



LUTHERAN CONFESSOR

HERMANN SASSE
ON THE ESSENTIALS
OF THE FAITH

JOHN T. PLESS



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To Matthew C. Harrison
Friend, confessor, brother in office, and president
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, whose
labors in translating the works of Hermann Sasse
have made Sasse accessible to a new generation
of Lutherans throughout the world

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AE Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, American Edition. General editors: Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Christopher Boyd Brown, and Benjamin T. G. Mayes; 82 vols. Concordia Publishing House and Muhlenberg and Fortress, 1955–.
- HWS Sasse, Hermann. *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*. Translated by Theodore G. Tappert. Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979.
- K-W Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- LSB *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006.
- LTLP Sasse, Hermann. *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*. Edited and translated by Matthew C. Harrison. 3 vols. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013–15.
- TLW Sasse, Hermann. *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*. Translated by Matthew C. Harrison. 2 vols. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001–2.

FOREWORD

One of the issues the Reformation addressed was the linear understanding of church history. According to this understanding, the church gradually achieves greater clarity in the life and confession. The Reformers considered this a form of *theologia gloriae* and instead thought of church history as a repeated process of decline and renewal, a pattern that begins in the book of Genesis. The church is often hidden under the cross. Throughout the series of ups and downs, a few faithful witnesses always remain, constituting the continuity of the church.

Reflecting on the life and theology of Hermann Sasse, this understanding of church history comes to my mind. The decline of church life and academic theology during the twentieth century, as well as the clarity of confession within minority groups, is astonishing. There is much to learn from this period, and Sasse's life and theology provide insight into this dramatic era. He lived through two great wars and the period of the German church struggle. During the postwar period, his influence on confessional Lutheranism became significant on no less than three continents.

Sasse compared the mild optimism that characterized Protestant theology at the beginning of the century to the mild evening sun after a bright summer day. However, night and darkness were approaching. Not only was a generation of young men buried in the WWI battlefields, Sasse writes, but also the liberal theology that had shaped Berlin University students. Those who survived the war's trenches were thrown into a deep crisis. It was in this crisis that Sasse found the truth of the Evangelical Lutheran confession. A new wave of publications about the Reformation began with the Luther Renaissance in 1917, and Luther's message reached the heart of the young theologian.

Sasse realized the deep reality of sin in every human effort and that the only hope for a sinner is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

However, the legacy of Hermann Sasse is worth studying not primarily for historical reasons, but because he preached the Word of God clearly and profoundly. In the dark valleys of world history and amid the pressures and conflicts within the church, his confession of Christ attained a clarity that enables it to continue resonating with new generations. In a sermon delivered on Reformation Festival in 1943, Sasse described how the generations following the Reformation primarily celebrated it because of the renewed light of the Gospel. Later, however, during the Romantic period, the celebration was characterized by a more human admiration for Luther's personality. Sasse states that the grateful reception and administration of the heritage from previous generations must be done in accordance with Hebrews 13:7: "Remember your leaders, *those who spoke to you the word of God*" (emphasis added).

In this excellent book on Hermann Sasse, Professor John T. Pless keeps a sharp eye on the Gospel Sasse conveyed. While introducing us to Sasse's time and historical circumstances, the book maintains a clear theological focus. It provides a dogmatic overview of Sasse's confession and provides a discussion also about the present situation. Pless has profound knowledge of Sasse and his era and shares the same confessional position. He treats questions about Lutheran identity and confession today in accordance with Sasse's theological heritage.

Confessing the Gospel is part of the Lutheran way of life. When Sasse was commissioned as one of the coauthors of the Bethel Confession in 1933, the goal was to produce a confession that was *zeitgemäß*, adapted to the times, addressing the issues of the day. The resulting confession addressed critical questions and related them to the center of the faith, the triune God and His salvific deeds for man. In this book on Hermann Sasse, the wish to confess the Gospel in a contemporary context is pursued. In his thorough study of Sasse's theological legacy, Pless demonstrates its relevance for the contemporary church.

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INTRODUCTION

When the Reformation demanded that the Gospel be taught in its purity, the phrase “pure teaching,” or “pure doctrine,” was intended to mean far more than correct theological theory. “Doctrine” and “teaching” have the same meaning in the writings of Luther and in the Lutheran Confessions as they have in the New Testament: to teach is to present to the people the saving message of the Gospel. So the Reformation also used the words “confess” and “confession” in the same way as the New Testament: a confession is the response of the church (“We have believed and know that Thou art the Holy One of God”) to the revelation. Just as we cannot “teach,” so we can not “confess,” “but in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Nor did the Reformation ever forget that the same word is used in the New Testament for the confession of faith, the confession of sin, and the worship of God. At bottom, for the Lutheran Church a confession is nothing else than the great “We praise Thee, O God: we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord” of a pardoned sinner. And when the church rejects the errors of ancient and modern times “with common consent” in the great “we believe, teach, and confess” of the Lutheran Confessions, this concern for pure doctrine is nothing else than the concern which Paul and John manifested when they warned their congregations against distortions of the evangelical proclamation, against gospels which were no longer the Gospel.¹



Robert Preus (1924–1995) once offered the opinion that, along with Franz Pieper (1852–1931) and Werner Elert (1885–1954), Hermann Sasse (1895–1976) will be remembered as one of the great confessional Lutheran theologians of the twentieth century. Sasse’s pilgrimage to confessional Lutheranism would take him from Germany to Australia with significant stops in the United States. An overview of Sasse’s life and work is included as an appendix to this volume. This book seeks to provide readers with an introduction to the basic contours of Sasse’s theology by way of his book *Here We Stand*. While *Lutheran Confessor* can be read as a self-standing text providing an overview and a map to Hermann Sasse’s theology, it will be most effectively utilized when read in conjunction with *Here We Stand*.

Here We Stand was first published in Germany in 1934 under the title *Was heisst lutherisch? (What Is Lutheran?)*. It was reprinted in an enlarged edition in 1936, translated into English by Theodore G. Tappert, and published by Harper and Row in 1938. It was a significant textbook in North American Lutheran seminaries of all synods in the middle part of the last century. Dr. Lowell Green once told me that when he was a student at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, in the late 1940s, Sasse’s book along with C. F. W. Walther’s *Law and Gospel* and Adolph Koeberle’s *The Quest for Holiness* were the three chief texts required for classes. English-speaking Lutherans are indebted to Dr. Norman Nagel and Matthew C. Harrison, president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, for their diligent work in translating and publishing Sasse and to Dr. Ronald Feuerhahn and Dr. Kurt Marquart for acquainting a generation of seminary students with Sasse’s work.

