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Faithfulness in Christ's Mission

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Abstract: Hermann Sasse (1895–1976) taught theology in Germany and Australia, emerged as a leading Lutheran theologian of the last century. His ecumenical contacts were broad and his knowledge of developments within global Lutheranism was informed and perceptive. Not the least of Sasse's interest was the place of mission within the Lutheran Church and how it relates to the confession of the faith. This essay explores this connection based on two primary essays by Sasse.

Presumably, Jesus' parable of the talents was chosen to give focus to this issue to accent the tragic possibility that the Lord's people might also bury the endowment entrusted to them in the ground, not utilizing it for the good of the Kingdom. While, no doubt, this parable has multiple applications for missions, this article focuses on confessional faithfulness in mission. Sasse himself recognized as much when in a 1942 essay, "Flight From Dogma: Remarks on Bultmann's 'Demythologization' of the New Testament," he wrote on a similar parable of accountability in Luke 16, "Must she [the church] who should have been a steward of the mysteries of God hear in that voice the voice of one who says to her: 'Give account of your stewardship, for you cannot be a steward any longer! [Lk 16:2].'"¹ And again in a 1956 essay, "The Confessional Problem in World Lutheranism," he makes a direct reference to the parable of the talents when he writes, "Is that really burying one's talent if he [the Lutheran] does not enter into every fellowship of that [in this case, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA] ? Did Luther bury his talent when he refused the hand of fellowship to Zwingli [at Marburg in 1529]? Did the apostles do it when they refused fellowship with false teachers?"² Sasse recognized that the church of Jesus Christ has been entrusted with the good deposit of the Gospel, which can never be divorced from dogma. The Lord requires faithfulness in the confession of His truth. Sasse develops the implications of this fidelity to the truth of the Gospel for mission.



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To understand how Sasse does this, we need to pay some attention to his own biography. Who was Hermann Sasse (1895–1976)? He was born into a middle-class family in Thuringia. Sasse would enter the University of Berlin, where he studied with some of the most prestigious theologians of the early twentieth century, including Adolph von Harnack, Adolph Deissmann, Julius Katfan, Reinhold Seeberg, and Karl Holl. His university studies were interrupted by World War I, as he enlisted as an officer in the Germany army where he would see action in some of the bloodiest battles of that war.

Like many of his contemporaries, Sasse would find the war to be the crucible that would test and ultimately crush the convictions of classical liberalism which were mediated to him by his Berlin teachers. The devastation and suffering that Sasse witnessed as a soldier convinced him of the futility of liberalism's optimistic view of the human capacity for ethical progress.

After the war, Sasse would complete his doctoral studies and serve as a pastor in Berlin. In the 1925–26 academic year, Sasse pursued a year of post-doctoral studies at Hartford Seminary in the United States. This year was significant for two reasons. First, it would give Sasse intimate knowledge of church life, including that of the various Lutheran bodies in the United States. Second, Sasse himself states that it was during this year that he became a confessional Lutheran through his reading of Wilhelm Loehe's *Three Books about the Church*.

Sasse's knowledge of the American religious scene in these years is reflected in his first book, published in 1927 under the title, *American Christianity and the Church*. This monograph contains Sasse's observations on the place of "undogmatic Christianity" in American life. The young German theologian describes the pragmatism of the American church when he writes "It is a church which has renounced the idea that it is possible to possess the truth and the requirements necessitated by that truth for carrying out its work."³

In contrast to mainline American Protestantism in 1927, Sasse held out hope for Lutherans in America. Largely spared the skirmishes of the so-called Modernist/Fundamentalist debate over the Bible, the works righteousness of the Social Gospel Movement, and the suspicion that creeds and liturgy were detrimental to growth and unity, Lutherans were not institutionally united; and they were something of wallflowers in the American religious garden. Sasse wrote,

And the Lutherans are not united, leading an isolated life, having little influence on the intellectual life of the nation. But they are living and growing churches. If the movement toward unity (the first great consequence of which was the formation of the United Lutheran Church in America in 1918) continues and leads to the unification of all Lutherans it will be one of the most significant churches in America. The life of these churches dispels the notion that Lutheranism's doctrine of justification

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necessarily leads to quietism. There is in America perhaps no more active a church than the Missouri Synod, which is the most dogmatically rigorous Lutheran Church in the country. The history of the organization of this church demonstrates that Lutheranism can exist in forms other than a state church or dependent upon the state (as we hear happily repeated time and time again in Europe). Lutheranism is never more vibrant than where it is free from guardianship by a secular authority.⁴

Sasse would remain conversant with American Lutheran leaders and theologians for the remainder of his life. He was particularly interested in the Missouri Synod, for he saw in it the last large confessional Lutheran church body that stood against the forces of theological liberalism and unionism. Shifts in the Missouri Synod led Sasse to wonder if the synod had buried its legacy and instead embraced a future more attune to the predominant ecumenical trends of the middle twentieth century.

