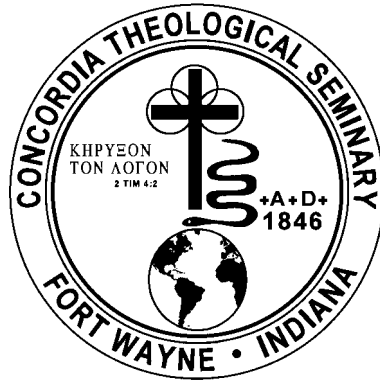


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Hermann Sasse's View of the Office of the Ministry Up to World War II

Matthew C. Harrison

Hermann Sasse once recounted a story while teaching a church history course at Concordia Theological Seminary in the 1960s. The story illustrated the complex plight of the church of the Old Prussian Union and much of German Lutheranism prior to the First World War. “When I was drafted [during World War I], the Catholics were separated from the Lutherans by a Silesian officer. There were some left. ‘What are you?’ [the officer asked.] ‘An atheist,’ [came the reply]. ‘So, you believe nothing? You are a Protestant!’”¹

AC IV is the gospel heart of the Christian faith, and AC V locates the delivery (*Solchen Glauben zuerlangen; Ut hanc fidem consequamur* [To obtain such faith; That we may obtain this faith]) of the gifts named in AC IV (*vergebung der sünde und gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt* [forgiveness of sins and righteousness which avails before God]) in word and sacrament.² This would seem a simple matter, but it is by no means self-evident. Sasse became convinced that from Kant to Ritschl to von Harnack, the German Lutheran Church (particularly within the Union) had been on the wrong path, lost the saving dogma of the church, and reduced the faith to ethics and the gospel to law. Adolf von Harnack, the quintessential scholar at the quintessential liberal German university (Berlin), viewed the salvific facts of AC IV (and also AC III) as a Greek/Pauline mixture of an earlier religion, based on Jesus and his teaching, already itself an admixture as presented in the Gospels. Harnack opined: “The origin of a series of the most important Christian customs and ideas is involved in an obscurity which in all probability will never be cleared up.”³ Harnack goes on to notate a number of such difficult questions: “When and where did baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit arise, and how did it make its way in Christendom? When and how did the belief in the birth of Jesus from a Virgin gain acceptance in Christendom? How old is the triad: Apostles, Prophets and Teachers? When were baptism and the Lord’s Supper grouped together? How old are the first three Gospels?”⁴ Says Harnack: “To all these questions and many

¹ Otto F. Stahlke, “Class Notes,” [n.d.], given to Matthew C. Harrison.

² *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche: Herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsburger Konfession 1930*, 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992). All translations from the German are the author’s.

³ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, 7 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 1:132.

⁴ Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 1:133.

more of equal importance there is no sure answer. But the greatest problem is presented by Christology.”⁵ Harnack’s historicism rendered Christ unsure, and with the fall of Christology, also Baptism, sacrament, and office all became unsure, “never” to “be cleared up.”⁶

If the biblical and mandate texts of the Small Catechism were myth, then so were AC IV and V. Indeed, all dogma had become meaningless. And yet, the personal and professional course of Sasse’s life soon began to influence his conception of theology and dogma, and thus also his view of the preaching office.

World War I

The major turning point for Sasse was World War I. “What did this mean for theology? The students who went into the battlefields of the First World War with Harnack’s theology, lost this theology. You can perhaps live on this in happy times, but you can’t die with it, and so, the liberal theology and the optimistic view of man died in the catastrophe of the First World War.”⁷

Sasse served as a chaplain in the war. Decades later, after being feted in the *Springfielder* of Concordia Theological Seminary, Sasse wrote to Heino Kadai: “Yesterday I received the copy of the *Springfielder* with your congratulatory article. At first sight I felt a little as I felt when, coming down with five men out of 120 from Paschendale on the 7th of November 1917 (the day of the Bolshevist [*sic*] Revolution in Prussia) my sergeant major greeted me with the words, ‘But we have buried you yesterday with military honors.’”⁸ The quip does not obscure the death and devastation experienced. Sasse’s regiment was almost entirely wiped out.

Along with his experiences in World War I, Sasse also found himself in the middle of a Luther Renaissance during the Reformation anniversary of 1917. Concerning the seminal influence of Karl Holl and the Luther Renaissance he epitomized, Sasse wrote:

We who had been students of Holl suddenly began to realize that the Lutheran Reformation meant something also for modern mankind. “Man is nothing, and nothing is left to us but to despair of ourselves and hope in Christ.” This word of Luther’s became important to our generation. We began to study

⁵ Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 1:133.

⁶ Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 1:133.

⁷ Hermann Sasse, “The Impact of Bultmannism on American Lutheranism, with Special Reference to His Demythologization of the New Testament,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 5 (June 1965): 5.

⁸ Hermann Sasse to Heino Kadai, August 29, 1965, Sasse-Jungkuntz Correspondence, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Luther, the Confessions, and the Bible.⁹ Pindar and Sophocles had vanished from our lives, but one book had remained, our Greek New Testament.¹⁰

The Real-World Vantage of the Office Shaped Sasse

At the age of 25 Sasse was examined *pro ministerio* (for the ministry) and passed. General Superintendent Kessler of the Church of the Old Prussian Union ordained him at St. Matthew's, Berlin. Sasse then served as an assistant at Advent Church, Berlin, and at Templin. His first pastorate (1920–1921) was at Oranienburg, a parish of 10,000 with about a hundred in church on a Sunday. Later he was appointed pastor of St. Mary's in Berlin and also served as "welfare pastor" of Berlin (1928–1933).

The pastoral challenges for Sasse were real and intense. He wrote:

I remember one night when I had to search for a lost sheep of my flock. He had lost all his money in gambling and tried to drown in the river. I found him in the morning in a ward of one of the big hospitals of East Berlin where the suicides and attempted suicides were collected. I have never again, not even in the Bowery of New York, seen such misery, where the curses of the unsuccessful suicides mingled with the hellish noise of those who had destroyed their voices by taking poisonous acids. Now I had to face all the problems of a parish pastor, including the financial problems with which the church is confronted since the days of the apostles in Jerusalem.¹¹

Such pastoral realities required a "Theology of Facts" (Vilmar), not myths.¹²

Hartford Seminary and the American Visit (1925–1926)

Sasse completed his STM degree at Hartford Theological Seminary. He carefully chronicled his impressions of the American cultural and ecclesiastical scene in his *Amerikanisches Kirchentum* ("American Christianity and the Church"). "This churchliness of life [in the U.S.] has a downside to be sure: the secularization of the church. . . . 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, an effective

⁹ Sasse, "The Impact of Bultmannism," 5.

