Critique of President Preus' Statement

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Others have responded to the Preus "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles." William Lazareth, Walter Keller, Paul Bretscher, Paul Jacobs, the New England Pastoral Conference, Twin-Cities Pastoral Conference, Southern Illinois Pastors and Teachers Conference, Concordia College (Portland) Faculty, Theology Division of Concordia College (Seward), and the CRESSET team (Keller, Korby, Schultz, Truemper). All of the above were printed documents.

In the majority of cases the responses listed above criticized the Preus Statement for what it says about Bible and Bible-related points of controversy. An exception to that is the CRESSET critique. It focuses on A) the shallow Gospel in the Preus Statement (henceforth abbreviated as TPS); B) the improper distinction between law and gospel; and C) the resulting false notion of what faith really is. Some of the other responses touch on these items too.

I think the CRESSET team has exposed the jugular of the theology of TPS. Here TPS is most un-Lutheran and sub-scriptural. The hassle about the Bible which dominates TPS is a symptom of the deeper sickness at the heart of its message.

The CRESSET team has done the job of showing the accuracy of our evaluative words "Un- Lutheran and Sub-scriptural". What I

propose to do here is not to improve on their labors, but to try to offer two items. One is a list of historical parallels between the circumstances of the 16th century reformation and the agony of reformation in the LC-MS in 1973. The other is an attempted epitome (short concise version) of the already existing evaluations (especially the CRESSET one) to let the average reader see the error of TPS and the accuracy of our words “Un- Lutheran and sub-scriptural.”

THE PARALLELS: THE AGONY OF REFORMATION — IN THE 16TH CENTURY AND IN LC-MS 1973

1. It’s almost impossible to imagine—unless it has actually happened to a person directly— what is involved when one is asked: Do you ever stop for a moment and ask yourself “What if our tradition is wrong? What if ‘what we’ve always taught’ is actually at odds with the truth of the Gospel? In the reformation era this was surely the agony which the Reformers themselves faced. They did not arise on the scene as young Turks out to topple the establishment. They were initially “hard-hats” of the RC establishment who were moved by events to raise the agonizing question. Their RC opponents apparently were in most cases unable even to discuss the possibility. Note the similarity to LC-MS now, how many of our people are scared, too scared, to ask: what if our LC-MS tradition—at least some of it—is mistaken?

2. The answer which the reformers finally put together was a yes and no. Some large segments of “what we’ve always taught” are at odds with the truth of the Gospel—and these segments can be traced back a long way back into the Middle ages and even beyond. Other segments of “what we’ve always taught and practiced” are congruent with the truth of the Gospel and they too can be traced back through the Middle Ages right on back

into the NT times. The hard facts of our LC-MS churchly history are that we've had two traditions interwoven in our past—two traditions that crash into each other at the center although many folks in the past, "our fathers," we ourselves, may never have noticed it before. But now that we have come to see that it is so, we must clean the bad tradition off of the good one, and "hold fast to what is good" as the Apostle counsels us.

3. In the era of the Reformers' squabble with the papists, the papists did not deny a single orthodox dogma. Both sides publicly acknowledged all the creedal formulations of the ancient church. And neither side suggested that the other was purposely trying to be deceitful. TPS and we too affirm our orthodoxy.

4. Nevertheless when the reformers listened to the damnamuses (the items which the papists rejected), they detected the *de facto* false gospel, the *de facto* heterodoxy of their opponents. From some of the positive affirmations of the papists the *de facto* heterodoxy was often subsequently discernible. Thus although every RC theologian rejected Pelagianism, the theology of the Roman Confutation of the A.C. showed very clearly that they were semi-pelagians, not denying faith in Christ, but denying that such faith is sola. When the RCs gave their critique of the Lutherans' position, the substance of their own position comes much more out into the open. But that is true of any verbal presentation. To discern the <u>antitheses</u> is to see what the <u>thesis</u> is. The same is true in TPS.

5. Consequently the reformers were not content merely to record whether their opponents accepted the orthodox dogma (Trinity, Christology, procession of the Holy Spirit). Even more they checked out the use (or disuse) which the papal theology made of the heady dogma. Thus, e.g., at the point of Christology they noted that although RC theology confessed an absolutely orthodox

(i.e., Nicene) Christology, the Romans dis-used or mis- used it so miserably as to “make Christ useless”, to “disparage the merits and benefits of Christ” and thus “rob sinners of the consolation and comfort” which the Christ of the orthodox Christology wanted those sinners to receive. The “use” which The Preus Statement makes of the orthodox Lutheran dogma follows the papal pattern.

