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## BRIEF STUDIES

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### WHERE CHRIST IS, THERE IS THE CHURCH

Under this heading ("Wo Christus ist, da ist die Kirche") Prof. Hermann Sasse, formerly of Erlangen University and now professor of theology at the theological seminary of the United Ev. Luth. Church of Australia, in North Adelaide, S. A., some time ago published an article which in a somewhat abridged form was reprinted in the *Kirchenblatt* of the American Lutheran Church (October 21, 1950).

The article, the nature of which is both consolatory and hortatory, shows, on the one hand, that as the Christian Church in the past triumphantly survived all attacks of the gates of hell, so also it will survive them in the future, existing by Christ's almighty power till the end of time, and, on the other, that this fact is left out of consideration by those who today desire to build the Church not "upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief Corner-stone" (Eph. 2:20), but upon bishops, synods, professors of theology, and the like. According to Dr. Sasse, this tendency to secure the existence of the Church by human means is largely caused by the lack of the Christian conviction that "where Christ is, there is the Church." So far, so good.

But now, Professor Sasse, while not denying the efficacy of the divine Word as a means of grace nor the omnipotent presence of Christ in the Church through the Word, unduly emphasizes our Lord's real presence in the Holy Supper as the pre-eminent means by which the Church is guaranteed both existence and security in its perpetual struggle with its manifold foes. He says (in part):

"Because the Lord's Supper exists, therefore also the Church exists. Where the Lord's Supper is being celebrated, there is the Church. Only because of this Sacrament can it be understood that the Church is designated in the New Testament as the Body of Christ. The 'communion of the body of Christ' (1 Cor. 10:16) signifies both participation in the true body of the Lord, which is given us in the Lord's Supper, and membership in the Church as the Body of Christ. The Ev. Luth. Church at all events has always so understood this when from 1 Cor. 10:16 it derived the principle that church fellowship is communion fellowship and communion fellowship is church fellowship."

Dr. Sasse traces this doctrine back to Luther, of whom he writes

(in part): "In contradistinction to Zwingli and Calvin, he [Luther] allowed the Lord's Supper, without which no Lord's Day was observed in the Ancient Church, to keep its [proper] place in the services on Sunday. He never would have understood the objection that in evangelical worship not the Sacrament but the Word must form the focal point, since for him, just as for the Church of the New Testament, the Word and the Sacrament belonged together inseparably. . . . Certainly, both rather [the "rather" is directed against an antithesis in the omitted lines] belong together, and perhaps the proclamation of the Gospel actually draws its life from the celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar which accompanies it; for without the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper the sermon, whether one is aware of this, or wills it or not, becomes a subjective religious address. This certainly has happened in modern Christendom, even in the Lutheran churches of the last centuries since the Lord's Supper was forced out of its pristine place and made an occasional postscript to the service. . . . Since that time the view has more and more asserted itself in our Church that the Lord's Supper is properly only the seal or certification of a communion with Christ which we have [with Him] also otherwise. . . . But by this there was changed not only the entire doctrine of the Holy Supper, but also the whole conception of the presence of Christ, and of the Church as the place of this presence in the world."

One certainly appreciates Dr. Sasse's profound seriousness in stressing the importance of the Holy Supper, for it is true that as the true meaning of the Real Presence, namely, that in, with, and under the bread and the wine Christ's body and blood are orally received by the communicant, was obscured or changed, and in its place there was taught a mere spiritual presence of the exalted Christ in Holy Communion, not greatly different from His general or mystic presence, the Lord's Supper became an occasional postscript to the service.

Nevertheless, to say that "because the Lord's Supper exists, therefore also the Church exists," or that "the proclamation of the Gospel draws its life from the accompanying celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar," or that "without the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper the sermon becomes a subjective religious address," whatever that may mean in the mind of the writer, or to question the doctrine that the Lord's Supper is the seal or certification of our communion with Christ, which certainly is both Scriptural and Lutheran, or to maintain that this doctrine means to give up the proper conception of the Church as the place of Christ's presence in the world: all this means to confuse the doctrine of the Holy Supper and to ascribe to

the Sacrament a place which neither Scripture nor our Lutheran Confessions attribute to it. It is Lutheran and Scriptural doctrine that the Word of God is always effective, even when it is used without the celebration of the Lord's Supper, for Christ is always present with the Word to regenerate and sanctify. It is also Lutheran and Scriptural doctrine that the Lord's Supper is no more and no less than Christ's Gospel of forgiveness applied under the pledge of His body and blood to the individual believer. Again, it is Lutheran and Scriptural doctrine that the Gospel offers to the communicant no more and no less than does the Gospel in every form in which it is put to use. Lastly, it is Lutheran and Scriptural doctrine that "of all acts of worship that is the greatest, most holy, most necessary, and highest, which God has required as the highest in the First and the Second Commandment, namely, to preach the Word of God" (Apology, Art. XV (VIII); *Trigl.*, p. 327). All these are Lutheran fundamentals concerning the means of grace that must not be altered, no matter how great one's interest may be in stressing the value of the Holy Supper. Luther also subscribed to the ancient axiom: "Where Christ is, there is the Church," but in the sense: "Where the Word is and the ministry, there also is the Church," and the context of this quotation (Exposition of Gen. 28:10) shows that he had in mind the proclamation of the Gospel. (St. L. Ed., II:386.) Luther, of course, never separated the Gospel, in its form of proclamation, from the Sacraments, ascribing different values or functions to either the Word or the Sacraments. For this reason he could also write: "In every parish where children are baptized and the Gospel is preached and Christ is so pictured to men that they receive Him, there is the Church" (Exposition of Matt. 18:2-5; St. L. Ed., VII:873). Or: "In all the world the Church is everywhere where the Gospel and the Sacraments are" (Exposition of Gal. 1:2; St. L. Ed., IX:44). Luther's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is fully set forth in all its essential features in his Small Catechism, which shows the essence, the Scriptural foundation, the benefit, the conferring and receiving means of the benefit, and true sacramental worthiness. One who orients his doctrine of the Lord's Supper to the five points of the Catechism will be preserved both from Romanizing overestimation and from Calvinizing underestimation of the Sacrament of the Altar. *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* is certainly sound doctrine, but Christ must never be separated from His Word in whatever form it comes to man. *Nos sciamus ecclesiam Christi apud hos esse, qui evangelium docent.* (Apologia III:279; *Trigl.* p. 226.)

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