¹⁰ Hermann Sasse, "Reminiscences of an Elderly Student" (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), 2.

¹¹ Sasse, "Reminiscences," 3.

¹² August Vilmar, *Die Theologie der Tatsachen wider die Theologie der Rhetorik: Bekenntnis und Abwehr* (Marburg: Bertelsmann, 1857); English translation by Roy Harrisville, *The Theology of Facts versus The Theology of Rhetoric: Confession and Defense* (Fort Wayne: Lutheran Legacy, 2008).

liturgy.” Great men of America achieve their business goals. “Other chapters show Jesus as the master salesman or sportsman. If Jesus were living today, he would, in principle, affirm American civilization. . . . Thus, we have the basis for the practical church program of the American: the realization of democratic society through the work of the church.”¹³

Sasse was convinced that in this American milieu, where the Protestants were compromised by the secular-sacred mishmash of the Social Gospel Movement (which distorted the Office of the Ministry), and the Roman Catholics by Marian dogmas (i.e. the false dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary, promulgated without the slightest biblical warrant), only the Lutherans were in a position to pose the question of truth unto repentance.

Sasse later wrote that it was in the U.S. where he read the Lutheran Confessions and Wilhelm Löhe’s *Three Books about the Church* and became a convinced confessional Lutheran. “Personally I must confess that it was in America that I first learned to fully 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.”¹⁴

Faith and Order—Lausanne

Sasse had entered the ecumenical movement in a large way through his doctor father, Adolf Deissmann. Ronald R. Feuerhahn has demonstrated that Sasse was the most active continental theologian in the Faith and Order Movement prior to World War II. Sasse held positions on the Continuation Committee, Executive Committee, and Committee of Reference.¹⁵ Sasse was chosen to be the editor of the official German Report of the Lausanne Conference (1927).¹⁶ That document provided numerous reports on lectures and discussions of “*Das geistliche Amt der Kirche*” (the sacred office of the church), dealing with ecumenically pressing questions: Who ordains? What of bishops? Church order? Grades of the one office?¹⁷

In the wake of Lausanne, several essays flowed from Sasse’s pen, which are of fundamental significance for his understanding of the office. In his essay “Kyrios”

¹³ Hermann Sasse, *Amerikanisches Kirchtum* (Berlin-Dahlem: Wichern-Verlag, 1927), 31–32.

¹⁴ Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), x.

¹⁵ Ronald R. Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse as an Ecumenical Churchman” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1991; rev. 1994), 15.

¹⁶ Hermann Sasse, ed., “Geschichte der Weltkonferenz” in *Die Weltkonferenz für Glauben und Kirchenverfassung. Deutscher Amtlicher Bericht über die Welkirchenkonferenz zu Lausanne 3.–21. August 1927* (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1929), 72ff.

¹⁷ Sasse, *Die Weltkonferenz*, 432ff.

(1928), Sasse claims that the New Testament witnesses to the divinity of Christ, but asserts that only by starting from the dogma of the divinity of the Holy Spirit may the church “escape from the cloud of ‘religious historical hypotheses’ . . . [to] a new understanding of the resurrection, and so also a new Christology.”¹⁸ And that would be a high Christology of the ancient church, “a living Christ, to whom his church prays, and who is in the church’s midst; that this Christ is not an intermediate being, but *vere deus [truly God]*.”¹⁹

In “Ubi Christus, Ibi Ecclesia” [where Christ is, there is the church] (1929), Sasse poses Nietzsche as one of those “men whose lives embody the fate of an entire epoch. . . . His desperate destitution and loneliness is the loneliness of the modern man. To be sure, there still burns in his soul the desire for God. Indeed, he cries as Friedrich Nietzsche for the unknown God, and he consecrates to him solemn altars in the deepest depths of his heart. But the voice of the living God he no longer hears.”²⁰ How does the church respond to such accusations? Repentance.

First our mouths are dumb, then he [the Lord] speaks. If we with our wisdom and our power are at an end, then he speaks his great Word to us: “Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age!” [Matt 28:20]. With these words he once sent his apostles into the world, to tasks which humanly speaking were impossible, to destinations which they knew not. And they joyously went the unknown way. They knew that his forgiveness, his peace, his power were with them. “Behold, I am with you always”—this is the mystery of the church. For upon what does the church rest? No not on our faith, not on the holiness of our lives—then it would have long since dwindled out of history—but solely on Christ the Lord. *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* [Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 8:2].²¹

In “Church and Churches” (1930; in a Festschrift for Wilhelm Zoellner), Sasse confronts the challenge of divided Christianity, and the Office of the Ministry already figures large. “To understand the church, one must begin with Christology and never sociology because there is one living Christ, there is only one church. *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*.”²² “Where does this church become visible?” The question, writes Sasse, “does not mean for us, Where do we find the people who belong to this church? But rather, Where do we find Christ?”²³ Sasse quotes AC V, “*Nam per*

¹⁸ Sasse, “Kyrios,” *Theology* 17, no. 100 (October 1928): 223–229. Cf. Sasse, *The Lonely Way*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001, 2002), 1:61–67.

¹⁹ Sasse, “Kyrios,” 1:66.

²⁰ Sasse, “Kyrios,” 1:69–70.

²¹ Sasse, “Kyrios,” 1:71.

²² Hermann Sasse, “*Kirche und Kirchen: Über den Glaubenssatz von der Einheit der Kirche*” in *Credo Ecclesiam: Festgabe . . . Wilhelm Zoellner*, ed. Hans Eherenberg et al. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1930), 295–317. Cf. Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 1:82.

²³ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 1:83.

verbum et sacramenta tamquam per instrumenta donatur Spiritus Sanctus, qui fidem efficit, ubi et quando visum est Deo, in iis, qui audiunt evangelium. [For through the word and sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel.] . . . Thus, Article V of the Augustana speaks against the churchless mysticism of *Schwärmertum* [Enthusiasm].” It was clear for Sasse that a concrete, classical New Testament Christology was the only remedy for theologies that saw in the New Testament only a “beautiful religious experience, pious sentiment, and useful ethics. Such persons will not understand this quest for the one truth.”²⁴

In “The Social Doctrine of the Augsburg Confession” (1930),²⁵ Sasse provides definite dogmatic commentary regarding the office by explicating AC XVI (and AC XXVIII) on the two realms, church and state.