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It was the nineteenth-century Bavarian pastor, Wilhelm Loewe, that Sasse would identify with most closely. He was impressed by Loehe's understanding of the church as apostolic, catholic, and confessional. Loehe's description of mission as the one church of God in motion would leave its imprint on Sasse. While he was not uncritical of Loehe, Sasse appreciated his courage in both confession and mission.⁵

It might be said that Sasse was both an ecumenical confessionalist and a confessional ecumenist. His passion for the truth of the apostolic Gospel and his love of the Church catholic compelled him to be both. It is with this in mind that we turn to two essays where Sasse addresses the Lutheran Church's responsibility for mission.

The first essay, written in 1946, "The Question of the Church's Unity on the Mission Field," addresses a practical challenge that would naturally arise in the years immediately after World War II, as Western churches were able to either resume or initiate mission endeavors in Asia and Africa. In this piece, Sasse observes that, given the multiplicity of denominations involved in evangelistic work in places where the Gospel had not been previously preached, the contemporary question of the unity of the church arose from the mission field. The World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh in 1910 was the birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement. At Edinburgh, the issue of unity was not theoretical but pragmatically driven by the desire to evangelize the world effectively in the twentieth century. John Mott (1865–1955), an American Methodist layman, spearheaded the conference,

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optimistically declaring “It is our hope that before we close our eyes in death, all people on earth will have had the opportunity to know and await the living Lord Christ.”⁶ The Edinburgh Conference was more at home in the optimism of the nineteenth century rather than in the disappointment that would come with the twentieth century. The missional optimism of Edinburgh would fade with two world wars and the rise of secularistic nihilism.

But for Sasse there is a deeper issue: “How can Christian mission call the peoples of the world to the *one* truth of the *one* Gospel if its bearers themselves are not united on what the Gospel actually is?”⁷ Sasse argues that the message of the Gospel has definite and identifiable content; it is the word of the cross. It is not a denominational message but the apostolic kerygma of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God and Lord, put to death and raised to life for the justification of sinners. This Gospel is not simply a message about Christ’s repeating the history of His life, death, and resurrection. It is the proclamation of His saving work, always predicated for sinners, and it is delivered in the oral word of preaching and in Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar, instituted by the Lord Himself. It is not to be confused with a philosophy of life, a system of morality, or mystical experience.

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In contrast to the activism that prompted those inspired by Edinburgh, Sasse does not seek the unity of the church as a goal to be pursued for the sake of mission. Rather, the unity of the church is a given to be confessed: “Genuine faith in the *una sancta* as an indestructible, divinely established reality in the world can guard us all, Christians of churches young and old, from doubting the church of God. For the present state of Christianity will plunge anyone into despair who only sees the outer state and knows nothing of the hidden glory of the *regnum Christi* (“kingdom of Christ”), which stands behind it.”⁸

The Christian stance is not despair, but rather faithfulness and patience in the face of outward fissures in Christendom. The unity of the church is constituted in Christ alone. Where this is forgotten, Sasse observes, a lethal synergism sets in that would attempt to create some other unity than that described in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, i.e., unity established by the pure preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to the divine word. This was the

error, says Sasse, of Pietism as expressed in the slogan, “Doctrine divides, service unites.”⁹

Erudite church historian that he is, Sasse reminds his readers that if the Early Church had neglected doctrine, Christianity would have come to an end. The Marcionites, Valentinians, Montanists, Nestorians, and Arians were not simply alternative versions of a single Christian reality. Had these heretical distortions of the Gospel been recognized as legitimate and reconcilable narratives of Jesus Christ, the Church would no longer exist, her mission ruined. “Just as a man whose kidneys no longer eliminate poisons which have accumulated in the body will die, so the church will die which no longer eliminates heresy.”¹⁰ Sasse’s essay anticipated what would come to be known as the ecumenical paradigm of “reconciled diversity” and talk of “post-denominational Christianity.” Yet he understands that both miss the point of the necessity of confession. Where there is a confessional vacuum, it will be filled by an eclectic mixture of truth with error. The outcome, Sasse predicts, will be a reversion to paganism: “And so today, too, wherever the church no longer is able to separate from heresy, it will fall back into paganism and be destroyed.”¹¹

