

Johann Eck and Jacob Preus – Parallels: 1530 & 1972

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Most of this presentation is in outline form, only this segment is written out.]

Missouri Synod President Preus’s “Fact-Finders Report,” 160 pages of “facts,” facts that he has identified in the teaching of the Concordia Seminary faculty—who can fathom them? Where even to seek to begin the conversation that they force one to enter? Especially when one is anonymously quoted in extenso and charges of false doctrine laid against us, charges supposedly substantiated by the long citations, by the “facts.” Was there ever an analogous situation in the history of the church that might serve as model? One instructive episode from Reformation history that has many parallels is John Eck’s 404 theses against the Wittenberg faculty of 1530 just before the Diet of Augsburg. There is unevenness in the 404 (actually they represent several sets of quotes and collections of charges made against the Wittenbergers during the decade of the 1520s with a hefty expansion added by Eck to bring the total up to 404) But Eck’s format is congruent with Preus’s: “Here’s what we’ve always said on this point, and here’s the horrible alternative that the Wittenbergers are now teaching.”

But the parallel with Eck in 1550 is not merely formal (same

sort of thing); it is material (same substance) too. Eck could say the same thing that Preus says in his epilog: "It is becoming increasingly clear that we have two theologies." The Wittenbergers agreed with Eck on that point. We agreed with Preus on that point in our day. But now the question is, of course: which one is the Good News of historic Biblical Christianity, and which one is not? Preus would claim to be an heir of Wittenberg; and we do no less. Just as Eck claimed to be an heir of Nicean orthodoxy; and the reformers were no less assertive in their claim.

It is not easy to carry on a controversy like this. But it is not impossible. That is, some aspects of such a controversy are not impossible. It may be well nigh impossible to "win" such a controversy. Who "won" the controversy between the Wittenbergers and the Roman establishment in the 16th century? Worse than that: the historical precedents are poor for theologians of the original Wittenberg-mold ever succeeding in getting their opponents to agree that the Wittenbergers correctly understand the opposition. In a moment I shall seek to show that it is not simply name-calling to associate Preus with Eck, or us with the Wittenbergers. The congruencies in each pair are demonstrable: a Legalistic Gospel that is finally "bad news" for sinners vs. a law-free (not lawless) gospel that is genuine good news for a sinner who is serious about his and the world's real dilemma. But before that, just one or two other items:

1. There always have been "two theologies" in "our traditional LCMS position" – one that constrained the gospel (sometimes more and sometimes less), and one that let it be the great good news which made the original New Testament really "new". See "Law/Gospel reductionism in the history of the LC-MS" (CTM April, 1972). This will surely be the most significant item of this calendar year, Missouri's 125th anniversary, when historians of the future look back on it, that during this

anniversary year the alternative between these two theologies (subterranean for nearly all the first century and a quarter) became the center of the public agenda of our denomination.

2. The issue is doctrine. What must be taught and confessed for sinners to hear God's good word for them? Preus's position is false doctrine. The issue is not personalities (although there are personal clashes interlaced in the controversy—as is always the case). In addition the issue is not that some man is more evil, or more a sinner, although the Old Adam of one or the other of these in the controversy may be more active than that of another at any one moment. But Lutherans expect the Old-Adam-quotient of any one churchman to be finally equal (=100%) to the Adamic quotient of any other man.

3. The historic analogy with Eck in 1530 does not prove anything about the controversy now, of course. Many things are different; but because the argument is about God's good news for sinners, the argument is not completely 100% different. And Luther's sometimes bilious and crotchety comments about Eck might still be instructive to give us insight into where the trustworthiness of God's good news is located in the current hassle. Some Luther quotes: "Eck is not searching for the truth of the gospel at all, but sinecure and spiritual credit" "At Augsburg he makes speeches about the Lutherans as though they were scared stiff and knew that they were lost." "Eck plays with the Holy Scriptures and searches in it for everything else except for the truth." "I'm not pleased with lampoons of Eck for carrying on the fight; better to accuse him openly with the charge [of false doctrine], than to tilt behind the fence."

Here is Preus's false doctrine: legalism with the usual disclaimers that accompany a "Christian legalism," yet with the same tell-tale signals that betray the legalism none the less.