Thus the two governments, the spiritual and the secular, should not be confused and mixed together. For the spiritual power has its command to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments. It should not become an office foreign and contrary to its nature. It should not enthrone and remove kings, should not do away with secular obedience, should not prescribe laws for secular power and secular affairs, as Christ said: “My kingdom is not of this world [AC XXVIII 12–14].”²⁶

Sasse notes several attempts to “Christianize the world” including the “heresy of the ‘Social Gospel’ in the Anglican world,” the heresy of the “Christian state in Germany,” and Rome’s attempt to “ecclesiasticize the world.”²⁷ All are born of fanaticism, blur the teaching of Christ, and “lead to precisely the same result with a secularization of Christendom.”²⁸ “The authority of the church or bishops gives eternal goods and is exercised alone through the preaching office” (AC XXVIII 10).

1931 Referat

At the end of May 1931, Sasse presented a paper at the “Second Study Week of the German Committee for Faith and Order of the Churches (Lausanne)” in Soest.²⁹

²⁴ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 1:86.

²⁵ Hermann Sasse, “The Social Doctrine of the Augsburg Confession and Its Significance for the Present” (1930), in *Lonely Way*, 1:89–100.

²⁶ Hermann Sasse, “The Social Doctrine of the Augsburg Confession and Its Significance for the Present,” 94.

²⁷ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 1:96.

²⁸ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 1:96.

²⁹ Ronald R. Feuerhahn, *Hermann Sasse, A Bibliography* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1995), no. 31-01: “Die Frage des kirchl. Amts. Einzelne, ungenaue Notizen von der Soester Arbeitswoche. Mittw. D. 27. Mai 31, vorm. Referat Sasse, Vervielfältigung, 6 S.” A previous meeting of this committee is referenced in Feuerhahn, No. 044, “Die Kirche im Neuen Testament.”

This appears to be the first specific paper he prepared on the question of the Office of the Ministry. It was in the context of an ecumenical discussion “between Lutheran, Reformed and Free Church Theologians.” While the six-page paper is not thus far available, we do have notes from the presentation.³⁰

Sasse opened his essay by stating that the question of the ecclesiastical office is the point at which the differences between the churches cannot be blurred because such differences lead to practical consequences. The question of the office is a controversy affecting English-speaking Christianity, and the Germans (of the various churches gathered) must not be spectators. It may be that one last great decision is being rendered between evangelical Christianity and Catholicism on the question of the office. The question confronting German Christianity is this: “Are we agreed on a doctrine of the office? . . . And if we are agreed on a doctrine of the office, do we have agreement in practice?”³¹ The doctrine of the office is a dogmatic question, and no dogmatics is complete without a doctrine of the office.

Concluding the introduction, Sasse asserts that “Luther is always secondary to the Augustana,”³² meaning of course that not all of Luther's views on the office were taken into the public confession of the church.³³ Consistent with what would remain a longstanding conviction that the Lutheran dogma of the church and office are unfinished, Sasse asserts that “the Lutheran Confessions say something valuable, but it is only a beginning because there was still a lack of experience.”³⁴ The following notes briefly summarize five points in Sasse's paper.

³⁰ These notes are available in the Sasse Archives, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

³¹ Sasse, “Referat,” 1931, unpublished, unpaginated copy in possession of the author.

³² Sasse, “Referat.”

³³ Here Sasse refrains from following Löhe completely. In the controversy over the *Amt* (office) with the Missouriians, Löhe granted that there were passages of the Confessions which expressed Luther's views on priesthood and office, but there are others which express a different view. “*Beide [Walther and Löhe] das Amt für iure divino. Beide sind sich also über Ansicht an Dogma des Amtes einig. Nur über die Begründung des Dogmas besteht Streit. Aber das ist ein Theologumenon. Löhe kann nicht anders. Er gibt, dass bedeutenden Dogmatiker sich Luthers Ansicht in diesem Punkte aneigneten. Aber es gab manche Lehrer, die diese individuell lutherische Lehre nicht hatten. Er weiss, dass Luthers Lehre sich in den lutherischen Symbolen an einigen Stellen durchsetzte. Andere Stellen aber sprechen dagegen. Sollten sie alle für Walther sprechen, so sind es doch solche, die in ihrem Zusammenhang keine symbolische Geltung beanspruchen können. Kurz: Die Kirche als solche war in der Sache nicht so fertig, dass man die widerstrebende Partei verworfen hätte.*” Siegfried Hebart, *Wilhelm Löhes Lehre von der Kirche, ihrem Amt und Regiment* (Neuendettelsau: Freimund, 1939), 237. Cf. Wilhelm Löhe in *Kirchlichen Mittheilungen aus und über Nord Amerika* (1853, no. 7).

³⁴ Sasse, “Referat.”

1. In his “To the Christian Nobility” (1520), Luther refers to 1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:6.³⁵ The priesthood was first introduced in connection with the doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass.³⁶

Against enthusiasm: Regarding AC V, there is still no theological concept of the church in which the Quakers are included; I hope God has another one!³⁷

2. The office can never be derived [*abgeleitet werden*] from the general priesthood of believers, but only from the apostolate, the first proclamation and celebration of Baptism and the Sacrament. That is why it is important to understand the nature of the apostolate.³⁸

3. “Apostle” appears in the New Testament with a double meaning: a) “messenger.” For example, Barnabas is called an apostle along with Paul (Acts 14:14). See also Romans 16:7; and b) The strictly theological usage of the apostolate, in Acts and also in Paul regarding his office [*Amt*].³⁹

4. The essence of prophecy is the struggle between error and truth. Truth, the awareness of being an office bearer, the speaking on behalf of another. Outside the biblical prophets, Sasse sees only Zarathustra and Mohammed as prophets.⁴⁰ In the New Testament, prophecy has become a discrete church

³⁵ “Dem nach so werden wir allesamt durch die tauff zu priestern geweyhet, wie sanct Peter i Peter ii sagt” (Martin Luther, “An den Christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des Christlichen standes besserung” (1520), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 73 vols. [Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009], vol. 6:407.22 [hereafter WA]). There appears to be no reference to Revelation 1:6, yet Luther makes his famous and important distinction in his explication of the office with respect to 1 Peter 2:9. “Szo folget auf dissem, das leye, priester, fursten, bischoff, und wie sie sagen, geistlich und weltlich, keynen andern unterscheyd ym grund warlich haben, den das ampts odder wercks halben, unnd nit des stands halbenn, dan sie sein alle geystlich stands, warhafftig preister, bischoff und bepste” (WA 6:408.25–29). That is, Luther asserts that all Christians are priests and have the same “Stand” but not the same “Amt.” They have the same “standing” before God but not the same office in church and life.

³⁶ That is, the theologically freighted custom of calling the occupant of the office “priest” in the ancient church, as the Supper was increasingly defined as a sacrifice performed.