Sasse does not end this article on a negative note of pessimism or despair, for the Lord is exceedingly rich in mercy and preserves His Word in this dying world. Sasse takes his readers back to Jesus’ high priestly prayer, which is a missionary prayer:

These young Christians also read the apostolic warning against heresy. And there are many gripping testimonies to the fact that they have begun to understand why the high priestly prayer of the Lord, both the petition for the preservation of unity and the petition for the preservation of truth belong inseparably together. “That they may be one” (John 17:21) is merely the opposite side of “Sanctify them in your truth; your Word is truth” (John 17:17). It is Jesus Christ himself and no one else who tells us that the question of the *one* church is the question of the *true* church.¹²

A second major essay from Sasse’s pen would come in 1954 under the title, “The Lutheran Church and World Mission.” Written roughly five years after his arrival in Australia, Sasse is aware of the challenges to the church’s mission in India and Asia.¹³ He recognizes that many questioned whether there should be a Lutheran Church in southeast Asia, referring to the particular circumstances of the Batak Church, which had been accepted into membership in the Lutheran World Federation even though it did not subscribe to either the Small Catechism or the Augsburg

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Confession. He notes that some equate the importing of Lutheran teaching to Asia as a kind of confessional colonialism. Sasse observes that the question is pressed on us both by Christians and non-Christians: Why should there be a Lutheran Church on the mission field?

Sasse answers this question by returning to the dominical words that institute the preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. God has provided for these that human beings might come to justifying faith to echo the language of Article V of the Augsburg Confession. He is critical of Karl Hartenstein and others whom he believes ground mission in human energies rather than the Means of Grace, which are the marks of the church: "So the world's mission churches are in danger of becoming churches without sacraments, at least without the real Sacrament, which is means of grace and not a harmless sign which one can, if needed, even omit. The LWF with its mission department can't help either. For the Sacraments, without which Luther couldn't even imagine a church, don't interest it very much, as both its words and deeds show."¹⁴

A product of the Rhenish Mission Society, the Batak Church could not distinguish between the Lutheran and the Reformed doctrines of the Lord's Supper. Sasse recognized this as unionism incapable of making a clear confession. Without confession, mission is made sterile no matter how impressive it may seem outwardly. In a similar vein, Sasse worries that the church in India is in danger of losing the Lutheran doctrine of Sacrament. Such a loss, he opines, would be particularly disastrous there in that it would deprive Indian Christians of teaching of "the real incarnation and the real presence as concrete forgiveness"¹⁵ throwing them back on spiritualistic interpretations carried over from Hinduism.

Lutheran missions are such not simply in name, but by actual confession. There is an urgency to Sasse's appeal that Lutherans not bury the treasure of the confession but proclaim it with boldness and confidence:

As at home, so today also in the mission field, the Lutheran pastor stands before the difficult, and yet so thankful job of speaking the Gospel so clearly, as clearly as the catechism and the Augsburg Confession do. The Confession must become alive [in] us again, and we want to begin with ourselves. For basically, contemporary humanity of all races has had enough of nonbinding chatter. Communism would never have achieved such victories if it hadn't satisfied the hunger for dogma which the churches weren't able to satisfy anymore. But why have we kept from people the true dogma of the pure Gospel. May God strengthen us all for the battle for the true confession, and help us, in the power of Christ's love, to call back to the Gospel's truth a Christendom which is sinking into relativism.¹⁶

Lutheran mission will lead to Lutheran churches not merely in denominational affiliation, but in doctrine and practice. This theme would be ably carried forward by

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Sasse's student and associate, Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (1910–1982), director of the Bleckmar Mission from 1950 to 1978. In an essay entitled, "The Lutheran Church Plants Lutheran Mission," Hopf largely encapsulates the major themes of his mentor's thinking on mission, concluding

To stewards of the older and younger Lutheran churches, being trustworthy and faithful belongs to their ecumenical responsibility to the whole Christian church on earth. Woe to every Lutheran church who so misunderstands her confessional bond, as if she should introvertedly eke out her own meager existence in seclusion, protect her stock, and leave parts of Christianity polluted or ruled by false doctrine to their own resources. If Lutheran mission should and must lead to Lutheran church, then this in no way means the isolation of a young Lutheran church that is just emerging. It means, rather, the responsibility of the mission to preserve the unity with all rightly believing Lutheran churches on earth, but just as much its responsibility to the testimony to the biblical truth of salvation and its consequences beyond all borders and boundaries of painful divisions in the church.¹⁷

For Hopf, as for Sasse, the question of mission always stands or falls with the doctrine of the church and particularly the confessional unity of the church in the marks of the church.