Legalism: what is it? If one answers: legalism is a proclamation which says man is saved by works and not by the Grace of God, Preus would deny it, and appropriately so, for this he does not proclaim. But then neither did the papist camp with whom the Wittenbergers contended. That is documented in their response to the CA, the *Confutatio Pontifica* (3 August, 1530). Christian legalism makes Christ still the center of things, but it will not leave him to occupy that center stage “alone.” The Latin word *solus* is the drumbeat of the Confessors.

The first such clash between legalism and *solus Christus* in the church’s recorded history is seen in the controversy between St. Paul and the Galatian Judaizers. Paul does not hear the opponents in Galatia saying: Forget about Jesus. Rather their kerygma as he perceives it is: Jesus Christ is indeed necessary for salvation; but it is a Jesus Christ plus something else. Something secondary to be sure, but necessary nonetheless. Namely, the liturgical and ceremonial praxis which God himself laid on the Israelites of old. Faith in Christ plus these liturgical elements make you a “full-fledged” member of the Abrahamic-children-of-promise community, a community now fulfilled in Jesus the Christ and the grace of God which we have all experienced in him.

Even though one might be tempted to say: The Galatian Judaizers are just a little bit off; they are not all wrong, St. Paul comes to more radical conclusions: The truth of the Gospel is destroyed by the Galatian legalists. Spokesmen for such a gospel “be damned” (*anathema estoo* are his Greek terms). Whether the legalists can see and admit it or not, if their theology is the truth, says Paul, “then Christ died for no purpose.”

The 16th century version of this controversy conforms to the same model. The Wittenbergers see the Jesus-Christ-plus-something of the papists to be: Faith in Christ plus works of

charity = a fully justified Christian. Here the plus is not primarily liturgical as it was in Galatia, but ethical. And as the Wittenbergers observed 16th century legalism in operation among Christians, the same result occurred. Christ's real work was wasted; Christians were still left under a curse. Jesus-Christ-plus is not good news for sinners.

Preus's theology, as spelled out in "A Statement of Biblical and Confessional Principles" – and now as used as his yardstick to critique the seminary faculty – is a legalism of the same model. His however is not a Jesus Christ-plus-liturgical additions, nor a Jesus Christ plus-ethical additions. His is a legalism which proclaims Jesus Christ plus my view, my concept of the Christian scriptures. This might be designated: Jesus Christ plus-epistemological additions, or plus-philosophical additions.(*). The upshot of any addition to Christ-alone is what such addition always does: destroys the truthfulness of the gospel, makes Christ's work finally useless, and puts people and the legalist preacher under the curse, God's own curse. That's what Paul says.

It seems harsh to make such connections, yet our Biblical and Reformation heritage leaves no other alternative as a realistic possibility. The agony of having to call one's chief bishop a false teacher and direct an anathema against his proclamation is painful. The Wittenbergers were patently agonized over the critique they had to make on their fellow Christians; and Paul is publicly agonized at having to read the riot-act to the Galatians, but consider the alternative. At root it is the alternative of the Galatians, and of the 16th century semi-Pelagians, and 20th century epistemological legalism, to wit, Apostasy. At root Preus's citation of Joshua's either/or – "choose ye this day" – is in place. But Joshua's "we will serve the Lord", if that means the Lord Jesus Christ, means standing not with Preus, but on the other side of the fence that

separates the two theologies.

(*) The legalists of Galatia and the 16th century appeared to be rather magnanimous: they would not read their opponents out of the church. Instead they saw them as incomplete, not fully Christian. The distinction was seen as quantitative: 75% Christian vs. 100% Christian. Preus's public statement about seminary professor Arlis Ehlen follows the same form. Arlis is not a heretic, to be disciplined, unfrocked, excommunicated. Rather his theology is deficient at the points of Preus's plusses; but he still is eligible for a parish call, other work in the church, etc. Just not teaching future pastors. This is the ecclesiological consequence of a legalist kerygma. Its theology destroys the "truth of the gospel," its ecclesiology destroys the reality of the body of Christ. *Tertium non datur*. There is no third alternative.

[JohannEckandJacobPreus \(PDF\)](#)