

## Crossing Bearing and Life in a Lutheran Synod: What Can We Learn from Hermann Sasse?

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“The Lutheran Churches are still sunning themselves in the delusion that they have something to expect from the world other than the dear holy cross, which all those must carry who proclaim God’s Law and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to mankind. But this delusion will soon disappear”<sup>1</sup> so wrote Hermann Sasse in March, 1949.

While not exactly equivalent to synods in North American Lutheranism, Hermann Sasse <sup>2</sup>(1895-1976) had his own experience with church governments as places for bearing the cross in Germany and later on in Australia. A son of a church of the Prussian Union, Sasse would become a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, and eventually he would leave that body to immigrate to Australia where he would become a member of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia and then after that body’s merger with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia, the Lutheran Church of Australia. I propose that Sasse suggests not only a theology of the cross but an ecclesiology of the cross. As Udo Schnelle would put it: “The existence of the church itself is already an application of the theology of the cross.” <sup>3</sup>Not long after re-locating to Australia, Sasse would write one of his “letters to Lutheran pastors” on the *theologia crucis*. This letter, a brilliant and concise introduction to Luther’s conceptuality of the theology of the cross; it also has ramifications for the theme of this paper, cross bearing in the life of a Lutheran Synod.

Sasse was not the first to retrieve the Reformer’s theology of the cross. This theme was accented by Theodosius Harnack in the nineteenth century and in 1929 by Walther von Loewenich of Erlangen in his major work, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*. In a section on “Life under the Cross,” von Loewenich observes “The hiddenness of the church, however, is given expression in the form of suffering. It is a fault of Protestantism that at times it has taken this idea of Luther’s so lightly. Luther regarded cross and suffering as the church’s most precious treasure; but the church that bears Luther’s name has often not taken this sufficiently to heart (W.I, 613; 23ff.; LW 31, 227). In Luther’s eyes a church that is all too militant and vocal in politics is suspect (W.V, 227, 7FF.). The true church, on the contrary, is a church of martyrs. The new humanity that Christ wanted is the suffering church (W.V, 307, 36ff.). Only that church has the full right to call itself the church of Christ which follows her Lord in all things. Hence

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Sasse, “*Ecclesia Orans*” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*-Volume I edited by Matthew Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 75. Sasse alludes to Luther’s language of the holy cross as the seventh mark of the church here. See Luther, “On the Councils and the Church” AE 41:164ff. Luther says “Seventh, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord’s Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ” (164).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of Sasse’s life and work, see John T. Pless, “Hermann Sasse (1895-1976)” in *Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians*, edited by Mark C. Mattes (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013, 155-177.

<sup>3</sup> Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, translated by M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2005), 2000.

Luther lists cross and suffering among the marks of the church. ”<sup>4</sup> Sasse’s letter would pick up this theme in light of the church’s suffering through two world wars and as he puts it “the dark clouds of an impending third world war” that “cast their shadow over the lives of all people.”<sup>5</sup>

Sasse uses the theology of the cross to crucify human illusions, even pious illusions which are nevertheless human, of church bodies. Examples are offered from Roman Catholicism, Methodism, Pentecostalism, and the Social Gospel movement, but Sasse will not excuse the Lutheran churches. “We in the church should much rather ask ourselves how things stand with our own *metanoia*, our own repentance.” “Our churches are in need of continuing reformation. How does the Gospel fare among those who call themselves confessional Lutherans? Sasse’s penetrating questions raise the question of whether we have preached the Gospel free of illusions in our time: “We must all be very clear regarding the fact that only a church which in its proclamation has become free of these illusions can speak the Gospel to a disillusioned world today; the *pure*, that is real Gospel, is not a gospel which men have justified themselves.”<sup>7</sup>

The only deliverance from illusions which plague even confessional Lutheran bodies, Sasse asserts is “the wisdom of the cross” drawing on a fragment from a Luther sermon of 1515.<sup>8</sup> Sasse dispels faulty misunderstandings of Luther’s theology of the cross such as the claim that it is terribly one-sided or that it ignores the incarnation and resurrection.<sup>9</sup> The theology of the cross stands in contrast with its opposite, the theology of glory. Only the theology of the cross can be said to be the biblical teaching which foundational for the life and mission of the church. If this theology of the cross is not preached, the Gospel is not preached.