I am grateful to Dr. Jacob Corzine and Concordia Publishing House for this opportunity to revisit this classic text and suggest ways in which this book, now ninety years old, might be of help as Lutherans all over the world seek to answer Sasse’s original question, *What is Lutheran?* in an ever-shifting context.

Paragraphs from Sasse’s book will be highlighted at the beginning of each chapter, followed by commentary and connections with some of Sasse’s other writings now available in English. Connections with contemporary developments and challenges to Lutheran theology and

church life will be engaged. Each chapter will conclude with questions appropriate for individual study or group discussion as well as suggestions for further study.

Before we move to the individual chapters, it would be helpful to situate this book in Sasse's own career. Here we might note four aspects of Sasse's life up to 1936: (1) Sasse's theological education in Berlin; (2) his "American year"; (3) his involvement with the Ecumenical Movement; and (4) the rise of National Socialism and a Lutheran response.

Education at the University of Berlin

After a rather conventional childhood as the son of a middle-class pharmacist, Sasse matriculated at the University of Berlin to pursue studies in philology and theology in 1913. Scholars of the period included Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), Karl Holl (1866–1926), Reinhold Seeberg (1859–1935), Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), Hans Lietzmann (1875–1942), and Adolf Deissmann (1866–1937). In varying degrees, these men were products of the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century shaped by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89).

Adolf von Harnack was the son of the outstanding confessional Lutheran theologian and Luther scholar Theodosius Harnack (1817–1889), whose theology stood in stark contrast with that of his son. The author of *What Is Christianity?* (1901), the younger Harnack asserted that the essence of authentic Christian faith is not doctrine but ethics. In a review of Harnack's biography, Sasse would describe his teacher as "the theologian of the Second Reich" and conclude,

The tragedy of his [Adolf Harnack's] life is in the fact that he who studied so many theologians of all eras, of whom he possessed an intimate and personal knowledge, never was able to grasp what makes a theologian and distinguishes him from a scholar of religion.²

Sasse recognized Harnack as a brilliant historian of the early church but a man totally lacking in a grasp of the truth of the church's confession that Jesus, God and man, is Lord. Yet the impact of von Harnack was deep: "No German theologian since Schleiermacher has had such a profound impression upon intellectuals as has Adolf von Harnack."³ Von Harnack sought to uncover the "historical Jesus" but found a man who could not be identified with the coming Messiah or recognized as Lord.

Another significant teacher for Sasse was Karl Holl, a pioneer in the "Luther Renaissance." The discovery of Luther's early lectures on Romans (1515–16), published in 1908, would guide Holl's approach as he focused on Luther's so-called "tower experience," concluding that Luther's understanding of religion was a "religion of conscience." Holl would make a sharp distinction between what he believed was Luther's grasp of religion and that of confessional Lutheran theology, which he saw as shaped by Melancthon. While Sasse would reject both Holl's theological method and most of his conclusions, he would credit Holl for exposing him to Luther's writings.

From Reinhold Seeberg, author of the important *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, Sasse would learn that systematic theology is never independent of the history of dogma. Sasse was impressed by Seeberg's encyclopedic grasp of the development of church doctrine and its connection to church history. Sasse would often criticize Ernst Troeltsch's sociological distinction between "church" and "sect." Hans Lietzmann would be an impetus for Sasse's study of the Lord's Supper, even though Sasse will take a position on the truthfulness of the words of institution and their reliability in determining liturgical practice at variance with his teacher. Adolf Deissmann, author of *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (1908), would guide Sasse's doctoral research and lead him to develop expertise in philology. Deissmann would recommend his student for service as a German representative to the Faith and Order Conference, thus opening the door for Sasse's ecumenical involvement.

Sasse's studies were interrupted by World War I. From 1916 to 1918, he served in the German army. He would survive one of the bloodiest battles of the war, the Battle of Passchendaele. Out of his regiment of one hundred and fifty men, Sasse was one of only six to survive. Later he would remark that liberal theology died for him on the battlefield.⁴

The American Year

Sasse was awarded his doctorate in 1923 and served in congregations in the greater Berlin area. He was given an opportunity for postdoctoral studies at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut for the 1925–26 academic year. This would be a very significant experience for Sasse. It was here that Sasse read Wilhelm Loehe's *Three Books about the Church*, a book that Sasse said made him a real Lutheran. In the foreword to the American edition of *Here We Stand*, Sasse noted,

Personally I must confess that it was in America that I first learned fully to appreciate what it means to be loyal to the Lutheran Confessions; but for what I learned from the Lutheran theologians and church bodies in the United States, I probably could never have written this book.⁵

Early contacts were with theologians and churchmen of the United Lutheran Church in America. These contacts would grow to include men of other American Lutheran church bodies, especially the Wisconsin Synod, the Missouri Synod, and the American Lutheran Church.

The year after his American visit, Sasse wrote the monograph "American Christianity and the Church." It was this monograph that Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) would read when he prepared for his own exchange year at Union Seminary in New York a few years later. In it, Sasse notes his observations about both the vibrance and challenges of church life in the United States. On the one hand, he notes, "In America the fearful divide between religion and culture, between church and secular civilization, which has rent the people

of Europe, is absent.”⁶ On the other hand, Sasse finds that churches in America seemed to be preoccupied with money, public relations, culture, and bringing to fruition the kingdom of God. He notes that other American Christians turned to the Fundamentalist stream as a way of affirming biblical truth over against modernism. Sasse finds the approach of the Fundamentalists problematic and rejects it:

The conservative wing in these churches, the Fundamentalists, sharply criticize the cultural Protestantism of the Federal Council from a strongly biblicistic standpoint. But this Fundamentalism has no connection to the idea of the church of the Reformation. . . . And therefore it is incapable of real church formation and exerting creative influence on the culture. Above all its naive eschatology, its expectation of the immediate end of the world, limits the horizon of its disciples to the present living generation.⁷