For Sasse, doctrine and mission could never be played off one against the other. The whole of Sasse's theology runs through the assertion of Article VII of the *Augustana* that it is sufficient, but also necessary, for the true unity of the church that the Gospel preached purely and the sacraments be administered evangelically. It is this treasure that has been entrusted to the Lutheran Church. Faithfulness in mission entails faithfulness to the Means of Grace from which the Church has her life and growth. Sasse's sharp and often unwelcome critique of moves within global Christianity in general and Lutheranism¹⁸ in particular were necessary that the one saving Gospel of Jesus Christ not be buried away under the rubble of ecclesiastical proposals that ignore the need for doctrinal truth in mission. In this sense, Hermann Sasse remains a prophetic figure for confessional Lutherans in our own day, calling us to embrace mission with boldness and confidence that the Word of the Lord might have free course in a dark and dying world.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Hermann Sasse, "Flight from Dogma: Remarks on Bultmann's 'Demythologization of the New Testament'" in *The Lonely Way, Vol. II: 1941–1976*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 98.
- ² Hermann Sasse, "The Confessional Problem in World Lutheranism," in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. II: 1951–1956*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 497.
- ³ Hermann Sasse, "American Christianity and the Church," in *The Lonely Way, Vol. I: 1927–1939*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 47.
- ⁴ H. Sasse, "American Christianity and the Church," 55.
- ⁵ For more on Sasse's critical appreciation of Loehe's work, see John T. Pless, "Hermann Sasse's Reception of the Loehe Legacy" in "*Die einigende Mitte*" *Theologie in konfessioneller und ökumenischer Verantwortung: Festschrift für Werner Klän*, Hrsg. Christoph Barnbrock and Gilberto da Silva (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2018), 334–342.
- ⁶ Cited by Henning Wroegemann, *Intercultural Theology, Vol. II: Theologies of Mission*, trans. Karl E Böhmer (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2018). Sasse makes reference to Mott and this citation in numerous of his essays on unity and ecumenism. For other assessments of the Edinburgh Conference and its impact on mission down to the present day, see *Walking Humbly with the Lord: Church and Mission Engaging Plurality* ed. Viggo Mortensen and Andreas Østerlund Nielsen (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2010). This volume was published in commemoration of the centennial of Edinburgh and as such provides helpful historical background and critical analysis and reflection on the significance of the Conference.
- ⁷ Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity on the Mission Field" *Lonely Way, Vol II: 1941–1976*, 183.
- ⁸ Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 186.
- ⁹ Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 188.
- ¹⁰ Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 190.
- ¹¹ Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 191. Here one may also see Sasse's essay from 1960 "On the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit" in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. III: 1957–1969*, 200–222. Here Sasse notes the theological "enthusiasm" that seeks to find God where He has not promised to be present and how this is manifested in those who look for outward success in numbers of converts or the size of ecumenical gatherings. Instead Sasse reminds his readers that discernment is a gift of the Spirit as by the Word, He enables churches to distinguish between truth and error.
- ¹² Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 191.
- ¹³ For example, see Hermann Sasse, "Die Kirche in Asien" in *In stau confessionis III*, Hrsg. Werner Klän and Roland Ziegler (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2011), 215–225.
- ¹⁴ Sasse, "The Lutheran Church and World Mission," in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. II: 1951–1956*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 321.
- ¹⁵ Sasse, "The Lutheran Church and World Mission," 327. Sasse was a keen observer of ecumenical developments in India. See, for example, his "Some Remarks on the Statement on the Lord's Supper Agreed Upon Between the Church of South India and the Federation of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of India" (1956) in *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kloha and Ronald R. Feuerhahn (Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 1995), 260–270 and especially his 1962 piece, "The Union of South India as a Question for the Lutheran Church" in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. III: 1957–1969*, 321–339.

¹⁶ Sasse, “The Lutheran Church and World Mission,” 333.

¹⁷ Wilhelm Friedrich Hopf, “The Lutheran Church Plants Lutheran Missions” trans. Rachel Mumme with Matthew C. Harrison” *Journal of Lutheran Mission* (April 2015), 28.

¹⁸ See for example the 1956 essay, “The Confessional Problem in Today’s World Lutheranism” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. II: 1951–1956*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 475–501, and Martin Kretzmann’s critical response, “Letter to the Editor” in *The Lutheran Layman* (August 1, 1957), 7ff.