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<sup>4</sup> Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 127. For a fine application of Luther’s theology of the cross to contemporary church life, see Mark C. Mattes, “The Theology of the Cross Speaks Today” in *Comfortable Words: Essays in Honor of Paul F. M. Zahl*, edited by John D. Koch Jr and Todd H.W. Brewer (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 147-167.

<sup>5</sup> Hermann Sasse, “*Theologia Crucis*” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*-Volume I, edited by Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 385.

<sup>6</sup> Sasse, “*Theologia Crucis*,” 386.

<sup>7</sup> Sasse, “*Theologia Crucis*,” 387.

<sup>8</sup> “*Unum praedica, sapientiam crucis!* [“There is one thing to preach, the wisdom of the cross!”] That is the answer (in a sermon fragment of 1515; WA 1:52) which Luther gives to the vital question of the ministry [*Predigtamt*] of all ages: ‘What shall I preach?’ The wisdom of the cross, the word of the cross, a great stumbling block to the world, is the proper content to all Christian preaching, is the Gospel itself” (Sasse, “*Theologia Crucis*,” 387). Also see Oswald Bayer, “The Word of the Cross” *Lutheran Quarterly* (Spring 1995), 47-55.

<sup>9</sup> Note Sasse answer to the charge of one-sidedness: “The theology of the cross obviously does not mean that for the theologian the whole church year shrinks to Good Friday. It rather means that one cannot understand Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost without Good Friday. Luther was, alongside Irenaeus and Athanasius, one of the great theologians of the incarnation. He was that because he saw the cross behind the manger. He understood the victory of Easter as well as any theologian of the Eastern Church. But he understood it because he understood it as the victory of the *Crucified*. The same can be said of his understanding of the activity of the Holy Spirit. It is always the cross which illuminates all chapters of theology because the deepest nature of revelation is hidden in the cross. This being so, Luther’s *theologia crucis* wants to be more than one of the many theological theories which have appeared in the course of the history of the Church. It claims to be, in contrast to another theology, which now prevails in Christendom and which Luther calls the *theologia gloriae*, the correct, the scriptural theology with which the Church of Christ stands and falls. Only of the preaching of this theology, Luther thinks, can it be said that it is the preaching of the Gospel” (“*Theologia Crucis*,” 387-388).

For Sasse, the theology of the cross is not a theology about the cross. The veneration of the cross in the liturgy was the oldest form of the *theologia crucis*, Sasse contends, but it yielded a theology about the cross which is reflected in the early Good Friday hymns, “Sing My Tongue, the Glorious Battle” (LSB 454) and “The Royal Banners Forward Go” (LSB 455). But these hymns are addressed to the cross, not the Crucified.<sup>10</sup> The theology of glory is veiled under the language of the theology of the cross giving evidence to a triumphalism to which the church is always in danger of being overtaken. Sasse does not let us forget that the Middle Ages possessed an “evangelical side” reflected in core elements of the liturgy which proclaimed the sole-sufficiency of Christ’s atonement: the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the *Agnus Dei*, and the Words of Institution for example. But it was Luther who was able to draw a clear line of demarcation between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. This he does in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518.

Luther prepared twenty-eight theological theses and twelve philosophical theses for debate at a meeting of the Augustinians in Heidelberg in May of 1518. “Heinrich Bornkamm argues that, as far as the theology of the Reformation is concerned, the Heidelberg Disputation is the most influential of all Luther’s disputations.”<sup>11</sup> The arrangement of the twenty-eight theological theses is carefully and deliberately structured in a movement from the law of God to the love of God in Christ Jesus. The first twelve theses contrast the works of man with the works of God. The law does not advance the cause of man’s righteousness before God but hinders it. All human possibilities of achieving salvation are rejected. Theses 13-18 tackle the anthropological basis of scholastic: the freedom of the will. The third section (theses 19-24) establishes the distinction between the “theologian of glory” and the “theologian of the cross.” Then final section (theses 25-28) is the climax of Luther’s argument: faith in the work of Christ alone.

