

19. Greetings

Herman Sasse, Ph.D., D. Theol.

Dear Brethren:

Since I cannot be with you at your important meeting, I have been asked to send at least a written message. I wish to assure you that my thoughts and my prayers are with you when you think over the situation of the Lutheran Church in your country and throughout the world and discuss the tasks that lie before us.

The first and foremost task is to get a clear picture of the overall situation. Fifty years ago, after the First World War, a rediscovery of the Church — in contrast to a mere private Christianity — was experienced and the slogan of “the century of the Church” was coined. Today we observe everywhere a decline of the churches such as has perhaps never occurred in the two millennia of Christian history. Certainly great catastrophes have happened in the past. But they were limited to certain parts of the world like the breakdown of the church as in the Near East with the rise of Islam, or the vanishing of the faith in the era of European Enlightenment. Today the catastrophe is world-wide. It becomes manifest in the loss of the doctrinal substance of the Christian faith in all denominations of Christendom. A catholic priest with an excellent philosophical and theological education, a man in a high and responsible office in his church asked me: “Do you really believe in the resurrection of Christ?” I replied: “Father, you believe that. You have believed all your life. You will believe it again. But there is a superhuman power that tries to destroy your faith. Fight this power with all your strength remembering the words of St. Paul Ephesians 6 that we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, and powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness. But remember also what the apostle says about the weapons we need for that fight, the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, and prayer.” If such sudden loss of faith occurs in a church with the strong discipline of Rome, what will we expect from the weak Protestant churches, also from us Lutherans? The old Lutheran countries of Europe look already very much like the old Christian countries of the Orient. Luther’s prophetic words on the future of the Church in Germany which may have the same destiny (“The Word of God is a faring rainstorm which does not come back to places where it has once been . . .”) seem to have come true, in all Europe. And what about America? I have known old theologians of conservative Lutheran churches in America who had been pillars of orthodoxy in a long ministry but who lost their former convictions and taught the opposite to what they had been teaching. Usually such tragic developments of individuals foreshadow the tragedy of their churches. As by my own reason or strength I cannot believe, but the Holy Spirit must work faith in my soul and preserve me in true faith, so a church has constantly to pray that God the Holy Spirit may preserve it in the faith. It seems sometimes as though we have forgotten what our Catechism teaches about the preservation of the faith. Our Fathers knew it when they sang: “Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word.” In the darkest days of the church struggles in Germany in our time the old custom was revived in many parishes that at the toll of the evening bell the Christians, wherever they were, prayed the old hymn: Ach bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ/Weil es nun Abend worden ist/Dein teures Wort, das helle Licht/Lass ja bei uns auslöschen nicht.” “In dieser schwer betrübten Zeit/Verleih uns, Herr, Beständigkeit/Dass wir dein Wort und Sakrament/Rein behalten bis an

unser Ende." It is not a matter of course that a particular church must remain, if it is well organized and its members have the intention to preserve it. "Wir sind es nicht, die die Kirche könnten erhalten, unsere Vorfahren sind es auch nicht gewesen, unsere Nachkommen werden es auch nicht sein, sondern der ists gewesen, der da spricht: Ich bin bei euch bis an der Welt Ende. Wie Hebr. 13 geschrieben steht: Jesus Christus heri et hodie et in saecula und Offb. 1: "Der es war, der es ist, der es sein wird. Ja, so heisst der Mann und soll auch kein anderer heissen." (Luther WA 54, 470). Only if we keep these truths in mind, shall we be free from that self-glorification of one's own church and its orthodoxy. Otherwise it could be that we fall under the judgment of Christ. "Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knoweth not that thou art wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked (Rev. 3:15ff)." This saying of the living Christ contains also the deep truth that a church which is doomed is full of optimism and self-confidence. *No heretic has ever admitted that his doctrine is heresy. He regards it as a new way of proclaiming the old truth. The cancer which destroys churches is in the early stages painless.*