³⁷ This is a reference to the *damnamus* (“we condemn”) in AC V. Quakers reject the sacraments and claim direct revelation from God apart from word and sacrament.

³⁸ This theme is very significant for Löhe. Cf. Wilhelm Löhe, “Aphorismen” (1849) in *Gesammelte Werke, Wilhelm Löhe*, ed. Klaus Ganzert (Neuendettelsau: Freimund-Verlag, 1951–1986), 5/1:262ff., 265ff., et passim.

³⁹ Löhe, “Aphorismen,” 5/1:286.

⁴⁰ It is not entirely clear exactly what Sasse is getting at. But he has in mind Luther’s description of “fanaticism” as the “strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mahomet” [SA III.VIII 5.9], quoted in Sasse, “Union and Confession,” in *Lonely Way* 1.278. Regarding “Montanus, Mani and Muhammad” Sasse says, “All the great heresies of ancient . . . and modern times,” “go beyond the Scriptures, goes beyond Christ . . . and thus is no revelation.” Sasse, “The Church and the Word of God” in *The Lonely Way* 1.158. Such false prophets occur throughout history. Apostles, however, only appear in the church, and of course, only in the apostolic era.

office.⁴¹ It's different with Christ! The prophets are spread over the entire history of the world, but the apostles in the church. Apostolic succession is a fiction, but this truth is expressed in it: The present church is identical with the apostolic one; the apostolic confession is still here!⁴² The apostolic office is superior to prophecy, to the horror of the fanatics.⁴³

Where is the office [*Amt*] that is the continuation of the apostolic office? The Reformed have the position regarding the constitution of the church such that they say in the New Testament there are binding rules for the church's present constitution. So also Catholicism. The Lutheran Church claims that the New Testament contains no doctrine on the constitution of the church. Many types of church constitutions have been read into the New Testament. You can also do that. That is certainly a result of the great diversity in ancient Christianity. AC XXVIII presupposes that the episcopate [*Bischofsamt*] is preserved through the Pastoral Office [*Pfarramt*]. There "*Pastores*" [pastors] and "*episcopi*" [bishops] are used synonymously. This, too, is the meaning of apostolic succession, that the office which keeps doctrine pure is maintained.⁴⁴

5. The church of Christ appears a) in the *congregatio sanctorum* [assembly of saints]; b) in the ministry *docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta* [of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments]. (The famous question about the chicken and the egg!) The official is not a functionary by order of the congregation [*Functionär u. Beauftragter der Gemeinde*].

The office is a divine institution.

The apostles never conferred [*übertragen*] their Christ-given authority [*Vollmacht*] to a congregation [*Gemeinde*]. When they conferred it, they did it

⁴¹ Löhe, "Aphorismen," 5/1:275.

⁴² "Allein so gewiss und wahr es ist, dass die heilige Kirche von den Aposteln gegründet, so gewiss ist es im Gegenteil auch, dass man aus dieser Auslegung des Wortes wenig Ruhm nehmen kann, wenn nicht zugleich jene andere Auslegung, auf der Apostel Lehre ruhend' hinzugenommen wird. Was würde es helfen, wenn die Kirche von den Aposteln gegründet wäre, ohne ihr Wort mehr zu haben?" Wilhelm Löhe, "Drei Bücher von der Kirche," in *Gesammelte Werke*, 5/1:98–99.

⁴³ Löhe, "Aphorismen," 5/1:275.

⁴⁴ Cf. Hermann Sasse, "Successio Apostolica" in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 2:425–449.

from person to person.⁴⁵ We have been [trying to] create living congregations now for fifty years, but have only founded societies [*Vereine*]!⁴⁶

Sasse concluded with this assertion: “There is a symphony of congregation and ministerium, and in both the church of Christ comes into the world.” Discussion ensued. The question was raised, “How is the Lutheran view of the office distinguished dogmatically from all other views? For instance, that of the Lutheran and Reformed?” Though the notes do not name Sasse as the source of the response, it appears that he replied:

For Luther, the proclamation of the Gospel belongs to the essence of the church, and thus the rest of God’s Word is not on the same level [*gleichgeordnet*]. The Law is completely subordinate to the Gospel. The office is established as the gift of God to his humanity, and this office has nothing [to give] beyond the Gospel (proclamation of the Word, Sacrament, Power of the Keys). To the contrary, for the Reformed, the office is founded upon the regulations [*Anordnungen*] of the New Testament.⁴⁷

Kirchliches Jahrbuch (1932)

In the same issue of the yearbook for the Protestant churches of Germany, in which Sasse famously and pointedly rejected the Aryan Paragraph of the Nazi Party platform, he noted the practical confusion caused by errant views of the office. In the environs of National Socialism’s emerging infatuation with ideas of “leadership,” under the section titled, “The Crisis of Religion and the Proclamation of the Church,” Sasse stated:

Religious Superiority, Religious Virtuosity, Religious Leadership—from what kind of world do these ideas come? Certainly not out of the world of the New Testament and the Reformation! In the church of the Gospel, one knows nothing of superior personalities to whose leadership the uneducated entrust

⁴⁵ Sasse channels Löhe here. “*Wie stand nun Löhe zum Streit dieser beiden Richtungen [i.e., the American controversy on the office between Grabau and the Missourians]? In seinem im Jahre 1849 erschienenen Aphorismen über die neutestamentlichen Ämter hatte er seine Anschauungen über das Verhältnis von Amt und Gemeinde zum erstenmal zusammengefasst. Er betonte vor allem, dass das Amt nicht eine Übertragung gemeindlicher Rechte und Machtvollkommenheit, sondern göttliche Stiftung sei und sich selbst von Person zu Person fortpflanze. Es ist ein Beruf innerhalb des geistlichen Priestertums, von diesem aber streng zu unterscheiden. Wer zum Amte ordiniert ist, ist kein Laie mehr. Nicht die Gemeinde beruft zum Amt—sie kann allenfalls Wünsche äussern—sondern das Amt selbst.*” Hebart, *Löhés Lehre*, 231. See Löhe, “Aphorismen,” *Gesammelte Werke*, 5/1:262.

⁴⁶ The entire section is taken from Sasse’s “Referat.” The notes are not terribly clear here. Sasse appears to be asserting that a deficient view of the office in the founding of new congregations has rendered these churches more clubs or societies than real deliverers of the gospel gifts.