While Sasse does not undertake a complete exposition of the Heidelberg Theses, he does focus on significant aspects of Luther’s argument in delineating the distinction between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross: “For the two theologies which Luther distinguishes, the theology of glory and theology of the cross, are not two grades of one and the same theology which would supplement each other, as the natural and revealed perception of God in those systems of Catholic and Protestant theology which are determined by Aristotle. They stand rather in relationship of irreconcilable contrast, as false and true theology.”<sup>12</sup> The theologian of glory attempts to see God in and through the visibility of the world, the works of creation. Hence the theologian of glory works with

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<sup>10</sup> See Sasse’s treatment of these hymns in “*Theologia Crucis*,” 390-391. He concludes that these hymns have their genesis in the attempt to Christianize the ancient Teutonic notion of a cult of holy trees, thus making a circuitous path from adoration of the holy tree to adoration of the Crucified Savior. “On closer examination the oldest *theologia crucis* appears to be a typical example of what Luther later called *theologia gloriae*. The cross is a direct revelation of the glory of God on earth. Triumphantly in precedes the victorious armies of the Christian emperors and the valiant hosts of the Church Militant. As in the first centuries the demons fled from the sign of the cross, so now the enemies of the church flee in confusion where the banner of the cross or the relics of the cross appear” (391).

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Sasse, “*Theologia Crucis*,” 395.

the assumptions that both God's law and human reason contribute to some progress on the path toward righteousness. The end of such a theology is either pride or despair. The theologian of the cross, on the other hand, looks to the Crucified Christ where God is revealed in suffering and weakness rather than in power and triumph. It is the nature of the theology of the cross, Sasse says, "to contradict all ethical and religious feelings of natural man."<sup>13</sup> The theology of the cross is not the fulfillment of these aspirations but their death. This is why as Luther puts it in Thesis 21, "The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls things what they are."<sup>14</sup>

For Sasse as for Luther, the theology of the cross was not an abstract theoretical description of how God works that one could speculate on and discuss in the cozy confines of a cloistered academy. In his Genesis lectures, the Reformer insisted that to be a Christian is live under the cross as the flesh is continually crucified. Luther writes "For he who is not a 'Crosstian,' so to speak, is not a Christian; for he is not like Christ, his Teacher"<sup>15</sup> This is resonated in Sasse comment: "The *theologia crucis* includes the *Yes* of faith to the cross, which Christ wants us to take up."<sup>16</sup> As Gustaf Wingren had pointed out in his classic study, *Luther on Vocation*<sup>17</sup>, God uses the cross precisely in the locale of one's calling to put the old man to death. Even so in our life together within the synod, God will not let the ecclesiastical old Adam escape crucifixion. The synod, too, becomes the place for death and resurrection.

The theology of the cross is absolutely necessary, Sasse maintains, for the whole church. "All that we think and do in the church has to be cleansed by the theology of the cross if we are to escape the perils of a theology of glory"<sup>18</sup> says Sasse. This is precisely where Sasse's exposition of the theology of the cross is helpful in our thinking about life and mission under the cross in our various synods.

Sasse was especially critical of the triumphalism always symptomatic of the theology of glory which characterized the missionary and ecumenical movements of the twentieth century. He singles out as an example the American Methodist, John Raleigh Mott (1865-1955) whose optimism was expressed his assertion that the evangelization of the world would take place in this generation. While the First World War tempered such idealistic sentiments they were not extinguished especially in North

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<sup>13</sup> Sasse, "Theologia Crucis," 398.

<sup>14</sup> AE 31:40

<sup>15</sup> AE 5:274.

<sup>16</sup> Sasse, "Theologia Crucis," 401.

<sup>17</sup> See Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, translated by Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957). Vocation is the place of the cross. "In one's vocation there is a cross - for prince, husband, father, daughter, for everyone - and on this cross the old human nature is to be crucified" (29). Through the cross of vocation the neighbor is benefited. Luther: "I ask where our suffering is to be found. I shall soon tell you: Run through all stations of life, from the lowest to the highest, and you will find what you are looking for" (29). See Sasse's review of this book in *The Reformed Theological Review* (October 1957), 91-93 where he notes how "cross and desperation" are aspects of vocation.

<sup>18</sup> H. Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, translated by Norman Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 52.

