

The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters Volume I (1927-1939). By Hermann Sasse. Translated by Matthew C. Harrison. Historical introductions and biographical sketch by Ronald Feuerhahn. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002. 502 pp. \$21.95.

English-speaking Lutherans might recall Hermann Sasse (1895-1976) as the author of *Here We Stand* translated by Theodore Tappert in 1938 and *This is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* published by Augsburg Publishing House in 1959. Sasse lived a remarkable but in many ways a lonely life. Reared in the church of the Prussian Union, Sasse studied theology under Harnack and Deissmann, giants of the old liberalism of the nineteenth century. It was while Sasse was on a study leave to Hartford Seminary in Connecticut in 1925-26 that he came in contact with theologians of the United Lutheran Church in America and through their influence he became a convinced Lutheran. Sasse was one of the first German church leaders to oppose Hitler. His strong Lutheran convictions did not isolate him from ecumenical contacts. Rather Sasse was actively involved in the ecumenical movement, participating in the First World Conference on Faith and Order in 1927 and serving on its executive committee. Throughout his life he maintained close contacts with both Reformed and Roman Catholic theologians and church officials. Severely disappointed by what he perceived to be the loss of Lutheran confessionalism in the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany in 1948, Sasse left his teaching post at Erlangen and accepted a call to teach at Immanuel Seminary (now Luther Seminary) in Adelaide, Australia. He held this position until his death in 1976.

The essays and letters in this volume come from the first part of Sasse's career. A fascinating essay from 1927 entitled "American Christianity and the Church" contains Sasse's observations on the place of "undogmatic Christianity" in American life. The young German theologian describes the pragmatism of the American church when he writes "It is a church which has renounced the idea that it is possible to possess the truth and the requirements necessitated by that truth for carrying out its work" (47).

For Sasse, the systematic theologian must be a historian. Yet the theological discipline never collapses into an antiquarian exercise. Theology exists to serve the confession of Christ in the world. Several of the writings included in this anthology address issues emerging from the political situation in Germany in the 1930s. Sasse uses the Lutheran understanding of the "two

governments” as a basis for his prophetic challenge to National Socialism in his 1930 “The Social Significance of the Augsburg Confession” (pp.89-100) and his 1935 “The Government and Secular Authority according to Lutheran doctrine” (173-241). In the latter essay, Sasse contends “The acknowledgement of the governing authority as a universal created order reflects exactly the doctrine of the NT. 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 without sin and as long as the pagan authorities remained within their proper legal sphere. But when the governing authorities transgressed its lawful limits, as happened with 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). 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” (92). For Sasse, the parallels with Hitler were clear.

Sasse defended a *quia* understanding of confessional subscription as is evidenced in his exchange with a certain Pastor Hoeppel in 1938 (see “*Quatenus or Quia?*” 455-460). For Sasse, the Lutheran Confessions were not relics of the past or mere tokens of a Lutheran identity but the living response of the faithful church to the Holy Scriptures. As such, Sasse maintained that if a church body no longer receives the Lutheran Confessions as authoritative and binding interpretations of the Scriptures, that body is no longer to be identified as a Lutheran Church. Therefore Sasse does not hesitate to launch a sturdy polemic against all forms of confessional uncertainty and unionistic laxity that would hide behind what he calls the “pious lie” in his 1936 essay, “Union and Confession” (265-305). Out of his deep Lutheran commitment, Sasse calls the church of his day to repentance in a treatise written in 1935 called “Confessional Unrepentance? Remarks toward Understanding Lutheran Confessionalism” (247-264). The same confessional commitment that led Sasse to join with Bonhoeffer in the preparation of the Bethel Confession, compelled him to reject the Barmen Declaration (see “The Barmen Declaration- An Ecumenical Confession?” 347-349).

Sasse realized that the church’s confession is the line of demarcation against all idolatry. Such a stance would be deemed intolerant. Sasse answers this

charge in 1930, “ The *Kyrios* confession set the boundaries for the church over against the pagan religions, the mystery religions with their ‘many lords’ (I Cor. 8:5), and the Caesar cult, in which Caesar was honored as lord and god. Indeed, these strange religions had no opposition to the designation of Jesus as *Kyrios*. They were very tolerant. All paganism is tolerant. But for the Christian there was only one who was the Lord! It was because of this Christian intolerance that the great persecutions of the church broke out” (112).

Several of the essays in this volume treat the Lord’s Supper. For Sasse, as for Luther, “the struggle to preserve the Sacrament of the Altar as Christ instituted it and the struggle for the pure doctrine of the Gospel are one and the same struggle” (387). Especially insightful is Sasse’s call for a thoroughly Lutheran understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar that centers in the gift of the forgiveness of sins in his “Church and Lord’s Supper” (369-429) written in 1938. Sasse opposed the surrender of the Lutheran doctrine of the Sacrament to the Reformed and what he saw as a “high church” tendency to transform the Lord’s Supper into a meal of cultic mysticism. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of Sasse is his profound treatment of the Lord’s Supper.

To be sure, *The Lonely Way* contains a rich supply of essays that shed light on the situation of Lutheran theology and church life in the early and middle part of the twentieth century Germany. Yet the appearance of these essays and letters from this “lonely Lutheran” are of interest for more than historical reasons. Hermann Sasse raises critical questions for all branches of contemporary Lutheranism regarding our own understanding of the Gospel, the Sacrament, confessional commitment, and the nature of the church. Lutheran theologians, pastors, and church leaders would do well to spend some time wrestling with the issues that engaged Hermann Sasse.

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