⁴⁷ Sasse, “Referat.”

themselves. But one knows something about a pastoral ministry instituted by the Lord of the Church, to which the care of other people's souls is entrusted. Human needs, experiences and qualities are not the reason the office exists, but rather the institution, the institution of the office by Christ. Wherever this is forgotten, where the inner legitimacy of the office is based on the qualities of the personality, the office is destroyed.⁴⁸

The Office of Teacher in the Ancient Church (1933, 1946)

Sasse prepared his inaugural lecture for the occasion of his joining the theological faculty of Erlangen University in 1933. Because of his public criticism of the NSDAP (Nazi Party) in 1932, his move to Erlangen from Berlin was delayed, and he suffered consequences. "Erlangen called me to a chair for church history in 1933. Political difficulties arose. I had been the first to fight the program of the NSDAP. So I got only the salary of a country pastor, though I fulfilled the duties of a full professor with seminars."⁴⁹ His paper, "The Office of Teacher in the Ancient Church," was finally delivered May 11, 1946, and he was granted a full professorship and paid accordingly.

The offices of "apostles, prophets and teachers" are referenced by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:28: "God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers."⁵⁰ The *Didache* was discovered in 1873, and since then its reference to these offices had been much debated. Sasse maintained that these three offices were not local but trans-local in the early church.⁵¹ The apostles, in the strict sense of the word, died, and the office died with them. The office of prophet suffered shipwreck with the rise of the several ancient charismatic heresies (Montanism, etc.), "and their functions, too, passed over to the bishops."⁵² The office of teacher was also essentially assumed by the office of bishop.

Sasse's paper is compelling and worth careful study, but we reference it only for the sake of its more or less incidental references to the Office of the Ministry.

The congregation is able to call men into every other office [besides apostles, prophets, teachers]. She selects the presbyters. . . . She chooses the *prohistameno*i [those who preside] from the rank of presbyters—the 'ruling' presbyters, with whom the care of the congregations lies. . . . The congregation

⁴⁸ Hermann Sasse, "Die 'Krisis der Religion' und die Verkündigung der Kirche," in *Kirchliches Jahrbuch* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1932), 24. Cf. Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, vol. 1: Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions: 1918–1934 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 122.

⁴⁹ Hermann Sasse to Tom Hardt, June 18, 1958, as cited in Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:197.

⁵⁰ All Scripture quotations are the author's translation.

⁵¹ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:200.

⁵² Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:204.

calls men into the college of ruling presbyters, or bishops, as they are called at the start of the Pauline mission. . . . Certainly the laying on of hands belongs to the installation into such offices which bestows the *Pneuma*, the Holy Spirit, and with him the gifts of the office [*Amtscharisma*]. But the initiative lay in the calling through men.⁵³

“Two important ideas connected with the office of the ancient Christian teacher are explained by this connection: the ideas of tradition and succession.”⁵⁴ Paul follows the rabbinic tradition. “I have first of all handed over to you [*paredoka*] what I also have received [*parelabon*], that Christ was put to death for our transgressions according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:1–3). “*Parelabon-paredoka*: these are the technical terms of the Oriental tradition.”⁵⁵ For the modern West, truth stands at the end of the process of inquiry. “It is not the origin but the end of the inquiry.”⁵⁶ The modern world rejects this principle of tradition, so it does not understand the New Testament. At the end of his life, Paul “urged his spiritual sons Timothy and Titus to truly hold fast the *paradoka*, the doctrine handed down”⁵⁷ (2 Thess 2:15). In the New Testament, the *paradosis*, the tradition of pure teaching, is handed down from “one generation to another, from teacher to student.”⁵⁸

There is also the practice of handing over an office through the laying on of hands, as Paul did with his spiritual son, Timothy. He followed the way of the rabbis, who ordained their students through the laying on of hands. In the church of the New Testament, the laying on of hands is no empty gesture. Through it and in it the Holy Spirit comes with his gifts to the man. God can bestow upon the man in this way the charisma of teaching.⁵⁹

But Sasse also asserts that there simply is no idea of a line of succession in the New Testament, such as is later found in 1 Clement.⁶⁰

The congregation calls to the office. The laying on of hands imparts gifts for carrying out the office. The sacred duty of the office is to receive the tradition (the true apostolic teaching) and to pass on this received “tradition.” There is no sacred succession, person to person, but only a succession of true teaching.

⁵³ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:199.

⁵⁴ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:206.

⁵⁵ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:207.

⁵⁶ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:207.

⁵⁷ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:207.

⁵⁸ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:209.

⁵⁹ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:209.

⁶⁰ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:209.

The Lutheran Doctrine of the Office of the Ministry (1943–1944)

As we have seen above, Sasse took up the issue of the office particularly at times he defined as “crises”—in the wake of World War I, in the period of the nascent ecumenical movement and its challenges, in the practical work of social pastor in Berlin, and in the period during the rise of the Nazi Party. In the “horror of these apocalyptic times” of World War II, Sasse penned his most extensive treatment of the office to date.⁶¹ This extreme crisis had elevated interest in the questions of the church and the Office of the Ministry, and so issues of church and office were of burning practical concern.

And indeed we shall, in this hour, take up that part of ecclesiology which most directly concerns us servants of the church: the doctrine of the ecclesiastical office. For everything which we today can be, say, and do in the service of the church is completely dependent upon how we understand our office. My task is to speak on the *Lutheran* doctrine of the office of the ministry [*geistlichen Amt*].⁶²

The bibliography of Sasse demonstrates a rising and persistent interest in the question of the Prussian Union and its far-reaching and detrimental consequences for the church. He was hoping that repeated missed opportunities to re-create a constitution for the churches in Germany would give way to a constitution which honored the Lutheran Confessions and their requirement for a Lutheran constitution for a Lutheran Church. This was certainly in his mind as he went about defining the Lutheran teaching on the office in the first section of his essay.

To understand the Lutheran doctrine, one must first realize its uniqueness in comparison to all other confessions. All others find in the New Testament an “*ordo quo Dominus ecclesiam suam gubernari voluit* [order by which God intended his church to be governed]” (Gallican Confession XXIX). “That is to say, all other confessions know of a constitution of the church established by Christ and commanded by God in the New Testament.”⁶³ This the Lutheran Confessions reject. It is a confusion of law and gospel. It is to require—no matter what form of governance allegedly found in the New Testament—what God leaves free. The New Testament is concerned with good order, to be sure (1 Cor 14:33), and the church orders of the sixteenth century show how seriously the Lutherans took this matter. Attempts to find one mandated church order in the New Testament have simply amounted to “lifting one of its statements from among the various ones found there

⁶¹ Hermann Sasse, “The Lutheran Doctrine of the Office of the Ministry” in *Lonely Way*, 2:117ff.

⁶² Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:120.