American churches. Sasse writes of this in his 1927 essay on “American Christianity and the Church” which he completed after a year of post-doctoral studies at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

The so-called “Social Gospel Movement” is tagged by Sasse as a particularly American expression, although through Walter Rauschenbusch it was grounded in the theology of the German Albrecht Ritschl. As Sasse saw it the Social Gospel was the embodiment of a theology of works fueled by a free will. In this vision, Sasse said “the perfection of the church coincides with the perfection of culture.”<sup>19</sup> Contemporary examples might be found in any number of “peace and justice” pronouncements coming from the ELCA.

Sasse observed that American Christianity was by nature ecumenical and denominational, not confessional. “It is a church” he said, 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.”<sup>20</sup> Later Sasse would trace this notion of a dogma-free Christianity back to Erasmus. Sasse says of Luther: “He saw behind Erasmus’ concept of an undogmatic Christianity the coming neo-paganism of the modern world.”<sup>21</sup>

In an undogmatic age such as ours one of the crosses which confessional Lutheran synods must bear is the burden of confession itself. To borrow the title of the two volume collection of Sasse’s works, ours will be the “lonely way.” The lonely way is not the path of schism and sectarianism. It is a genuinely catholic way but it does bring about ridicule for the world can only understand it as antiquarian and intolerant for we live in an age that Reinhard Slenczka has described as possessing “an anti-dogmatic attitude—where “dogma” is an emotive word and “dogmatic” is a swearword—is the clearest sign of the presence of dogmas, which, however, are difficult to articulate in rational manner.”<sup>22</sup>

This is the burden of the cross that Sasse recognized and freely accepted. It can be observed in his own life on numerous occasions. It can be seen in his opposition to National Socialism and in his refusal to sign the Barmen Declaration.

Sasse took a prominent role in opposition to the growing penetration of the National Socialists into the affairs of the church. Already in 1931, he provided a strong theological refutation of attempts by National Socialists to manipulate the church for their own political ends. Along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Georg Merz, Wilhelm Vischer, and Friderich von Bodelschwingh, Sasse was a drafter of the Bethel Confession in 1933. However, he parted ways with Bonhoeffer and others when he refused to sign the Barmen Declaration<sup>23</sup> the next year as

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<sup>19</sup> H. Sasse, “American Christianity and the Church,” in *The Lonely Way*-Volume I, edited by Matthew Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 31.

<sup>20</sup> H. Sasse, “American Christianity and the Church,” 47.

<sup>21</sup> H. Sasse, “Erasmus, Luther, and Modern Christendom” in *The Lonely Way*-Volume II, edited by Matthew Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 381.

<sup>22</sup> Reinhard Slenczka, *Ziel und Ende* (Neuendettelsau: Freimund Verlag, 2008), 17.

<sup>23</sup> For more on Barmen, see Eberhard Busch, *The Barmen Theses Then and Now*, translated and annotated by Darrell and Judith Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). Busch observes “With the adoption of this text as a confession, it ceased to be merely the documentation of a theological doctrine, perhaps of a Barthian dogmatic,

he saw it as a unionizing document which failed to distinguish the law from the Gospel. In short, no matter how deeply he was committed to resisting the evil forces of National Socialism, Sasse would not and could not compromise the Lutheran confession for this noble end. For this he was severely criticized and ridiculed as a stubborn Lutheran. It was a cross that Sasse would embrace.

The war years were hard on Sasse. Due to the maneuvering of Werner Elert, the Erlangen faculty was spared radical interference from the Nazi government, but Sasse was viewed with suspicion and denied a promotion. His family would suffer from scarcity of food and lack of fuel to heat their home.

Escalating tensions with faculty colleagues would plague Sasse in the years immediately following the war. A heart attack in 1946 prevented him from attending the first meeting of the Faith and Order Committee after the war. But Sasse's greatest disappointment had to do with the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (EKiD) in 1948. Thirteen years later his bitterness is still evident as he wrote: "In Eisenach, at the foot of the Wartburg, the Lutheran Church in Germany was buried in 1948. Loehe's nightmare of the Lutheran Church being buried by its own pastors became a reality."<sup>24</sup>

Church historian and ecumenist that he was, Sasse was keenly aware of the narrative of unionizing movements in German Lutheranism. Under political duress, the *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (DEK) was formed as a body encompassing Protestant territorial churches in 1933, thus fulfilling the aim of the Prussian Union in the previous century. Sasse had hoped that the end of Nazism would bring a new day for the Lutheran Church in Germany, free from politicized union with Reformed churches. Such a hope was not to be realized; Lutheran territorial churches entered into the EKiD. For Sasse this was a crisis of confession as it meant an institutional surrender of the Sacrament of the Altar.