Sasse notes that American Lutherans of this period had largely been spared the division that occurred in other Protestant denominations. He notes the presence of the Prussian Union in America through the small Evangelical Synod (a predecessor body of the United Church of Christ), which he deems “irretrievably lost in Calvinism.”⁸

Sasse also notes that the Augsburg Confession’s teaching that the church is the gathering of the saints where the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered is foreign to American thinking:

The American concept of the church basically avoids this question. It surrenders dogma and liturgy as something unessential—“trifling matters” as Goethe put it. For us, however, both of these belong to the essence of the church: the Word and Sacrament, confession and liturgy. We understand the protest against an ossified orthodoxy and a dreary ritualism, and we agree with this protest. But we believe that the church possesses in the *Verbum Dei* [“Word of

God”] the eternal truth, over against all the relativism of human knowledge. And we believe that in the evangelically understood Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, that in the liturgical life of the church which is grounded on these things, the powers are present which are able to establish a new and real human fellowship, even in an age in which all human fellowships are unraveling.⁹

In American Christianity, Sasse observes a pragmatic passion for unity. Creeds are divisive but actions unite: “The great issues of the Reformation, such as the doctrine of justification, have been shoved aside in its program for unification.”¹⁰ Sasse concludes that Protestants in America had absorbed the worst elements of German theology, especially noting Albrecht Ritschl and Ernst Troeltsch. In Sasse’s estimation, the image of the magisterial Reformers was quickly fading in America. In this essay, we see the young Sasse begin to emerge as a *Lutheran* theologian against the backdrop of American Christianity. Many of the themes he touches on in “American Christianity and the Church” will be developed and sharpened in *Here We Stand*. We can see why *Here We Stand*, when read in light of this essay, would gain a good hearing among American Lutherans in the middle decades of the last century.

The Rise of National Socialism and a Lutheran Response

Sasse was one of the first theologians to sound the warning as to the demonic destructiveness of Hitler and National Socialism. Even before Hitler came into power, Sasse warned against what he saw as the emerging of an idolatrous fascination with the ancient Teutonic myths, naive trust in a political leader who would deliver Germany from economic and social woes, glorification of the *Volk* (people) as having a divinely given status, the rejection of the Old Testament as Jewish legends unworthy of the canon, the establishment of a German Protestant church, and the state’s control of the church. Germany,

still in deflation and chaos after the Treaty of Versailles, was ripe for the propaganda that would prove to be seductive. As a confessional and confessing Lutheran, Sasse spoke against the ideology of National Socialism because he perceived it not only as offering a false hope but also as an offense against the First Commandment.

In 1930, Sasse wrote “The Social Significance of the Augsburg Confession” while he was a pastor in Berlin, responsible for the congregation’s “social ministry” in the community. In this early piece, Sasse warns against confusing the kingdom of God with an effort to “Christianize” the social order. Drawing on Articles XVI (“Concerning Public Order and Secular Government”) and XXVII (“Concerning the Power of Bishop”) of the Augsburg Confession, Sasse lays out the Lutheran teaching of the “two kingdoms” or “two governments.” God governs His church through the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, but this spiritual government is not to be confused with God’s governance of the world, which is exercised through the power of the sword. The power of the sword is to curb evil and protect bodily life. It is this power that is to enact justice and maintain peace. Sasse recognizes that God uses pagans and Christians alike in His government of the civil realm: “No matter which peoples Christians live among, they must acknowledge the current legal authorities, ‘be they pagan or Christian,’ as governing authorities established by God, and be obedient to the applicable laws (Apology XVI 2–3 [54–55]).”¹¹ For Sasse, “there is as little possibility of a Christian state as there is of Christian agriculture and Christian technology. . . . There is no Christian order for society, for that would be an attempt to make sin disappear from the world, that love would take the place of law, in other words, that the kingdom of God would have come in glory.”¹² Because sin exists, the law, state, and civil authority will remain until Christ returns in glory. Christians are not freed of their obligation to governing authorities (see Romans 13).

Sasse’s confession of God’s two ways of governing creation seeks to keep the church distinct from the state. Both power and law belong to the essence of the state according to Sasse, but the state does not have the authority to abolish the categories of right and wrong

from jurisprudence and replace them “with ‘useful’ and ‘injurious,’ ‘healthy’ and ‘ill,’ ‘socially valuable’ and ‘socially inferior.’”¹³ Caesar is to be honored and obeyed as long as he remains Caesar and does not attempt to be God:

The church at the time of the apostles had acknowledged the Roman government as the governing authority established by God, insofar as it fulfilled the functions of a governing authority, insofar as it was the shield of justice and peace. The church rendered it obedience so far as it could do so without sin and as long as the pagan authorities remained within their proper legal sphere. But when the governing authority transgressed its lawful limits, as happened in the cult of Caesar, and demanded not only rule over the body, but also over the soul, there the saying applied: “One must obey God rather than men” [Acts 5:29]. Thus the struggle between Christ and Caesar broke out, as reflected in the Revelation of St. John. It is not Caesar who was the enemy of Christ, but Caesar the god [*Divus caesar*], who placed himself in the throne of God. The doctrine of our confession directly reflects these thoughts of Holy Scripture.¹⁴

Sasse’s sturdy understanding of God’s two governments in terms of the divine institution of both, the fact that they are not interchangeable, and the limitation of their respective powers would form the platform for his treatment of National Socialism two years later.