⁶³ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:120.

and then subordinating all others to it But they are all finally contrived.”⁶⁴ The church is the new Israel, but Jesus is no new Moses. The various forms of church government are finally “human traditions or rites and ceremonies instituted by men” (AC VII 3). The forms of constitution (episcopal, consistorial, presbyterial, congregational) may be of the *bene esse* (well-being) of the church, not the *esse* (*being*). And so FC Ep X 3 applies the following: “In God’s Word they are neither commanded nor forbidden. They are rather established only for the sake of the wellbeing of the church and good order.” Also FC Ep X 4: “The community of God at every place and every time . . . has the authority to change such ceremonies as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God.”

In the second part of his essay, Sasse defines the office. AC V, Sasse asserts, speaks of the delivery of the divine gift of the gospel. AC XIV (“No one shall preach or teach unless rightly called”) and AC XXVIII (“Power of Bishops”) present the Lutheran teaching of the constitution of the church, which is counterpart to that of other churches’ teaching on church order. “To obtain such faith, God has instituted the preaching office to give Gospel and Sacraments.” “Such faith” is defined by the previous article, AC IV. Thus, the doctrine of the office and the gospel belong together, “that we may obtain such faith” (AC V). The Office of the Ministry is “inseparably connected to the doctrine of justification,” and “God willed that justifying faith be awakened by the oral preaching of the Gospel.”⁶⁵

The task of the office is defined by AC V 1: it is “the ministry of teaching the Gospel.” This is the proper task. The *officium alienum* (alien office) is the preaching of the law. “We bearers of the office of the ministry cannot take the preaching of the divine Law seriously enough in a time when people not only transgress this Law, but also despise, ridicule and trample it under foot.”⁶⁶ The more seriously we take the law, the more we recognize it is not the highest thing commanded of us. “The Gospel is this and nothing else: that in Jesus Christ there is forgiveness of sins, in him alone and nowhere else in the world, but also truly in him. A sermon that does not say that, a sermon in which this real Gospel is not mentioned, would not be a Christian sermon.”⁶⁷

The office is also the “ministry of administering the sacraments [*ministerium porrigendi sacramenta*]” (AC V 1). “The two are inseparable.”⁶⁸ In the period of Rationalism, when the gospel was no longer heard in the sermon, it was still heard in the words of institution, ‘given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’ Even

⁶⁴ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:122.

⁶⁵ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:124–125.

⁶⁶ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:125.

⁶⁷ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:125.

⁶⁸ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:126.

in the Canon of the Mass, it says, "God does not value merit but is an abundant giver of grace."⁶⁹

Proclamation and sacraments belong together. Where the sacraments are denied or omitted, the proclamation of the gospel is turned into law. A mission that would preach the gospel and omit the sacraments "would never result in a church, but rather a most short-lived society for the cultivation of a Christian worldview. The proclamation of the Gospel would die away like a voice in the wind if those who came to faith were not baptized and the baptized did not celebrate the Lord's Supper. Why this is, we do not know. No sociology is able to explain it because the fellowship of the body of Christ, constituted by Baptism and the Lord's Supper, is beyond the understanding of sociology. We only know that this is the case and that the miracle of the church, which is inaccessible to reason, is bound up together with the miracles of Baptism and the Lord's Supper."⁷⁰

There is only one *ministerium ecclesiasticum* (ecclesial ministry). The Apology notes that there are grades of the one office (*gradus in ecclesia*) (Ap XIV). "There are pastors, superintendents, bishop and archbishops," Sasse says, but they are by human right, not by divine right, "as is the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* itself."⁷¹ Other offices may be established to unburden the pastor. Deacons may be established for the work of love, but they do not take part in church government proper in the sense of the Lutheran Confessions. Luther and our Confessions understand by church government "the exercise of the functions peculiar to the office of the ministry: 'an authority and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to dispense and administer the Sacraments (AC XXVIII 5).'"⁷²

As for the other administrative and governing functions of the church, church law "is no manifestation of the church of Christ."⁷³ These things much exist because the church is at the same time "an association of external things and rights" (Ap VII/VIII 5).⁷⁴

In the third part of his essay, Sasse asks the question, Whence the office? How does it come about in this world? Luther had a two-sided battle. One was anti-Roman, the other anti-fanaticism. His fight against Rome was directed against the false notion of "priest." He did this especially in *To the Christian Nobility of the*

⁶⁹ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:126.

⁷⁰ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:127.

⁷¹ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:128. Cf. Tr 60–67.

⁷² Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:129.

⁷³ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:129.

⁷⁴ In Hermann Sasse, "Non-Obligatory Proposal toward the Spiritual Leadership of the Church," *Lonely Way*, 1:244, Sasse nuances this point: "All external matters of the church serve the proclamation of the Word." Original found in Hermann Sasse, "Unverbindlicher Vorschlag zur Geistlichen Leitung der Kirche," in *Lutherische Kirche* 17.3 (February 1, 1935): 39ff. Feuerhahn no. 35-01.

German Nation. (See above in Sasse's 1931 "Referat.") Here Sasse provides a quote from Luther from *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests* (1533). The Holy Spirit has "in the New Testament diligently prevented the name *sacerdos*, priest or cleric, from being given even to an apostle or to several other offices. But it is solely the name of the baptized or of Christians as a hereditary name into which one is born through Baptism." For none of us is born an apostle, preacher, teacher, or pastor through Baptism, but we are all born simply as priests and clerics."⁷⁵

On the other hand, Luther opposed the fanatics, including his former colleague Karlstadt, because they completely abolished the Office of the Ministry. The "sneak preachers" forced themselves into congregations without a call and presumed to preach the word of God. So Luther demanded "proof of call and command to preach, or immediately enjoin silence . . . for where the office is involved . . . one cannot hold an office without command or call."⁷⁶

Sasse asks another question: "What is the call for Luther? How does the *vocatio* [call] happen?"⁷⁷ He answers that it is not "a bestowal of priestly ordination."⁷⁸ The call happens when a congregation (*Gemeinde*) of Christians, all priests by virtue of Baptism, call one to carry out in their midst what all in principle are "entitled" (*berichtigt*) to do. Sasse affirms Luther's view, noting how firmly he proceeded with this advice in *To the Christian Nobility* regarding whether a small group of Christians could in principle choose one among themselves to serve as pastor, compared to Thomas More's reticence on the same question. Sasse notes that "it will always remain the criterion for a concept of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of the ministry, whether or not one agrees with Luther here that in the case of necessity the congregation can appoint its own office bearer."⁷⁹ Sasse knows of no Lutheran theologians, not even Vilmar, who have denied this possibility.⁸⁰

Luther was no congregationalist, notes Sasse. The emergency examples Luther provides are indeed cases of the perceived action of a local congregation. But in the case of the advice to the Bohemians (*De instituendis*), Luther grants the right to the

⁷⁵ Martin Luther, *Von der Winkelmesse und Pfaffenweihe* (1533) WA 38:230.13–18; Martin Luther, *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests* (1533): vol. 38, p. 188, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

⁷⁶ Luther, *Von den Schleichern und Winkelpredigern* (1532), WA 30/3.520.36; *Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers* (1532), AE 40:386.