Not the least of Sasse disappointments came when the theologians of the Missouri Synod failed to come to the aid of their German brethren. F.E. Meyer and Theodore Graebner of the Saint Louis Seminary had pleaded with Sasse not to leave the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria when it joined the EKD. In a 1975 letter to Robert Preus, Sasse recalled what he could only see as Graebner's betrayal of the confessional cause: "When the synod in Hannover had to decide whether or not to accept the constitution of the EKiD and join it or not, the decisive vote was against the motion and for the preservation of the Lutheran Church. This came as a great surprise. The chairman, the new Bishop Lilje, declared the proceedings as confidential and read the assembly a letter written by one of the outstanding older men in St. Louis, a man of blameless orthodoxy in the same way of Walther and Pieper, as he was generally regarded.

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although it is true that Karl Barth as its primary author has the significance of an essential and remarkable commentator. But the text as such has become a *confession* of the *church* through the action of the Barmen Synod" (5).

<sup>24</sup> H. Sasse, "Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism" in *We Confess the Church*, edited by Norman Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 59.

He was traveling in Europe and had just attended as a visitor the constituting convention of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, 1948. He wrote to Bishop Lilje: Don't follow the voice of the 'Schwabacher Konvent' (the organization of some hundreds of confessionally minded Lutheran pastors), and its leaders. There can be no objection against joining the EiKD and WCC. Do you want to be more Lutheran than Missouri, Lilje asked. The public was readmitted and a new vote was taken in favour of the motion. This was the end of endeavors to restore the Church of the Augsburg Confession in Germany. It was not the fault of your church, but of one man who as sometimes happens with old men had completely changed his formal views. But it must be kept in mind if one wants to understand the development of Missouri. The event showed clearly what was to come if the dogmatic compass of the great ship was no longer working."<sup>25</sup> Betrayal by brethren was a cross with which Sasse was acquainted.

Cross-bearing for Sasse was not theoretical; it was made concrete in his own life. Compelled by conscience, he could no longer remain in the Bavarian church. Sasse resigned his membership in the territorial Church of Bavaria and joined the so-called "old Lutherans," the *Evangelisches -lutherisches Kirche* in 1948. The next year he accepted a call to teach on the faculty of Immanuel Seminary in North Adelaide, Australia, a school of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (UELCA).

The move to Australia would bring hardship for Sasse. His salary was considerably less than what he received in Erlangen. Scholarly resources were limited making it impossible for Sasse to complete the remaining articles assigned to him for Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. His wife was lonesome for Germany and was unable to receive the same quality of medical care in Australia as would have been available in Germany. In fact, Sasse laments that his wife's early death was due to the move to Australia.

Yet this time under the cross would prove extremely productive for Sasse. He would be instrumental in the merger of the two Lutheran bodies in Australia in 1966. In his loneliness, he would nurture contacts with fellow-confessors all over the world, challenging and encouraging them to faithfulness. Sasse's sixty-two open letters to Lutheran pastors written between 1949-1969 address a wide range of theological topics and often include an element of pastoral consolation for pastors and churchmen laboring in lonely and difficult circumstances.

Of course, Sasse was never a member of any American Lutheran synod but he was intimately acquainted with all strands of American Lutheranism.<sup>26</sup> His presence, no doubt, in any of these bodies would have been uncomfortable to say the least. But my point here is not to

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<sup>25</sup> Letter of Hermann Sasse to Robert Preus on 19 January 1975 in the author's possession.