In 1932, Sasse authored “The Church and the Political Powers of Our Time.” Here Sasse notes the rise of the “*Führer* cult” with its fanatical exaltation of Germany as a Christian *Volk*:

Here there is no academic or proletarian, no businessman or worker, here is not a pastor or teacher, here is not a Catholic or Protestant. They are all together one in the miracle of a common faith in *one goal, one truth, one Führer*. The

character of this faith of political convictions is never so clear as in the unconditional dedication to the *Führer*.¹⁵

Sasse notes how theologians were no longer able to articulate the person and work of Jesus Christ as the answer to humanity's deepest need—life with God forever through the forgiveness of sins—and instead offered only a “thin morality,” a theoretical Christian ethic that “could tell man how he should behave in various life situations as a religious and moral being. But that would help him about as much as throwing a textbook about swimming to a drowning man. So it has come to be that the man of the present perceives the proclamation of the church as theoretical and unreal. The entire force of belief, which has remained in his heart, is directed to something [else] that promises real help.”¹⁶ The creedless Christianity of liberalism, a faith devoid of dogma, is impotent in the face of the virile political claims that promise a renewed life with a return to German superiority. The manifesto of the German National People's Party in the election of the *Reichstag* in 1932 made this provocative appeal: “German culture and the Christian religion are the bases of the life of the *Volk*. We demand the protection of the Christian churches and the suppression of atheism; we also demand, however, of the churches that they confess adherence to the national state and *fight for it*.”¹⁷

Just as the Gospel neither creates nor overthrows secular government, so the state may not demand obedience in matters that contradict the confession of Christ according to Acts 5:29. Sasse notes how the state under Friedrich Wilhelm I (1688–1740) destroyed the Lutheran liturgy and infringed on the church's confession. The National Socialist Party platform allowed for religious freedom “so far as they do not endanger the existence of the state or threaten the decency and morality of the German race.”¹⁸ National Socialism would allow for religious freedom only to the extent that churches aligned themselves with the public interest of the state, particularly in doing battle against the “Jewish-materialistic spirit *within* and *around* us.”¹⁹ Sasse argued that the doctrine of justification of the sinner by

grace alone through faith alone spells the end to all human morality whether it is Jewish or German.

Article 24 of the party platform would exclude Christians of Jewish descent from church office. Here the state was overreaching, inserting itself into the life of the church and attacking the doctrine of justification by faith alone, for in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (see Galatians 3:28). Sasse sees this as an attack on the Gospel itself.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sasse shared much in common. Both were born into comfortable, upper-middle-class families. Eleven years younger than Sasse, Bonhoeffer studied at Berlin under many of the same teachers that Sasse had a decade earlier. Like Sasse, Bonhoeffer studied in America for a year. Prior to coming to the United States, he read Sasse's "American Christianity and the Church." These men came to know each other when Bonhoeffer was a student and Sasse was a pastor in Berlin. Both were alarmed by the emergence of National Socialism.

At the prompting of Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (1877–1946) of Bethel, Bonhoeffer and Sasse collaborated to prepare the Bethel Confession of August 1933. Meeting in Bethel, the home of a historic Lutheran deaconess institution, Bonhoeffer and Sasse, with input from Georg Merz (1892–1959), drafted a confession in the face of what they recognized as threats to the Christian faith. Thoroughly Lutheran in orientation, the Bethel Confession echoed the Formula of Concord in asserting that "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the only source and norm for the doctrine of the church."²⁰ Against those, like von Harnack, who consigned the Old Testament to the category of Jewish, sub-Christian literature, unfit for dogmatic or liturgical use, the Bethel Confession strongly affirmed it as God's Word that bears witness to Christ.

The Bethel Confession affirms the political use of the Law, which is God's Law at work in the orders the Creator has established, but it rejects as false teaching the notion that the political laws of any people can be equated with divine Law. Also rejected is the notion that the Jewish people alone are responsible for the death of Jesus. There are long sections of the Confession devoted to "Church and State" and

“The Church and the Jews.” The language of the Bethel Confession is explicit in condemning the antisemitism of National Socialism:

We turn against the enterprise of the German Evangelical Church to rob it of its promise by trying to turn itself into an imperial church of Christians of the Aryan race. . . . Christians coming from the Gentile world must expose themselves to persecution rather than voluntarily or forcibly abandoning the ecclesiastical brotherhood established by Word and sacrament with Jewish Christians, even in a singular relationship.²¹

The Bethel Confession was circulated among various theologians, many of whom sent critical comments that called for revision. Both Bonhoeffer and Sasse rejected these revisions, and when the document was finally published in November, they refused to sign it. The Bethel Confession of August 1933 would remain a testimonial to Sasse’s capacity as a Lutheran theologian to forthrightly address the evils emerging from Hitler’s platform. The historian E. Clifford Nelson offered this appraisal of Sasse in 1982:

With hindsight today’s interpreters of the “church struggle” readily admit that Sasse’s sharp words were biblically prophetic and evangelically confessional and that Sasse himself was prescient. Although numerous church people had assumed that it would be possible to work with Hitler, later developments proved them to be naïve and Sasse to be wise. The first illustration of this fact was the difficulty surrounding the drafting of a constitution for the proposed merger of the *Landeskirchen* into the Reich church.²²

The Question of Truth and Confession

Truth and confession go together. A few years after writing *Here We Stand*, Sasse would state, “Where man can no longer bear the truth, he cannot live without the lie.”²³ Confession is nothing less than speaking the truth in response to God’s revelation in His Word. This is acute, for “the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, is never present where lies are told. And there is actually more unity of the church present where Christians of differing confession honorably determine that they do not have the same understanding of the Gospel than where the painful fact of confessional splintering is hidden behind a pious lie.”²⁴

In the New Testament, the terms *confess* and *confession* are used in three ways: (1) confession of faith; (2) confession of sin; and (3) confession of God’s glory. To confess is to say back to God what He has said to us in His Word. Confession is a response to divine revelation.²⁵ The Father has declared to us this Jesus of Nazareth is His eternal Son, anointed by the Holy Spirit as Israel’s Messiah. This revelation made at Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan (see Matthew 3:13–17) was confessed by Peter at Caesarea Philippi: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Peter’s confession is the nucleus that lies behind every genuine creed in Christendom. It is the content of faith itself, which is expressed by the mouth (see Romans 10:5–13). This is the confession of faith. In the preaching of the Gospel, God says, “This is My Son and your Lord Jesus, given for you to save you from sin, death, and the devil.” Faith confesses, “Jesus is my Lord. He has saved me from sin, death, and the devil.”

The confession of faith is both a personal and corporate confession, and it is given in response to the Lord Himself:

No man can escape giving an answer to this question, be that answer what it may. And the confessions of the Church seek to be nothing more than an answer to that same question. And that is true of all confessions, the simple formulas which were sufficient for the primitive Church, the creeds

of ecclesiastical antiquity, the symbolical writings of the various confessional churches of the Reformation period which sought, each in its own way, to safeguard against false interpretations the original confession by which the Church acknowledges Jesus as the Christ. Every confession of the Church is first and last an answer, not to some human inquiry, but to the question of the Lord, who asks, “Who am I?”²⁶

God in His Law declares that we are sinners. His Commandments, which we have not kept, demonstrate how we have failed to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. This is sin that adheres to all the sons and daughters of Adam and makes us accountable to the Creator. In the confession of sins, we agree with God’s verdict and so say with David: “Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight” (Psalm 51:4). And “if we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:10). God says, “You are a sinner,” and we say back to Him, “I have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed.”