⁷⁷ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:132.

⁷⁸ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:132.

⁷⁹ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:133.

⁸⁰ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:133.

entire church of the country.⁸¹ When Luther used the word *Gemeinde*, he by no means simply understands a local congregation. He uses such language for the entire church. It was the Enlightenment and Pietism that pressed the limited meaning, foreign to Luther. Luther sanctioned the royal rights of patronage and did not question the right of bishops or superintendents to ordain.

Luther, asserts Sasse, always maintained that the pastor, called by the local congregation, is at the same time the one who is present in an office established by God. The pastor speaks in the name of the congregation (“our name” in the Letter to the Bohemians),⁸² and in the stead of Christ. “Thus the preaching of the pastor, insofar as it is the preaching of the pure Gospel, becomes the Word of God. And the forgiveness which he bestows on the penitent sinner in the absolution, is God’s forgiveness.”⁸³

Sasse asks: Is Luther’s view on how the office comes about the view of the Lutheran Confessions? He responds: “By and large it is, with one very characteristic exception. The Lutheran Confessions did not accept Luther’s view that the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* is the exercise [*Ausübung*] of the general priesthood.”⁸⁴ Sasse grants that the general priesthood is the presupposition for the Office of the Ministry. According to 1 Timothy 2⁸⁵ and Treatise 67, the church has the right to “chose and ordain ministers.”⁸⁶ But Sasse does not believe that Luther’s exegesis of 1 Peter 2:9 (“That you should proclaim the virtues of the one who has called you”)

⁸¹ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:134.

⁸² Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:135.

⁸³ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:135.

⁸⁴ “It is also certain that recognized Lutheran theologians have maintained that the holy office is not merely the spiritual priesthood in function but a unique vocation within the spiritual priesthood.” Trans. from Löhe, *Gesammelte Werke* 2:199–202, in Matthew C. Harrison, *At Home in the House of My Fathers* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 114. Löhe maintained that since in the controversy on the office, both sides referred to the Confessions, and “at least one passage is written in the Waltherian (individual Lutheran view),” but the Augsburg Confession presented a different view, that “the doctrine of the Symbols appears to me not to be finished” (115). This, in addition to a handful of issues, moved Löhe to a *quatenus* (“insofar as”) subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. See Hebart, *Löhes Lehre*, 393. Löhe also limited the loosing key to the person in the office. The layperson (contra Luther) could comfort and console, but not absolve. Sasse certainly always maintained a *quia* (“because”) subscription. See Hermann Sasse, “Quatenus or Quia,” in *Lonely Way*, 1:455. I find no statement prior to 1943/1944 and recall no statement in Sasse which limits the ability of a layperson to speak forgiveness in the context of his various vocations.

⁸⁵ Sasse likely intended Titus 1:5 here, “appoint elders in every city.”

⁸⁶ Tr 66–67: “Itaque cum episcopi ordinarii fiunt hostes evangelii aut nolunt impertire ordinationem, ecclesiae retinent ius suum. Nam ubique est ecclesia, ibi est jus administrandi evangelii. Quare necesse est ecclesiam retinere jus vocandi, eligendi et ordinandi ministros.” *BSLK*, 491.

and 1 Corinthians 14:31 (“You can indeed all prophesy”) proves that “the public proclamation of the gospel belongs to the general priesthood.”⁸⁷

Has Sasse sufficiently made the case that the confessions do not follow Luther on this point? The Treatise quotes 1 Peter 2:9, “You are a royal priesthood,” as its authority and immediately states,

These words pertain to the true church, which, since it alone has the priesthood, certainly has the right of choosing and ordaining ministers. The most common custom of the church testifies to this. For in times past the people chose [*eligebat/wählet*] pastors and bishops. Then came the bishop, either of that church or a neighboring one, who confirmed the one elected by the laying on of hands. Ordination was nothing other than such confirmation [*comprobatio/Bestätigung*]. (Tr 69–70)

The Treatise also references a passage about which Luther made much—namely, Matthew 18⁸⁸ (especially v. 17, “tell it to the church”; v. 18, “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven . . . whatever you loose”; and v. 20, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them”). The Treatise states: “Where the true church is, there by necessity is the right of choosing and ordaining ministers: just as in a case of necessity a lay person absolves another, and becomes a minister and pastor of another. . . . Here pertain the words of Christ which testify that the keys of the church are given not only to certain persons: ‘Wherever two or three are gathered in my name’” (Tr 67–68).

The Treatise certainly moderates Luther’s bold language on the priesthood. But could not Lieberg’s summary of Luther’s position be said of the Treatise? “The particular office thus appears only as a usage of the power of the function of Word and Sacrament already possessed fundamentally in the universal priesthood.”⁸⁹

It is surprising that we have not observed Sasse quoting or explicating any of the traditional “mandate” passages for the Office of the Ministry (i.e., John 20; Matthew 16; Matthew 28) in the breadth of this brief study of his thoughts on the topic prior to 1943/1944. Here he mentions for the first time Matthew 28. “According to Matt 28:20, it [the office] continues until the end of time and is carried

⁸⁷ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:135.

⁸⁸ Luther believes the words of Matthew 18:17–20 are addressed “to all absolutely and generally” (WA 12:184.3–4). “The keys belong to the whole church and to all its members by right as well as by use, and in every way” (WA 12:184.21). See Hellmut Lieberg, *Office and Ordination in Luther and Melancthon* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2021), 35–40, for many such comments by Luther on 1 Pet 2:9 (WA 12:180.20ff.), 1 Corinthians 11:23 (WA 12:182.25) and Matthew 18:18 (WA 12:183.32ff.).