<sup>26</sup> Sasse would form friendships with Theodore Tappert, E. Theodore Bachmann, and Herman A. Preus. Although they never met in person, he developed a literary relationship with Reu whom he referred to as my "fatherly friend." For more see, Ronald Feuerhahn, "Sasse & North American Lutheranism" *Logia* (Reformation 1995), 11-23.

speculate on how Sasse would have fared in any of our synods but rather to ask the question what could be learned from him regarding cross-bearing in any synod which seeks to be faithful to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Here I would suggest several broad categories where cross-bearing comes into play. Sasse has much to teach us under each of these headings. First, the theology of the cross must cleanse us from triumphalism. Second, confessional synods must also be confessing synods. Third, bearing the cross in the synod evokes patience and persistence. Fourth, life together in the synod under the cross compels us to prayer for the brethren. We will now briefly examine these four points individually.

First, the theology of the cross must cleanse us from all triumphalism. Sasse recognized the dangers of triumphalism. I will leave it to members of other synods to diagnose how it is in their own ecclesial bodies. My comments here will be confined to The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Sasse's critique. The mural that adorns the entrance lobby at the plaza level of Wyneken Hall at our seminary in Fort Wayne might be iconic. It is a mosaic portrayal of the *Christus Rex* by the Saint Louis artist, Siegfried Reinhardt done in 1962. When Oswald Bayer was on our campus in Fort Wayne in 2001, I gave him a tour of our campus. As we stood in front of this massive panel, Dr. Bayer startled me a bit by saying (in a Teutonically-understated way) that this beautiful piece was "not Lutheran." He went on to point out that the kingly Christ had no marks of the nails in His hands and feet and that He wore the imperial crown, not a diadem of thorns. No *theologia crucis* here; only a *theologia gloriae* of triumph and domination. Just as Pope Pius XI instituted the festival of Christ the King in 1925<sup>27</sup> in an attempt to assert the kingship of Christ in a secularized world, much of American Lutheranism midcentury was bewitched by notions of the triumph of the church in a brave new world. The Missouri Synod was not exempt.

But participation in this new age would require some changes, even radical adjustments. It was quite clear that changes in the understanding of biblical authority, confessional identity, and church fellowship were in fact underway. Even though President John W. Behnken could write in 1955, "It is my honest conviction, that the Missouri Synod has not changed its doctrinal positions" (28), others both within and outside of the Synod found that this protestation did not ring true. Living under what Theodore Graebner termed "the burden of infallibility,"<sup>28</sup> the Missouri Synod was unable to admit that it was changing. No doubt that one casualty of this denial was the Synodical Conference<sup>29</sup>. From the outside looking in, Sasse recognized the perilous position that the Missouri Synod was in as it was tempted toward a theology of glory in ecumenical dress. Flirtations with membership in the Lutheran World Federation on the part of the Missouri Synod were symptomatic of a deep sickness for Sasse.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See John T. Pless, "Why Not Christ the King Sunday?" *Logia* (Epiphany 2004): 60-62.

<sup>28</sup> Theodore Graebner, "The Burden of Infallibility: A Study in the History of Dogma" *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* (July 1965): 88-94.

<sup>29</sup> For a balanced and careful examination of the demise the relationship between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, see Mark E. Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003)..

<sup>30</sup> See his 1966 essay "Inclusive Lutheranism" in *The Lonely Way*-Volume II, 341-349.

Not a few of Sasse's writings are particularly instructive here. For example, in letter 53, "Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism," written in April 1961, Sasse begins by recalling the words of Adolph von Harless spoken in 1868 at the first meeting of the Evangelical-Lutheran Conference in Hannover: "If we speak of our wounds and what we suffer from them, we do not speak so much of wounds which others have given us, but of wounds which we have afflicted upon ourselves in ignorance or unfaithfulness."<sup>31</sup> Lutheranism in the middle years of the twentieth century both in Europe and North America was losing its nerve not on account of persecution or even a creeping secularism, but because it was growing indifferent to its own heritage and jettisoning its confessional moorings in hope of institutional expansion and great influence in the world. "There is no longer a consensus in these churches regarding what God's Word demands, what the Gospel actually is, what Baptism and the Lord's Supper are. What holds them together is the setup they have inherited, their constitutions and their apparatus for running things, their property and the money that the state provides or collects for them. These are the 'human traditions or rites and ceremonies' [AC VII, 3]. They are not what Article VII of the Augsburg Confession says creates the true unity of the church."<sup>32</sup> Neither bureaucratic management of divergence from the Confessions nor attempts to seek security in imitating the liturgical life of the Roman or Eastern Church could secure the stability of the Lutheran churches.<sup>33</sup>