There is also the confession of God’s glory. God has revealed His glory—that is, His saving presence in Christ—and we reflect that glory back to Him in the praise of His name. Jesus praises, literally “confesses,” His Father, who has concealed His wisdom from the learned of the world and revealed it to little children (see Matthew 11:25). Confession is doxological; it gives all glory to the triune God (see Isaiah 6:3; Philippians 2:9–11). As Sasse observed, “For the Lutheran Church a confession is nothing else than the great ‘We praise Thee, O God: we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord’ of a pardoned sinner.”²⁷ That confession comes from the *Te Deum*, a historic canticle of the church. Luther counted the *Te Deum* as worthy of being ranked among the Ecumenical Creeds. It embodies the confession of faith, of sin, and of the glory of God.

For Sasse, the Lutheran Confessions are not merely artifacts to be preserved as a way of honoring the legacy of the fathers.

Indeed, the church does not live on from the faith of the *fathers*. The confession can have a purely historical significance, like the flags and uniforms of Hanover. If it is correct that the *confessio*, the confession of the faith, is indissolubly connected with *confessio* in the sense of the confession of sin and of the praise of God, is not then our lack of repentance and our lack of joyful praise of God in newer hymns a notable parallel to the regression of the dogmatic confession [of the faith]?²⁸

Writing many years after Sasse had published *Here We Stand*, noted Reformed theologian Carl Trueman authored *The Creedal Imperative*, in which he observed that “there are powerful currents within modern life that militate in various ways against the positive use of creeds and confessions in the church.”²⁹ Trueman continues to argue that our age has rendered the creeds not so much as unbiblical but rather as implausible because they are built on an outdated understanding of truth and language. Trueman writes,

[Creeds] demand that individuals submit, intellectually and morally, to something outside of themselves, that they listen to the voices from the church from other times and other places. They go directly against the grain of our antihistorical, antiauthoritarian age. Creeds strike hard against the cherished notion of human autonomy and of the notion that I am exceptional, that the normal rules do not apply to me in the way they do to others.³⁰

Sasse anticipated these objections and sets them within their historical context. Surveying the state of Christianity in Germany in his day, Sasse speaks of the redefinition of Christianity as a religion of ethics devoid of dogma. It is about deeds, not creeds: “During the last two centuries Protestant Christianity gradually forgot what the Reformation had emphasized: the profound seriousness of truth.”³¹ He calls the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the “undogmatic age,”

noting, “The Christianity of pious sentiments and subjective religious experiences is dying of its own dearth of substance, or else is veering around to self-deification, to a new and a worse kind of paganism.”³² In our own day, we see these impulses reflected in the fascination with spirituality but a marked distaste for the church often embodied in outright hostility. Churches themselves have often succumbed to theological eclecticism and doctrinal indifference, witnessed in such innovations as the “Sparkle Creed,” which is antithetical to orthodox creedal Christianity.

Writing in the 1930s and against the backdrop of the previous two centuries, Sasse expressed the thought that, at least in some areas, there was a renewed revival of faith and with it a recovered appreciation for creeds and doctrine. For example, Sasse notes the new interest in the Nicene Creed as a basis for ecumenical discussion in his day, the recovery of the Heidelberg and Westminster Confessions by the Reformed, and the recognition of the vitality of Luther and the Symbolical Books (that is, the Book of Concord) among Lutherans.

In a similar way today, we might note pockets of resistance to modernity, as at least in some circles there is a recovery of historic confessions and a deepened engagement with the classical doctrine of the churches. The number of books, journals, podcasts, and conferences devoted to Reformation theology—both Lutheran and Reformed—continues to multiply. Some denominations, such as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, have made a decided turn away from a historical-critical approach to the Scriptures rooted in the Enlightenment and back to the faith of the Book of Concord.

All of this makes it necessary that Lutherans look more deeply at the question What does it mean to be Lutheran? What unites us with all Christians? How is Lutheranism different from Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Reformed Protestants, and heirs of the so-called Radical Reformation (Anabaptists)? Sasse lays out the character and the distinctiveness of the Lutheran Church neither as a “movement” nor as a sect but as a church. To answer these questions, Sasse begins with a discussion of two fundamental themes: confession and truth. These themes will resurface, repeating themselves throughout *Here We*

Stand. One of Sasse's contemporaries, Ernst Kinder (1910–70), wrote, "False Lutheran pride and self-sufficiency is only the reverse side of a false Lutheran inferiority complex. These show lack of confidence in the God-given responsibility of a confession, as well as an unhappy uncertainty."³³ Sasse avoids both the pitfalls of a false Lutheran pride and a false Lutheran inferiority complex. Rather, he is the voice for a robust confession of the truth of Christ born from the humility of faith. In the first chapter, we take up Sasse's own question—What does it mean to be Lutheran?—noting how his answer avoids both pride and compromise.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe the theology of Sasse's teachers in Berlin?
2. What effect did World War I have on Sasse?
3. How does Sasse assess the state of American Christianity in the 1920s? Can you see any parallels with the state of American Christianity today?
4. How does Sasse use Romans 13:1–7 and Acts 5:29 in his argument on civil authority?
5. What was Sasse's critique of National Socialism in 1932?
6. What were the similarities between Sasse and Bonhoeffer?
7. What was the purpose of the Bethel Confession?
8. Sasse notes that "pure doctrine" is "far more than correct theological theory." According to Sasse, how do Luther and the Lutheran Confessions understand "pure doctrine"?
9. What does it mean to confess?
10. Read the *Te Deum* (LSB, p. 223). How does it reflect each of the three aspects of confession: faith, sin, and God's glory?
11. How would you describe Sasse's understanding of the relationship between "truth" and "confession"?