"We have lost the Word of God and cannot find it again." With these words a leader of a modern Protestant Seminary of Reformed background described the situation of his church throughout the world. He said this in deep sadness. It seems to be the sickness of all Protestant churches which once regarded themselves as churches in which the pure Word of God was preached. What has happened to them? The writer of these lines more than forty years ago in America witnessed the great tragedy when the great Presbyterian Church with its center in Princeton broke apart into a Modernist and a Fundamentalist wing, and the heritage of the Reformation of Geneva was lost. Only with deep sympathy one can read today the sermons in which faithful ministers like Prof. Machen of Princeton raised their warning voices and tried to call back their church to the authority of the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

Everywhere you hear a cry for a new confession. Even Rome has its new "Creed of the People of God," proclaimed by the pope in 1968. It claims to be a new formulation of the old doctrine, but actually important doctrines of Trent have been given up. I want to say here nothing of the reformed Churches which, apart from small minorities, have long since abandoned the faith of their fathers. As to the Lutheran churches, many of those which belong to the LWF have abandoned the Formula of Concord and even Luther's Large Catechism. So far none of the Lutheran Churches in America has clearly rejected "Marburg Revisited" and the theses agreed upon in this common enterprise of the Lutherans, including Missouri, and the Presbyterians. It seems that the Lutheran-Reformed union is *ante portas* in America as it is a fact already in the territorial churches of Europe.

The only way I can see is the renewal of the Lutheran Confessions. For these confessions are not only ours, but the confession of our fathers and, if as we believe they are Scriptural, also the confession of the true church of the future. This belongs to the nature of the confession as understood in the Lutheran Church and perhaps in the true church of all ages. It binds together not only the present generation of believers, but also the believers of all ages. There is not only an ecumenicity of space, but also of time. Without this bond the church cannot remain. For the confession is inseparably linked with the Bible. It is our Lord Himself who asks His disciples "Who say you that I am," and his adversaries: "What think you of Christ, whose Son is He?" Him, a living person, very God and very Man, we confess in each article. Whatever we have to say beyond the text of the confessions can be only a clarification of their content. This is why I always recommend to start with the Confessions. Take Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession (which must be read together with the commentary in the Apology). If you have clarified what makes for the true unity of the Church, you must admit that it is the *full* Gospel which is contained in the whole Bible and the rightly administered sacrament which includes the full Biblical doctrine

of the sacraments. The full Gospel contains also the orthodox doctrine of Christ, of the Trinity, of men's sin and the Redemption which we have in Christ.

What can be done? When my generation came back from the First World War, we found a church in full decay. We had lost the theology which we have learned from Harnack and his colleagues. We lived in utmost poverty and had to start our ministry without real help. In this situation groups of pastors were studying again the confessions and the theology of Luther. Luther's mighty belief in the Scriptures as the Word of God helped us to rediscover the authority of the Bible. Out of these groups and brotherhoods arose what constituted a revival. It was not a great revival, not a mighty movement. There were many immature minds. The theological gaps of the war were still conspicuous. But we were able, when Hitler came, to fight for the freedom of the Gospel. Our weapons were the Augsburg Confession and Article 10 of the Form of Concord over against the claims of a political party and the Nazi state. In our ordination we have taken a solemn pledge to teach this doctrine and nothing else. No one was entitled to demand anything else from us. This has saved what was left of the church in Germany until after the Second World War, then men like Bultman and Tillich took over. They could succeed because of whole generations of young theologians who were the mainstay of the confessing church were taken away.

Not restoration, still less revolution can be the program of the church. It must be *renewal*, but renewal not in the superficial sense of the present Roman renewal which shrinks back from a real reformation. It must be a return to the real Reformation of Martin Luther, a return to the *Sola Scriptura* and *Sola Fide* (both belong inseparably together).

These are some thoughts which I would like to put before you, dear and esteemed brethren, when you meet for your Congress. What I had to offer is not a solution of the great problem with which we all are wrestling. It is food for thought, a small contribution to the great debate which is going on among all Christians who are concerned about the future of the true Church of Christ. God bless you all!