission. “A Statement” goes on to reject anyone who claims the Christian witness is complete without ever naming the name of Jesus.

What a mis-representation of the church’s mission – and of the “moderate” position. It is also a mis-reading of Jesus’ own ministry: Where does Jesus ever indicate that His healing the sick was secondary to His preaching the Good News? God’s grace was revealed in both the spiritual and physical ministry of Jesus.

To suggest therefore, any less than a total witness – involving **both** physical and spiritual ministry– betrays a lack of faith in the Commissioner Himself.

SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSIONS

The Mission of Christ in 30 A.D. and in 1976 A.D. is to get people redeemed from the powers of death that are loose in the world destroying God's creatures and creation. Is that physical or spiritual? It is both!

Such an all-encompassing mission means promoting the Good News **by word and deed**. Deeds without words – without the message of Jesus Christ – leaves the people in the dark about who the real Lord is. Words without deeds leave people wondering whether the message of Jesus is just another piece of propaganda.

The goal of the church's mission, then, is to enable all kinds of people in all kinds of situations to take full advantage of the Savior who can redeem them from all the powers of death.

Article Four

Holy Scripture

"A STATEMENT"

Dr. Preus devotes almost two-thirds of "*A Statement*" to this article on the Scripture. Nearly all of it is aimed at the alleged false teaching of the "faculty majority" at the old St. Louis seminary.

In the last section of Article Four labeled letter "I"), Dr. Preus states explicitly a theme which is implicit throughout the entire article: The divine quality about the Bible is its supernatural origin and the supernatural attributes that belong to it because of this origin.

Thus any study of the Bible using a natural perspective (specifically, the historical-critical method) is considered a threat to the Bible's supernatural origin.

But fuss about the Bible's supernatural origin all you want, and

the Gospel is not made one bit more believable. In fact, concern about the Bible's supernatural origin can lead people to trust in the Bible rather than in Jesus. Worrying, for example, about the Bible's "inerrancy" diverts our attention from its message of divine mercy.

Time and time again in the New Testament, people rejected Jesus precisely because He did not have the supernatural credentials they demanded. They rejected Him because He was too "natural" – a Messiah who was crucified as a common criminal. Thus both then and now, we sinners addicted to the supernatural can miss the truly extraordinary thing about the Bible.

SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSIONS

The divine quality about the Bible – the genuinely supernatural because it is so contrary to our natural, everyday existence – is that the Bible shows a God who is merciful to sinners. Right here on this very natural earth. God does this through a Man who is so "natural" that He dies just like the rest of us, suffering the death we sinners deserve. And what is more, He raises that Son from the dead that we might have new and eternal life.

This is God's "foolishness" – as St. Paul calls it in 1 Corinthians – and it is the power of salvation for all who believe it. That's what the Bible **supernatural**.

To convey this Good News, God uses very "natural vehicles," human words written by people like you and me. And when such words bring us God's own saving message, that's **inspiration** – the work of the Holy Spirit as Jesus describes it in John 14-16.

If the historical-critical method can help us get Christ off the pages of the book and into the hearts of people, then we must use that method. And these Biblical words and writings of the Apostles will still surprise us today – no matter what method of

Biblical interpretation we use – because they still paint before our eyes the crucified Messiah. For as John’s Gospel reminds us, “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:21).

Article Five

Original Sin

“A STATEMENT”

“*A Statement*” mis-states the doctrine of original sin by assuming that the subject under discussion is the first Adam. Rather, the doctrine of original sin describes the “tragic truth” of **every human**. My old Adam, as the Lutheran Confessions put it, is the subject under discussion.

The problem with Dr. Preus’ understanding of original sin is that it can cause us – in the face of our sinnerhood – to pass the blame back to the “original Adam.” And we know what Adam tried to do: pass the buck to Eve, and she to the serpent. This response is itself evidence of our sinnerhood.

What is worse, we have failed to confess our need of Christ. We have closed our ears to the Good News of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSIONS

The proper use of the doctrine of original sin is to encourage our **repentance**. “Yes, God that is who **I** really am. God be merciful to **me** a sinner.” This response recognizes two things:

- a. from the very moment of our **origin**, we have been an “old Adam,” and
- b. our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds have their **origin** in

the broken shape of our personal self – we do not fear, love, and trust God, but instead have taken over management of our own lives.

In the face of this tragic – and fatal – truth about ourselves, we can only throw ourselves on God’s grace in Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection alone frees us from our original sin.

Article Six

Confessional Subscription

Lutheran pastors and teachers publicly subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions. That is, they promise to preach and teach according to these Confessions. In the Bible, such public confession of faith is described as “binding” – it **binds** the person making the confession to the object of his confession.

“A STATEMENT”

“*A Statement*” however, presents the “binding” character of confession as **bondage**, as a limitation of freedom. Dr Preus argues, in effect, that somehow after you take a confessional obligation (as at the time of ordination or confirmation), you are no longer able to say things (about the Bible, for example) that you were free to say before.

This is a mis-use of confessional subscription on at least two counts:

- a. in confessional subscription, the object to which Lutherans bind themselves is **Jesus Christ alone**, and
- b. to have a “bond” with Jesus Christ is, according to the Scriptures, not a limitation or bondage, but rather freedom.

SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSIONS

Confessional subscription does not tell me what I have to do. No, because I am binding myself to a Christ who frees me, confessional subscription **frees** me to do something – proclaim the Good news of Jesus Christ. And to proclaim the Good News is to free the consciences of the others from sin and death. That is, as the Lutheran Confessions say, “the perpetual aim of the Gospel.”

That is why Luther and the other Reformers repeatedly maintained that their consciences could not be bound by “Councils.” Nor can we today be bound by statements and resolutions passed by majority votes of Synod.

Thus in confessional subscription, we are “bound” only to the Gospel and to the Lord “whom to serve is perfect freedom” (Prayer of St. Augustine).

Conclusion

We object therefore to “**A Statement**” because Dr. Preus has **mis-stated** and **mis-used** important doctrines of the church – Jesus as Savior and Lord, Law and Gospel, the Mission of the Church, Scriptures, Original Sin, and Confessional Subscription. “*A Statement*” – and the entire synodical controversy – has undermined the one true foundation of the church’s faith and practice, Jesus Christ.

In contrast we believe that in the midst of this conflict and in all of our lives, these great doctrines of the church need to be **used** to point us again and again to the Christ who frees us from all bondage and sends us on His mission.

[AStatement \(PDF\)](#)