Sasse was certainly not adverse to ecumenical discussion and fruitfully contributed to it especially in the earlier part of his career. But he also recognized that the Ecumenical Movement itself increasingly veered away from substantial theological engagement ultimately embodying the motto "Doctrine divides, service unites."<sup>34</sup> With grandiose designs to make the unity of the church visible in mission Sasse recognized the allurements of a theology of glory to which Lutherans, too, were prone to become entangled.

Second, confessional synods must be confessing synods. In an essay from 1951, "Confession and Theology in the Missouri Synod" turns his attention to the Missouri Synod. If Sasse's critique of the Missouri Synod seems harsh, it is not the criticism of a detractor but one who understands himself to be a brother and friend. Anticipating the charge that he might be accused of meddling in the affairs of another church body, Sasse begins the essay by noting "It is not meddling in the affairs of another church if we today undertake to speak on one of the basic problems of the Missouri Synod. For the life of a church is not like the life of an individual Christian, a private matter; it is a matter for all of Christendom. Whenever a church, whether it be a small congregation or a major part of Christendom, confesses her faith, she does so 'to those now living and those who shall come after us' (FC SD XII 40 [BSLK, 1099.42f.; Tappert, 636])."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Adolf von Harless cited by H. Sasse in "Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism," 40.

<sup>32</sup> H. Sasse, "Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism," 60.

<sup>33</sup> See Sasse's warnings in "Liturgy and Confession: A Brotherly Warning against the 'High Church' Danger" in *The Lonely Way*-Volume II, 299-315.

<sup>34</sup> H. Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity on the Mission Field" in *The Lonely Way*-Volume II, 188; Also H. Sasse, "The Lutheran Church and World Mission" in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*-Volume II, 314-333.

<sup>35</sup> H. Sasse, "Confession and Theology in the Missouri Synod" in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*-Volume II, 6.

Sasse praises the Missouri Synod for subscribing to the whole Book of Concord, her living congregations and parochial schools as well as impressive evangelistic outreach. But he also recognizes problems. He is critical of how he perceives Missouri Synod's classical theologians as being captive to the Aristotelian categories of Lutheran Orthodoxy including a particular understanding of biblical inerrancy. Most telling, however, in the essay is Sasse's observation that the Lutheran Confessions no longer play the role they played in the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> He observes that the Confessions are no longer spoken of with the joy which they elicited from Walther and the early Missourians. They are theoretically affirmed but not really used. "A confessional church does not happen if one does not actually confess."<sup>37</sup> Sasse saw this happening in the Missouri Synod of the middle twentieth century.

Third, bearing the cross in the synod evokes patience and persistence. Sasse was a church historian and his knowledge of the church's life as a life lived under the cross, gave depth to his perspective. While Sasse was prone to use the somewhat exaggerated language of a development or an event as "the great tragedy," he also recognized the bigger picture; the church lives in light of the eschatological horizon. Christ's holy Christian people live in the confidence of Article VII of the *Augustana* which confesses that this one holy church will remain forever.<sup>38</sup>

This truth distinguishes the church from the sect. In his 1965 essay on the Second Vatican Council, Sasse observes "We have been too much influenced by a certain type of sectarian Christianity, which for a long time flourished in America. The sect cannot wait; it must have everything at once, for it has no future. The church can wait for she does have a future. We Lutherans should think of that."<sup>39</sup> Sasse was too much a realist to set his hopes on the reprimation of an ecclesiastical golden age which never existed. The church in every age has lived with internal struggle, factionalism, and conflict as can be seen from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. Sectarianism and schism occur when impatience replaces faith and the future of the church is made to depend on human efforts rather than the promises of Christ. Sasse would express this in a sermon preached on the First Sunday after Trinity (27 June 1943) based on Acts 2:42-47 where he concludes "Nations pass away, but the church continues. And where there is a people which no longer has a future, there the church still has a future, because the future of the church is the future of Jesus Christ."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> H. Sasse, "Confession and Theology in the Missouri Synod," 17.