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NOTES

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- 1 HWS, 7–8.
 - 2 TLW I:312.
 - 3 TLW I:315.
 - 4 “You can perhaps live on this [Harnack’s theology] in happy times, but you can’t die with it, and so, the liberal theology and optimistic view of man died in the catastrophe of the First World War” (Sasse, “The Impact of Bultmannism on American Lutheranism, with Special Reference to His Demythologization of the New Testament,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 5, no. 4 [June 1965]: 5).
 - 5 HWS, 10–11.
 - 6 TLW I:27.
 - 7 TLW I:50.
 - 8 TLW I:43.
 - 9 TLW I:47.
 - 10 TLW I:51.
 - 11 TLW I:92.
 - 12 TLW I:93.
 - 13 TLW I:98.
 - 14 TLW I:92–93.
 - 15 Hermann Sasse, “The Church and the Political Powers of Our Time,” trans. Matthew C. Harrison, in *One Lord, Two Hands? Essays on the Theology of the Two Kingdoms*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2021), 242.
 - 16 Sasse, “The Church and the Political Powers of Our Time,” 245. Brackets added.
 - 17 Sasse, “The Church and the Political Powers of Our Time,” 248.
 - 18 Sasse, “The Church and the Political Powers of Our Time,” 252.
 - 19 Sasse, “The Church and the Political Powers of Our Time,” 252.
 - 20 Bethel Confession, Article I, “Concerning Holy Scripture,” cited in Torbjörn Johansson, *Faith in the Face of Tyranny: An Examination of the Bethel Confession Proposed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse in August 1933*, trans. Bror Erickson (Irvine: 1517 Publishing, 2023), 27.
 - 21 Bethel Confession, Article VI, “Of the Holy Ghost and the Church,” cited in Johansson, *Faith in the Face of Tyranny*, 51–52.
 - 22 E. Clifford Nelson, *The Rise of World Lutheranism: An American Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 314–15.
 - 23 TLW I:266.

- 24 TLW I:272.
- 25 Here also see Ernst Kinder: “The confession is the response of the church to God’s Word. It is the echo of faith to God’s revelation of salvation. The church of the gospel cannot exist without this echo of faith, and cannot properly carry on its service to the gospel without it. Only by means of such and echo does the gospel make fruitful progress” (“The Confession as Gift and as Task,” in *The Unity of the Church: A Symposium* [Rock Island, IL: Augustana Press, 1957], 104).
- 26 LTLP I:25.
- 27 HWS, 8. See also LSB, p. 223, for the text of the *Te Deum*.
- 28 LTLP II:53.
- 29 Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 47.
- 30 Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, 48. Brackets added.
- 31 HWS, 8.
- 32 HWS, 9.
- 33 Kinder, “The Confession as Gift and as Task,” 113.

1

What Does It Mean to Be Lutheran?

For our question, “What does it mean to be Lutheran?” is not identical with the problem, which is frequently raised, of determining the nature of Lutheranism as one of the great confessional expressions of Christianity and of determining the influences which have been exerted on the western world by this particular type of Christian faith, life, and thought. We are quite aware of the significance of this problem as an important question of church history and of the general history of culture. But we would have to refrain from discussing this problem here even if we were able to add anything substantial or new to what has recently been written on this subject. Lutheranism—this an abstract concept of the philosophy of religion. The character of Lutheranism is scientifically determined. And it follows from the very nature of the question that the various exponents of the philosophy of religion, that the historians and philosophers of the different schools and tendencies, that the theologians of the different communions, should give different answers. Not even the theologians who call themselves Lutheran agree on what the real nature of Lutheranism is. “Lutheranism” itself cannot provide the answer. It cannot answer the inquirer who seeks to know its nature because it is a dumb concept.

But it is altogether different when we ask about the Lutheran *Church*. The Evangelical Lutheran Church is not an idea. It is a reality. It is not dumb, but speaks. For it would not be a church if it had not borne witness, if it did not continue to bear witness, to what it is—what it is particularly as a *Lutheran Church*. . . .

If we stand up for the doctrine of the sinner's justification *sola gratia, sola fide*, it is not the dogmatic idiosyncrasy of a denomination which is at stake, but the article of which "nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even if heaven and earth and all things sink to ruin" [Smalcald Articles II]. Not only the church of our Confession, but the whole church of Christ, lives by this article. Hence we cannot possibly render a better service to the whole Christian church on earth, or even to the Christians of other communions who do not quite understand us today, than by preaching this doctrine in all purity and clarity. Indeed, it is the greatest contribution which can be made toward the true unity of divided Christendom, as the Formula of Concord says, quoting Luther: "If only this article is kept pure, the Christian church also remains pure, and is harmonious and without all sects; but if it does not remain pure, it is not possible to resist any error or fanatical spirit" [Formula of Concord II].

The hour will come when it will be necessary for Lutherans of the whole world to have learned the full depth of these words. That hour will come when they are required to answer the question of the world, the question of the other communions, "What does it mean to be Lutheran?"¹



A Question with a History

It has been popular in recent years to address the question of Lutheran identity. Yet *identity* is a slippery term that might refer to characteristics that are more or less abstract. For example, we could define Lutheranism as a catholic expression of the Christian faith centered in God's grace. On a bit more academic level, the American theologian Robert Jenson popularized the notion that Lutheranism is an evangelical movement within the church catholic: "As it is, Lutheranism is a *confessional movement* within the church catholic that continues to offer to the whole church a proposal of dogma which received definitive documentary form in the Augsburg Confession and the other writings collected in the Book of Concord."² In a similar fashion, Jenson's colleague at Gettysburg Seminary asserted:

For the BC [Book of Concord] understood Lutheranism as a reform movement within the church catholic, indeed within sixteenth-century Catholicism. At stake was the retrieval of the ancient Christian convictions for all of Christendom, and Lutheranism became the inevitable historical constellation for such a retrieval even though it became an organized church when medieval Christendom refused reform.³

Jaroslav Pelikan would describe Lutherans as "obedient rebels," drawing on the distinction between "catholic substance" and "Protestant principle" coined by his teacher Paul Tillich. According to Pelikan, Luther and early Lutherans held to the catholic substance of the Christian faith while utilizing the Protestant principle to critique abuses.⁴

Others have Lutheranism as a mediating movement between the Roman hierarchy and Spirit-led freedom. In this way, Lutheranism is seen as a middle point, inviting an ecumenical meeting place between Roman Catholicism and a variety of free-church Protestants. Using the language of Jenson, Carl E. Braaten, writing in 2007, is optimistic:

“Lutheranism has been from the beginning a confessional movement, and present trends indicate that all Lutheran communities around the world intend to continue their life and mission on a confessional basis.”⁵ Sasse would not share in this optimism.

