

A Conversation between Mark Noll and Hermann Sasse

JOHN T. PLESS



MARK NOLL IS A SHARP-EYED watcher of American Lutheranism from the outside. In numerous essays he has spoken of the ambiguity surrounding what it means to be Lutheran in America. In “American Lutherans Yesterday and Today,” Noll observes: “The history of Lutheranism in America is complex primarily because Lutherans seem to have both easily accommodated to American ways of life, including religious ways of life, and never accommodated to American ways.”¹ How about that for the proverbial Lutheran paradox? A new twist on the *simul*—American and un-American!

Actually Noll was not the first to make this observation about American Lutheranism. In the academic year 1925–26, a young German pastor from the Prussian Union came to the United States to study at Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut. His name was Hermann Sasse. It was during his time in the States that Sasse came to embrace confessional Lutheranism through his reading of Wilhelm Löhe’s *Three Books about the Church*. After returning to Germany, in 1927 he published a short book, *American Christianity and the Church*. It is this book that Dietrich Bonhoeffer would read in preparation for his coming to Union Seminary in New York.

Sasse saw American Lutheranism in the 1920s as not yet accommodating to American ways but living in a religious environment where such an accommodation would be very difficult to avoid. He also saw a great deal of promise for American Lutheranism. He was bemused by what he saw happening in other American Protestant churches in terms of worship. He writes:

Consider, further, all the attempts at reinvigorating dead congregations. What proposals and experiments are made today in order to develop “artistic” unity in the Divine Service where possible! What an absurd idea to make the Word of God, which has become ineffective, now effective by showing a film about Christ in the church. The holy spectacle of the Roman Mass would be preferable!²

But then Sasse had never heard of the Transforming Churches Network in the Missouri Synod or whatever counterparts there may be in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Sasse wrote of how churches advertised themselves:

There are advertisements which seek to bait the public. Why should colorful billboards and psychologically designed newspaper advertisement not serve the church? There are all organizations which are part of the American church, from the kitchen to the bowling alley. Why should the church not offer what a secular club offers? And these things progressively force their way into religious life itself. Worship (*Gottesdienst*) has been as we say, “developed.” There must always be something new, and everything must be effective: lighting effect, musical effect, and effective liturgy.³

Sasse recounted attending a service in a large Baptist church, where as soon as the preacher knelt to pray, the attendant switched off the lights so that darkness filled the sanctuary, creating the desired mood for the edification of the worshippers.

In those days, American Lutherans were mostly preserved from such things, or at least Sasse didn’t encounter them on what would be the first of numerous visits to the United States. In contrast to the unionizing, liberal Protestantism Sasse knew from Germany, his first exposure to American Lutheranism was positive and even cautiously optimistic. Subsequent contacts in the United States would win for Sasse friends in all branches of American Lutheranism, from Theodore Tappert at the Philadelphia seminary to the men of the Wisconsin Synod who first published his letters in English; also J. Michel Reu in

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1. Mark Noll, “American Lutherans Yesterday and Today,” in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Richard Cimino (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 4. Also see Mark Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” *First Things* no. 20 (February 1992): 31–40; and his chapter on “The Fate of European Traditions—Lutherans and Roman Catholics,” in *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 235–52.
 2. Hermann Sasse, “American Christianity and the Church,” in *The Lonely Way*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001–2002), 1:30.
 3. Sasse, “American Christianity,” 1:29.

Dubuque, Herman Preus in St. Paul, and J. A. O. and Robert Preus in the Missouri Synod. In addition, Sasse was the first lecturer at Bethany Lutheran Seminary's Reformation Lectures. He also had his criticisms of trends within all of these American Lutheran configurations. But that would be another story.

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Sasse recognized the complexity of the Lutheran way in America for many of the reasons identified by Noll. While Noll writes as a historian looking in retrospect at the winding and, more often than not, conflicting paths Lutheranism has taken, Sasse helps us see something of the theological challenges that confronted American Christianity in the 1920s and would impact all branches of American Lutheranism in one way or another down to the present day.