<sup>37</sup> H. Sasse, "Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism," 60.

<sup>38</sup> This eschatological note is clear in Sasse's preaching. See H. Sasse, *Witness: Erlangen Sermons and Essays for the Church 1933-1944*. Translated by Bror Erickson (Saginaw: Magdeburg Press, 2013). For example, see his sermon on Advent I, 1936: "Here, the Church, wherever she lives, learns about who her Lord is, about whom she waits for despite all disappointment. And she can wait, because he is with her. That is the mystery of the expectation of the Early Church. She could wait, because she was with him, hidden under the means of grace, in the Lord's Supper. That is the mystery of the coming Christ, Come, Lord Jesus! 'Surely I am coming soon!'" (55).

<sup>39</sup> H. Sasse. "The Ecumenical Challenge of the Second Vatican Council" in *The Lonely Way*-Volume II, 328.

<sup>40</sup> H. Sasse, "Jesus Lives" in *We Confess the Church*, 136.

Patience is not to be confused with resignation. When others suggested that “dialogue” about the possibility of admitting qualified women to the pastoral office, Sasse thundered in a 1971 essay on the ordination of women, “Not every question can be settled by means of a friendly discussion. It is necessary to remember that in an age which has the superstitious belief in dialogue as the infallible means of settling everything.”<sup>41</sup> Bearing the cross in a synod means being persistent in confession even if such persistence is seen as unsettling to ecclesiastical bureaucracy geared to keeping organizational harmony by ignoring error. Sasse writes “Just as 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.”<sup>42</sup>

Fourth, life together in the synod under the cross compels us to pray for the brethren. It is not uncommon for Sasse to conclude letters with a stanza from the Reformation-era hymn, “Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide.”<sup>43</sup> There is urgency to this prayer for Sasse recognized early on that “The Evangelical Lutheran Church is a church which has been sentenced to death by the world.”<sup>44</sup> The cross borne in the synod where brothers are contending for the faith and tempted, sometimes to contentiousness and at other times to indifference, drive us to pray for one another. Indeed the church is the *ecclesia orans*- the praying church. This prayer, Sasse says, in an activity of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter who intercedes for us in the way of Romans 8:26 in our infirmity and weakness.<sup>45</sup> Such prayer is heard by the Father for it is uttered the great High Priest of our salvation, Jesus Christ our Lord. This prayer is not an artistic decoration of the church’s worship, but the speaking to God on the basis of His command and promise. The cross drives us back to the hearing of God’s Word and the calling upon the name of the Lord for ourselves and each other on the basis of His certain promises. In an essay on Lutheran evangelism delivered to a pastoral conference in Australia, Sasse said “Sometimes it seems as if we have forgotten that only the most serious prayer can keep the church in the right faith and in the confession of the truth.”<sup>46</sup>

We have sampled just a bit of writings of Hermann Sasse that at long last have been made accessible to us through the labors of men such as Norman Nagel, Ronald Feuerhahn, and Matthew Harrison. I think he still has much to teach us about what it means to be a confessional Lutheran today no matter which synod we find ourselves in. I have used Sasse as a way at coming at the assigned topic not because of a desire to hold him up as an icon or a theologian who is without fault but because he given the circumstances of his life and times

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<sup>41</sup> H. Sasse, “Ordination of Women?” in *The Lonely Way-Volume II*, 402.

<sup>42</sup> H. Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity on the Mission Field,” 190.

<sup>43</sup> LSB 585.

<sup>44</sup> Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, translated by Theodore Tappert (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979), 187.

<sup>45</sup> H. Sasse, “*Ecclesia Orans*,” 81.

<sup>46</sup> H. Sasse, “A Few Thoughts Regarding Evangelism,” *Logia* (Epiphany 2014), 54. We might also note here that Luther’s famous triad, *oratio, meditatio, tentatio* becomes reversible in that the *tentatio* leads to a deepened *meditatio*, and renewed *oratio*. For more on this, see Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 33-65. Spiritual attack drives us back to God’s Word.

and the singular gifts the Lord bestowed on him, he helps think more clearly about what it means to confess and bear the cross in the various Lutheran church bodies where we live and work.

-Prof. John T. Pless

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