Sasse is not taking up the question What is Lutheranism? but rather What does it mean to be Lutheran? The first question might be answered by examining the impact of the Lutheran ethic on the social welfare policies of the Scandinavian countries or the imprint of Lutheran piety on particular historical figures, such as Lessing, Goethe, Hegel, and Bismarck. Such a study might yield sociological data, but it would fail to provide a theological answer to the question What does it mean to be Lutheran?

Our concern is not with a “Lutheran” system or school of thought. Neither is our concern with Lutheranism as an expression of national identity. The Lutheran Church is not confused with German, Swedish, or Norwegian identity. The Lutheran Church is a “wandering people of God,” an *ecclesia migrans*, as Sasse put it in an essay of 1950. Rather, our concern is with the Lutheran Church as it is defined by its confessions contained in the Book of Concord.

Since the church’s confession is the Spirit-wrought response to God’s revelation—the church’s answer to God’s Word—it cannot be reduced to a mere human perception of truth, as Schleiermacher opined. In a sermon on the three hundredth anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession in 1830, Schleiermacher confidently announced that the Augsburg Confession “is only a human expression of Christian doctrine” and exhorted the congregation not to fall “into a bondage of the letter and become slaves again of men.”⁶ Schleiermacher’s attitude toward the Confessions was relativism. They could not be definitive for the life of the church. Schleiermacher asserted that “Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech.”⁷ By way of contrast, Sasse countered,

The Lord Christ had no interest in the pious Christian heart of His apostles when He asked: “Who do you say that I am?” [Matt. 16:15]. There are no true or false plants, no

true and false families, and even the differences between the religious condition of the heart of a Hindu and a Muhammadan cannot be expressed in the categories of “true” and “false.” But there are true and false churches. There are Christian dogmas to which the predicate of truth is attached, such as the dogma of the ascension of Christ, and there are anti-Christian heresies, such as the heresy of the assumption of Mary.⁸

Sasse insisted that the Lutheran Church would live by its confession or sink into death without it. In a 1948 letter on the status of the Lutheran churches in the world, Sasse laments doctrinal indifference that is toxic to the life of faith. He urges pastors to take to heart their ordination vows in these last days of sore distress:

The Christian congregation of the present day in all lands and of all creeds is tired of the undogmatic, devotional character of the ethical sermon, which changes its theme every year. It demands in a way which we pastors frequently do not understand at all a substantial dogmatic sermon, a doctrinal sermon in the best sense of the word. If our contemporaries do not find it in the Lutheran Church, then the hunger for doctrine will drive them into other denominations. Therefore lay hold of the Confessions, dear brethren in the ministry, by yourselves and together with others.⁹

Sasse was convinced that without a full-throated articulation of the Gospel on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions, the Lutheran Church would crumble, reduced to nothing more than a historical memory. The trajectory that we saw in *Here We Stand* continues here:

We must learn anew Luther’s invincible faith in the power of the means of grace. Whatever the Church still has and still does should not be minimized. But she does not live from mercy, or from political and social activity. She does

not subsist on large numbers. When will the terrible superstition of the Christendom of our day cease that Jesus Christ is powerful only there where two or three million are gathered together in His name? When will we again comprehend that the Church lives by the means of grace of the pure preaching of the Gospel and by the divinely instituted administration of the Sacraments and by nothing else? And for no other reason than because Jesus Christ the Lord is present in His means of grace and builds His Church on earth, being even as powerful as ever before in the history of the Church—even if His power and glory, to speak as our Confessions do, are *cruce tectum*, hidden under the cross [Ap VII–VIII 18]. Oh, what secret unbelief and what little faith we find in the Church that calls herself the Church of the *sola fide*! May God in His grace eradicate this unbelief and strengthen this weak faith in our souls and renew us through the great faith of the New Testament and the Reformation. That, and that alone, is the manner of overcoming the urgent need of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the greatest and weightiest crisis of her history.¹⁰

Luther and the Lutheran Church

From the beginning, the place of the Lutheran Church has not been without ambiguity. Luther did not see himself as the founder of a new church. In his 1522 treatise “A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion,” Luther wrote:

I ask that men make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all, the teaching is not mine [John 7:16]. Neither was I crucified for anyone [1 Cor. 1:13]. St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians

3, would not allow the Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I—poor stinking maggot-fodder that I am—come to have men call the children of Christ by my wretched name? Not so, my dear friends; let us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians, after him whose teaching we hold. The papists deservedly have a party name, because they are not content with the teaching and name of Christ, but want to be papist as well. Let them be papist then, since the pope is their master. I neither am nor want to be anyone’s master. I hold, together with the universal church, the one universal teaching of Christ, who is our only master [Matt. 23:8].¹¹

Yet the title “Lutheran” would stick as the label for those who held to the evangelical teaching of the Wittenberg professor turned reformer. In addition to the above denunciation of the use of his name to designate a particular Christian party or group, Luther wrote this in his “Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament” (1522):

True, by any consideration of body or soul you should never say: I am Lutheran, or Papist. For neither of them died for you, or is your master. Christ alone died for you, he alone is your master, and you should confess yourself a Christian. But if you are convinced that Luther’s teaching is in accord with the gospel and that the pope’s is not, then you should not discard Luther so completely, lest with him you discard also his teaching, which you nevertheless recognize as Christ’s teaching. You should rather say: Whether Luther is a rascal or a saint I do not care; his teaching is not his, but Christ’s.¹²

The late American Luther scholar James M. Kittelson has convincingly demonstrated that Luther embraced the title “Lutheran” as a theological identification of his evangelical confession: “At the very least, by late April 1530 he himself [Luther] was using ‘Lutheran’

nomenclature in just the manner that he himself had apparently forbidden only eight years earlier.”¹³ While “Lutheran” had been used as a slur to attack the behavior of Luther and his associates, it came to be a tag to identify fidelity to the doctrine confessed and proclaimed by Luther. “Thus, the initial looser referents of the key term ‘Lutheran,’ which began life in conjunction with public behavior, now denoted a distinct confession and its teaching.”¹⁴

Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. He continued to preach, teach, write, and publish what he called “our theology.” In the introduction to his 1535 “Lectures on Galatians,” Luther asserted: “This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits.”¹⁵ Others had rallied around Luther in what Robert Kolb has identified as the “Wittenberg circle.”¹⁶ This configuration, though, was not without tensions that would give rise to controversy both during Luther’s lifetime and especially after his death.