⁸⁹ Lieberg, *Office and Ordination*, 38. Lieberg provides this passage from Luther. “For to bear such fruits publicly or privately does not demonstrate different priesthoods, but different uses of the same priesthood” (WA 12:189.34ff.).

out by the bearers of the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* as the successors of the apostles and the representatives of the entire church.”⁹⁰

Here is the key to understanding ordination, says Sasse. Public proclamation of the gospel, preaching, and the administration of the sacraments “is bound to the commission given at ordination.”⁹¹ Sharing the word with one’s neighbor, instructing one’s children in the faith, home devotion, and what Luther in the Smalcald Articles calls “the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren” (SA III IV) is not in view here. “According to Luther, an absolution can occur in the mutual consolation of the brethren (*mutua consolatio fratrum*), though this is normally left to the pastor.”⁹² “The *ministerium ecclesiasticum* always has to do with what happens and ought to happen publicly before the congregation.”⁹³ Thus, it is here that AC XIV is applicable. “No one should publicly teach [German: “preach”] in the church, without a regular call.” The *Variata*, notes Sasse, helps us understand what this means. It adds: “just as Paul instructs Titus to appoint presbyters in the cities.”⁹⁴ Sasse concludes, “The call therefore normally happens through the bearers of the office authorized to extend it, self-evidently (according to ancient ecclesiastical law) with the agreement of the congregation.”⁹⁵

Sasse finishes by explaining that Luther’s path was the “lonely way”⁹⁶ between Rome and fanaticism. The Spirit works through means, “the external word and Sacrament,” as AC V confesses. Thus, the Office of the Ministry is necessary.

That had to have appeared to the Spiritualism of that time, as also today, as a form of blasphemy against the Spirit. I say: Then, as today. For who are those “who think that the Holy Spirit comes to men without the external word” [*qui sentiunt Spiritum Sanctum contingere hominibus sine verbo externo*]? Is it not the mystic of every age? Is it not the bulk of modern theology from Pietism and Rationalism, through the *Herrnhuter* [Moravians] of a higher order, Schleiermacher, to the theology of liberalism and the History of Religions School? Does not all of modern Protestant theology of the Reformed churches really fall under this condemnation? In fact, here the spirits are distinguished. As Luther once went the lonely way between Rome and Spiritualism, so the Lutheran Church today stands alone between the world powers of Roman Catholicism on the one hand and modern Protestantism on the other. Her

⁹⁰ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:136.

⁹¹ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:136.

⁹² Unlike Löhe, Sasse takes no issue with Luther’s affirmation that also laypersons may absolve in the context of their private vocations. *Lonely Way*, 2:136.

⁹³ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 3:136.

⁹⁴ Sasse references the Treatise, probably Tr 62. *Lonely Way*, 2:136.

⁹⁵ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:136.

⁹⁶ Sasse, *Lonely Way* 2:137.

doctrine which teaches that the Spirit *is* bound to the means of grace is as inconceivable to modern people in the twentieth century as it was to their predecessors in the sixteenth. But we are convinced that behind this doctrine stands one of the most profound truths which has ever been expressed in Christian theology. Luther once formulated it in the Smalcald Articles in the following way:

“And in these matters which concern the external spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the Enthusiasts—that is, from the Spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word. . . .

“In short, Enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world. It is a poison implanted and inoculated in man by the old dragon, and it is the source, strength, and power of all heresy, including that of the papacy and Mohammedanism. Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and Sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and Sacrament is of the devil. (SA III VIII 3, 9–10)”⁹⁷

Conclusion

Sasse set forth a great deal on the office up to the years 1943/1944. We summarize as briefly as possible. The office depends upon the christological substance of the faith (AC III) and delivers the gospel (AC IV) by word and sacrament (AC V). When the dogmatic substance of Christ is lost, the gospel is turned into something else, and sociological definitions of the church obtain. The office loses its proper tasks (*opus alienum* [*alien work*]: law; *opus proprium* [*proper work*]: gospel). Whether in German liberalism or the American Social Gospel Movement, the pastor becomes the “religious virtuoso,” the great “leader,” and not the deliverer of Christ. When the office is based on personality, the office is destroyed.

These convictions were clarified in Sasse’s personal experiences in war, in the office, and in conversations in the Faith and Order Movement. The church is where Christ is. Christ is in word and sacrament (AC V). The office delivers this Christ in the same. The pastor speaks both in the name of the congregation (our name), and in the name of Christ. The alternatives look to sociology and end in one of many versions of churchless mysticism. AC XVI (“Two Realms”) defines the office also by what it does *not* do (left-hand kingdom tasks). Attempts to Christianize the world

⁹⁷ Sasse, *Lonely Way*, 2:138.

only secularize the church. The question of the office is a dogmatic question, and the doctrine of ecclesiology is not complete without it. This dogma of the office is not complete in the Lutheran Church (Löhe), as the church at the time of the Augsburg Confession had not sufficiently “experienced” the dogma there confessed. The Lutheran contribution on this question may be its greatest contribution to the ecumenical understanding of the church in modern times.

The office is not derived from the priesthood but from the apostolate (Löhe). The office is superior to that of the New Testament prophets, to the horror of the fanatics. The office of teacher in the New Testament (1 Cor 12:27–29) is a trans-local office, like that of apostle, and not a reference to the Office of the Ministry proper. The apostles in the New Testament do not confer authority to the congregation, but rather “person to person” (Löhe). Sasse appears to rely less strictly on Löhe over time and does not follow the latter’s *quatenus* subscription to the Symbols, particularly with respect to its statement in the Treatise on the office. Sasse grants Luther’s view that a layman may grant absolution/forgiveness in “private,” but this is normally left to the pastor. Both congregation and office belong together. The church comes into being via both. The congregation calls. The call comes through men. The laying on of hands bestows the “*Amtcharisma*.”

The office is a divine institution. As according to Luther, the pastor’s words of proclamation are God’s words. The pastor’s forgiveness is God’s forgiveness. The task of the office is deeply connected with the New Testament *parelabon/paradoka* (“reception/tradition”) teaching. The pastor receives the sacred New Testament teaching/tradition and hands it on, delivers it to the hearers. There is no line of succession in the New Testament. There is only a succession of true doctrine. To be Christian, the sermon must always include the gospel—that is, the sacrificial life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Preaching and the sacraments are inseparable. No sociology can explain why the church fails to come into existence where the sacraments are not celebrated.

Regarding the constitution of the church, the Lutherans know only AC V, XIV, and XXVIII. The constitution establishes and guarantees the ministry of the gospel. Pastors are bishops. Bishops are pastors. There is no one constitution (whether episcopal, synodical, presbyterial, congregational) that can be read into or out of the New Testament.

A study of Sasse’s post–World War II writings—in the context of various crises affecting the office and Sasse’s own vocations, and in his extensive efforts to bridge the Löhe and Walther traditions—will reveal much more. Particularly surprising in this study is Sasse’s paucity of references to the traditional mandate passages from the Gospels for the Office of the Ministry. Further study of Sasse’s views from 1945 to his death in 1976 is warranted.