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."⁴ 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."⁵ He was somewhat bemused that a fellow student at Hartford, a Quaker who was not baptized, could take a call to minister in a Congregational church where he would happily baptize both children and adults by either sprinkling or immersion given the choice of the parents or baptismal candidate. He noted, "At the edge of America's historical horizon stand the silhouettes of the Reformers, but they are fading fast. Calvin is hardly read by the average theologian. Luther still lives in the Lutheran Church through his catechism."⁶

In 1927 Sasse held out hope for Lutherans in America. Largely spared the skirmishes of the so-called Modernist-Fundamentalist debate over the Bible, the works-righteousness of the Social Gospel Movement, and the suspicion that creeds and liturgy were detrimental to growth and unity, Lutherans were

not institutionally united and they were something of wallflowers in the American religious garden. Here Sasse resonates with Noll. Sasse wrote:

And the Lutherans are not united, leading an isolated life, having little influence on the intellectual life of the nation. But they are living and growing churches. If the movement toward unity (the first great consequence of which was the formation of the United Lutheran Church in 1918) continues and leads to the unification of all Lutherans it will be one of the most significant churches in America. The life of these churches dispels the notion that Lutheranism's doctrine of justification necessarily leads to quietism. There is in America perhaps no more active a church than the Missouri Synod, which is the most dogmatically rigorous Lutheran Church in the country. The history of the organization of this church demonstrates that Lutheranism can exist in forms other than a state church or dependent upon the state (as we hear happily repeated time and time again in Europe). Lutheranism is never more vibrant than where it is free from guardianship by a secular authority.⁷

Sasse's optimism for American Lutheranism would wane in later years as he detected movements leading not simply to polarization over questions of biblical inspiration and inerrancy, but a loss of nerve in confessing. Perhaps there is something of a parallel here to Noll's diagnosis as well. However, I would suggest that in a 1968 essay, "Erasmus, Luther, and Modern Christendom," Sasse takes us deeper than Noll.⁸ In this essay, Sasse is no longer the young postdoctoral exchange student fascinated with his study abroad. He is a church theologian seasoned by suffering and disappointment, having left his Erlangen chair for a post at a small and seemingly insignificant seminary in Adelaide, Australia. His life had been spent as a keen observer and participant in ecumenical conversations and developments throughout Christendom, but with special attention to American Lutheranism.

In this essay Sasse sees that the controversy between Erasmus and Luther has not come to an end. Sasse wrote that Luther "saw behind Erasmus' concept of an undogmatic Christianity the coming neo-paganism of the modern world."⁹ Synergism is integral to American Christianity. We live in a country where, as one pundit put it, even Roman Catholics think like Southern Baptists. Of Erasmus, Sasse said, "He believes in God but has not entirely lost his belief in man."¹⁰ That seems to characterize the religious environment of North America in these early years of the twenty-first century. Erasmus's notion of the freedom of the will and democratic assertions of liberty make the remark of Isaac Singer completely understandable: "We must believe in

4. Sasse, "American Christianity," 1:31.

5. Sasse, "American Christianity," 1:47.

6. Sasse, "American Christianity," 1:36.

7. Sasse, "American Christianity," 1:55.

8. Hermann Sasse, "Erasmus, Luther, and Modern Christendom," in *The Lonely Way*, 2:373–84.

9. Sasse, "Erasmus," 2:381.

10. Sasse, "Erasmus," 2:383.

free will, we have no choice!”¹¹ That is the reason Sasse’s famous line in his 1934 book, *Here We Stand*, should be sobering for American Lutherans: “The Evangelical Lutheran Church is a

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church is a church which has been sentenced to death by the world.”

church which has been sentenced to death by the world.”¹²

I think Sasse hits on something that is expressed so well by Gerhard Forde in his fine little book, *The Captivation of the Will*, when he said, “If one starts from the premise and defense of freedom of the will one will end in bondage.”¹³ Sasse suggests that Lutheran theology must start where Luther started, with human enslavement to sin, in order to end with freedom. Coupled with Forde’s book, I find Sasse’s essay instructive

as we look at the Lutheran landscape in North America today. Perhaps the fault line is not so much between Lutherans who have different views of inspiration, Lutherans who are politically liberal versus those who are social conservatives, Lutherans who are said to be liturgical or nonliturgical, or Lutherans who accent the ministerial office as opposed to those who champion the congregation. Just maybe the fault line in American Lutheranism is at the point of the enslaved will. How one comes down on that question will, no doubt, have implications for all those other debates as well. That would be a conversation worth having, and perhaps Hermann Sasse might bring us to better clarity in answering the questions raised by Mark Noll’s essay. [LOGIA](#)

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11. Isaac Singer, quoted by Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 49.
 12. Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979), 187.
 13. Forde, *Captivation*, 44. Also instructive is Gerhard Forde’s essay, “Lutheran Faith and American Freedom,” in *The Preached God*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 195–203.

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