6. Faith-in-God’s-good-news-for-sinners is at the root of every serious controversy about doctrine. If the controversy breaks out at some other point, it may take time for this root of it to get out into the open. In the Reformation era it took more than a decade. In LC- MS it has also been quite a few years.

7. This is especially the case when a semi-heresy is in operation at the very time that the “whole-heresy” is being roundly rejected by the false-gospeler. The theologians of the papal confutation were in fact semi-pelagians, even though they denied that full-scale- Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism were accurate labels for their position.

8. That makes the semi-false-gospel harder to bring out into the open a) because it had enough of the smell of orthodoxy to it that the casual observer detects nothing awry, and b) the alleged proponent of the semi-heresy can hardly be convinced that his proposed doctrine is as off-base as it really is.

9. It was not immediately clear to either side of the reformation-era controversy just what the point of conflict was. For the historical record we must say that it was the RC Confutation in response to the A.C. that brought the raw-nerve out into the open. It seems that the Reformers themselves learned from their opposition what the neuralgic point was, namely the *sola fide*. (It was not *sola scriptura*, not *sola gratia*. This can be demonstrated from the documents of both parties.) This too is the root error of the Preus statement: it

disparages the *sola fide* while at the same time (like papal Christology) affirming the orthodox justification-*sola-fide* formulations.

10. The papists were convinced that the Lutheran *sola fide* was sub-Biblical and un-Catholic. The Lutherans affirmed just the opposite. Both sides appealed to Scripture and the tradition. Re the tradition the Lutherans countered: "some of the tradition is (unfortunately) erroneous and breathes a false gospel itself." Re the Scriptures the Lutherans said: "the whole Bible is on our side. Look at Apol IV as our attempt to show you the truth of that last sentence." TSP asserts that the seminary's alleged "law-gospel reductionism" (the term is a neologism, invented by our critics, but then so was *sola fide* a "nasty" term coined by the papal theologians in the 16th century) is sub-biblical and un- Lutheran. We say the opposite and we argue our case according to the same blueprint the Reformers did: there are two LC-MS traditions, one good and one bad; there is one Bible and if read according to the "good" LC-MS tradition, it is all on our side.

11. The Reformers' passion for the controversy was also shot through with politics, personalities, and operational old Adams. And so is ours. In our conflict no one side has more of the old Adam than the other. Each side has one old Adam per person. But that passionate controversy was nevertheless geared to praxis, to the difference which this or that doctrine made for the life of sinners in God's world. This is not to say that the RC theology was not practice-able (Semi-pelagianism is very practice-able); but rather that the apparent nit-picking, the "head-trips", the squabble by professors with their heads in or out of the clouds, was animated by pastoral obligations: getting the genuine (and not pseudo-) merits and benefits of Christ out in the open for fruitful use by the vexed and fearful consciences of sinners. For us the parallel is all too obvious

between TPS and ourselves.

12. Squabbles which at the surface seemed to be about papal authority, due process, the role of tradition, married vs. celibate clergy, liturgical regulations, etc. were (where they were serious and not frivolous) symptomatic of the fundamental fight on the point: *sola fide*. Although the RCs would be unable to agree with the picture the "reformers' had of the RCs' proposals, the Lutherans saw the alternatives to be either *sola fide* or slavery and the fearsome conscience that goes along with it.

13. Jesus' word to the father in Mark's account of the raising of Jairus' daughter: *Mee phobou, monon pisteue* (freely translated) summarizes the issue: "Not fear, but faith, faith alone is the issue." Fear will come of its own (and woe to that man who makes it even more so) but Faith, faith *monon* (=trusting Christ and thereby having his benefits) is what Christ calls over to us fearsome ones. Preus' theology uses (i.e., mis-uses) Christian data to promote fear, the very opposite of faith in Christ. The Biblical and apostolic word to such a "gospel" is *anathema estoo*. The Reformers' word for it is *damnanus*.

In several of the above 13 items parallels are drawn specifically to the bad theology of The Preus Statement. The epitome which follows offers some documentation.

Note: The Epitome is formatted in two columns making it difficult to include as part of this document. Please find it on our website. It is titled: "An Epitome of the Error-in-Substance of TPS (The Preus Statement)

CritiqueofPresidentPreus (PDF)