Controversies and Crisis

While it would be difficult to overstate the importance of Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) to Luther and the Lutheran Church, he was not a replica of Luther in either temperament or theological method. Where Luther was straightforward and even brash, Melanchthon was irenic in tone and tended more conciliatory in his statement of doctrine. Luther had praised Melanchthon’s accomplishment in framing the Augsburg Confession in 1530 but also noted that nothing more could be conceded to the Papists. Later, Melanchthon would modify Article X of the Augsburg Confession in an attempt to make the teaching of the presence of Christ’s body and blood more acceptable to the south German reformers who championed the Wittenberg Concord. This revision, which appeared in 1540, is known as the *Variata*. Controversy arose at the Diet of Naumburg in 1561 when the *Variata* was declared

the official text of the Augsburg Confession. This was done in a move to satisfy the Elector of the Palatinate, who, with the assistance of theologians Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus, was attempting to lead his territory to embrace Calvinism.

Melanchthon would preserve some limited role for the human will in conversion. Melanchthon was an early opponent of Johann Agricola in the first outbreak of the Antinomian controversy, concerning the place and function of God's Law in Christian preaching. Agricola maintained that the place of the Law was in the courtroom, not in the pulpit. In excluding the Law from the church's preaching, Agricola attributed repentance to the Gospel, effectively legalizing the Gospel, making of it a new Law and Christ a new Moses.

In an effort to counter Agricola's error, Melanchthon would speak of the Law as having a third function. The Law curbs the effects of sin in the world and crushes sinners, working contrition in them. In addition to these two uses, or functions, the Law is said to guide believers in the performance of works that are pleasing to God.

These controversies and others would fester among Lutherans in the decades after Luther's death, with the opponents lining up in two camps: (1) the Philippists, who were the followers of Philip Melanchthon, and (2) the Gnesio-Lutherans, aligned with Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75).¹⁷ Flacius came to teach Hebrew at Wittenberg in 1544. When the region lost its fight against Emperor Charles V in 1548, the emperor reimposed Roman Catholicism, offering scant concession in the form of a religious settlement known as the Augsburg Interim. Flacius looked to his fellow faculty members to repudiate the conditions of the Interim. When they equivocated, failing to boldly confess the truth in the face of opposition, Flacius vigorously protested, calling his colleagues to repent of their compromises, compromises that if accepted would lead to the demise of the Lutheran Church. Flacius and his fellow opponents recognized that the Interim was intended as a temporary solution that would allow the Lutherans to exist, granting to them the marriage of priests and communion in both kinds, but maintaining the Roman understanding of the sacrifice of the Mass and the notion that a combination of faith and human works are the

foundation for righteousness before God. As an “interim,” that is, a temporary arrangement, it was thought that Lutherans would be decisively and finally dealt with by the upcoming Council of Trent.

Robert Kolb provides a concise summary of these conflicts:

Indeed, the roots of the disputes between the Gnesio-Lutherans and their chief opponents within Late Reformation Lutheranism, the Philippists, can be traced back to the 1530s. However, the Smalcald War and the Augsburg Interim, along with the resulting compromise forged by Melanchthon and his colleagues at Wittenburg in the so-called *Leipzig Interim*, actually opened the fierce exchanges between old friends and fellow students of Luther and Melanchthon. The Philippists generally tended to be more conservative (from the viewpoint of a medieval observer), while the Gnesio-Lutherans were more radical. The former were more open to compromise and conciliation, whereas the later were prone to “confessional confrontation.” . . . The public controversies between the two parties, though wide ranging and stemming from a wide variety of concerns, focused on doctrinal issues to a large extent. For example, both sides insisted on salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, but the Gnesio-Lutherans embraced language and concepts that rejected and resisted any Philippist suggestion of a diminution of Luther’s radical monergism.¹⁸

Consensus was achieved in the Formula of Concord in 1577, but dissent and controversy would continue and become more complicated by shifting political realities that sought to accommodate Calvinism. The abiding significance of the Book of Concord for doctrine and practice was challenged, in some cases subtly and in others more directly. Sasse recognized that the Lutheran Church could not be a church of the Reformation without the Lutheran Confessions: “That the Evangelical Lutheran Church is a confessional church in the strict sense of the word, and that it ceases to be the Church of the Lutheran

Reformation as soon as it ceases to be the Church of the Lutheran Confessions, is a matter which admits no doubt.”¹⁹

The Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555 granted legal recognition to confessors of the Evangelical Lutheran faith. This legal status was renewed at the end of the bloody Thirty Years’ War with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. However, as Sasse observes,

This legal status of the Evangelical Lutheran Church was disrupted at a very early time by the infiltration of Calvinism into Germany. The Reformed Church won no less than twenty-four German territories, which had been Lutheran up to that time, from the secession of the Palatinate to the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War. The Formula of Concord of 1577 still united the vast majority of the German people, as far as these people had broken from the pope, into a single church which, although it was divided into a large number of territorial churches, was essentially one in confession. The forms of worship were also essentially the same everywhere. They followed the lines of the rich liturgical heritage which Lutheranism had preserved in the purified Mass of the Catholic Church.²⁰

With the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (“the religion of the ruler is the religion of the people”), the existence of the Lutheran Church was subject to the political whims of rulers. “The migration began in part with the church itself, at that time when many forsook their fatherland under the pressure of the *cuius regio, eius religio*.”²¹

Sasse reflects on this impact, noting a “series of sober dates” in Lutheran history. The Lutheran Church would be an endangered species threatened internally by doctrinal compromise and externally by political entanglements that would set limits on the freedom of the confession of Christ’s Word and Sacraments. Lutherans over the centuries would learn ever anew not to put their trust in princes (see Psalm 146:3),²² even as they recognized God’s work in the realm of His left hand: