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Theological Observer

A TALE OF TWO BOOKS

A recent publication of Concordia Publishing House is Hermann Sasse's *We Confess Jesus Christ* (St. Louis, 1984). A very different volume is by John H. S. Kent, *The End of the Line?* a product of Fortress Press (Philadelphia, 1982). Few may realize it now, but in fact these two books are nearly perfect paradigms of what the publishers' respective churches really stand for. The sharply contrasting books, both as it happens by historical theologians, represent, of course, not the average or typical theologies of their churches, but the latter's basic directions and ultimate destinations, given their present courses. "Missouri's" average theology is hardly as good as Sasse's, nor can that of the New Lutheran Church possibly be as bad as Kent's. Rather, the two books represent the two polarities or centers of gravity round which North American Lutheranism is resettling at present. If the Missouri Synod is serious about reclaiming its confessional heritage, it will continue to pursue the path so conscientiously charted by Sasse. And if the merging synods insist on letting historical criticism dominate their seminaries, Kent's "end of the line" will be the logically foreseeable outcome.

The five Sasse pieces are translations by Professor Dr. Norman Nagel of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis—of material selected from the collection of essays by Sasse which had appeared in two German volumes under the title *In Statu Confessionis* (1966 and 1976). The English paperback is the first of three in the *We Confess* series, of which the second, dealing with the sacraments, has already appeared. A third volume, on church and ministry, should be out by the time this article appears in print.

The center-piece of this first Sasse volume, and possibly of all three, is the essay on Luther's theology of the cross. Here Sasse, beginning with a panoramic survey of the cross in church history, plumbs the depths of what it means to be Lutheran. "The cross demands faith *contrary to what our eyes see*" (p. 50). This is not a summons to intellectual irresponsibility. Faith must not escape from objective reality into subjectivity. On the contrary, faith defies and un-masks our own illusions. Heaven cannot be stormed by feats of philosophy or religion. It is freely given to a faith which, taking God at His word, believes His power where it sees weakness, knows His love when it experiences anguish, and finds glory in the cross under the mask of shame. God hides Himself not in high abstractions, but in lowly, visible things like baptismal water, absolving words uttered by sinful lips, and consecrated bread and wine—and this all the better to reveal Himself there. This is not a theory or a game: "A yes to the cross of Christ is also a yes to my cross" (p. 52). This article is preceded by a study on "Jesus Christ is Lord" and is followed by an essay commemorating the fifteenth centenary of the Council of Chalcedon and by two essays on the church as a confessing entity and as itself also an article of faith to be confessed. A brief biography of Hermann Sasse concludes the volume.

As it happens, Kent's book also consists of five main parts. The first two chapters trace the retreat of Christian dogma before rationalism and historicism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively. Chapter Three discusses the fate of the doctrine of the church from John Wesley's time to the present. The next chapter treats of the "social theology" of that same period, and the last chapter deals with the twentieth century. Where Sasse was able to confess, because he was conscious of standing on the firm rock of God's Word, Kent, a professor of theology in the University of Bristol, can only debunk, retreat,

question, criticize, and deny. For him there is no truth, no dogma, no Word of God at all in the old, traditional sense: “. . . the study of modern historical theology which I have attempted here suggests that if Christianity is nearing the end of its main, public line, this is because it has exhausted ways of keeping its images alive” (p. ix). Although Kent punctuates his title, *End of the Line*, with a question mark, an exclamation point would have been more fitting. To show that things are not as hopeless as they seem on his account to be, Kent offers this piece of bravado (p. x):

For the critical theologian, for the Christian humanist, the assertion of belief, of belief in God, in human creativity, in the Gospels as one sign of that human capacity to make peace instead of a desert, is now more than ever a matter of faith: faith in the underlying rationality of the universe, . . . faith in the quality of life commended in what seems to have been the teaching of Jesus. . . ; faith in reason, however unfashionable reason may have become in the sick romanticism of today.

To paraphrase Antony Flex, how does a Christianity so defined differ from no Christianity at all? It is not surprising to find Kent criticizing J.A.T. (“Honest To God”) Robinson’s crude “reinterpretations” for still having kept too much of the old mythology. Of Robinson’s redefinition of Christ’s divinity in evolutionary terms, without any personal pre-existence (“God raised Jesus up through the normal process of heredity and environment and made him his decisive word to men”), Kent says: “neither biology nor the doctrine of the divinity of Christ had suffered much so far” (p. 111)!

Kent is quite right, no doubt, in seeing the collapse of the church’s accustomed social support, in an increasingly secularized Europe, as the fundamental reason for the urgent preoccupation with the question of what it is that legitimates the church’s existence and authority. Rome’s answer was to anchor the whole system in papal infallibility at Vatican I. The Anglican Oxford Movement turned to the historic episcopate for support. In this context Kent’s judgment makes very good sense: “the modern ecumenical movement partly originated in the anxiety of church leaders to replace the vanished social order in which the Churches had played an accepted part with a united ecclesiastical institution capable of holding its own as an independent structure with the increasingly independent and secular state” (p. 63).

Is it really true, however, that those who, in the various churches, stood for a “fixed dogmatic orthodoxy of the past” saw their main problem as one of “how to restore the Church’s past ascendancy in western society” (p. 1)? Kent’s rather too easy identification of the cause of “orthodoxy” with that of the ecumenical movement is an optical illusion due to Kent’s extremely liberal perspective. After all, when observed from great astronomical distances, two stars which are actually very far apart, may seem to be quite close. There is also a Reformed Anglo-Saxon bias which makes it seem self-evident that the church is essentially a “visible” institution.

Here Sasse and Kent take antipodal positions. Walking by faith, not by sight, Sasse points to the pure Gospel and sacraments, that is, to the pure marks of the church, as the sole guarantors of the church’s presence. Kent, together with the ecumenical movement he criticises for being insufficiently liberal, treats the church as a part of this world, with reformist social and political duties. The church is thus an article of sight. Perhaps Kent’s scepticism needs also to be

seen, however, as an understandable reaction to an impossible "ecclesiology of glory." Focusing narrowly on Anglican and Roman pronouncements, Kent takes "orthodox theologians" to be advocating a belief in "the indefectibility of the [visible] Church, which Christ will never desert and which the Holy Spirit will lead into all truth" (p. 80). Sasse's sober and sobering theology of the cross can help to purge our proclamation of "human illusions," such as all delusions of grandeur about external historical institutions and, thus, to inoculate our theology against the grim fate of being swept away in the "general disillusionment" (Sasse, pp. 36, 37) of our time.

Since my esteemed colleague, Dr. Eugene Klug, has raised the issue of Dr. Sasse's orthodoxy in respect of biblical inerrancy (*Concordia Journal*, July 1985), a comment or two may be apropos. I fully share Dr. Klug's dismay at some of the statements in Sasse's posthumous *Sacra Scriptura* (Erlangen, 1981). It is a great pity that an unfinished manuscript by Sasse was printed after his death, together with some previously published material. The book ignores the development over the years of Sasse's position on inerrancy and thus leaves an unfair overall impression. For instance, when President F. Schiötz of the American Lutheran Church had cited Sasse against inerrancy, Sasse complained that "selected passages" from his articles "taken out of their context . . . might suggest that [he rejected] the inerrancy of the Scriptures. The contrary is true." And Sasse tried repeatedly to stop the reprinting and sale by the St. Louis Seminary Bookstore of an English translation of his "Letter to Lutheran Pastors on Holy Scripture" of 1950. In deep humility Sasse wrote to *Lutheran News* (7 August 1967), enclosing a copy of a letter to the bookstore manager, in which Sasse said that "the essay, written during our Australian discussions of the doctrine of Holy Scripture, contained formulations which [he] could not maintain," and that he had "corrected what had to be corrected." In his essay of 1950 Sasse had, in effect, limited biblical infallibility to "articles of faith." In the July 1960 number of *The Reformed Theological Review*, however, Sasse clearly confessed: "one thing Christian theology can never admit, namely, the presence of 'errors' in the sense of false statements in Holy Scripture."

Soon after he became president of the Missouri Synod, Dr. J.A.O. Preus wrote to Sasse for advice on the inerrancy question. Sasse replied under date of 24 February 1970, urging the Missouri Synod to do serious theological work on this topic, since hardly any help was to be found elsewhere. Barth, wrote Sasse, had tried, but ended in *Schwaermertum*, and Elert's doctrine of Holy Scripture, despite some "excellent paragraphs," was "terribly weak." Sasse compared inerrancy to the ancient church's *homoousios* and urged: "The term *inerrantia* cannot and should not be given up—the meaning is quite clear, the absence of real error in the Bible."

Nevertheless, it is true that a certain ambiguity haunted Sasse's writings on this subject. If a grateful pupil be permitted to conjecture about a venerable and learned master's oversight, I would say that Sasse never succeeded in applying his deeply incarnational, Chalcedonian theology of the cross to Holy Scripture with the same consistency with which he had applied it to the sacraments and to the church. The theology of the cross demands that the mysteries of God acting under earthly "masks"—including, therefore, Holy Scripture—be taken not at their apparent face value, in terms of human phenomena, but at their real face value, as given by God in His Word. Theology, also bibliography,

must be done "from above," that is, in reliance on God's authority alone, without substantive admixtures "from below," that is, from the wisdom and philosophy of this world.

The sole point of these digressions is to commend the present *We Confess* series. It would be tragic if we refused to learn from Sasse on church, sacrament, ministry, and confession, simply because there were inadequacies in his writings on Scripture. Where, after all, is the theologian who has no "blind spots"? Dr. Norman Nagel has rendered the church an enormous service with his masterful English renditions of Sasse's essays, which rank already as classic contributions to the genuinely Confessional Lutheran theology of the twentieth century.

With John Kent's *The End of the Line?* one shudders on the brink of the bottomless abyss. The critical religious ideology—one can no longer call it theology—presented there with all due academic elegance, betokens a background of super-human powers, hissing, as it were, through Pontius Pilate: "What is truth?" Sasse, whose illusions perished at the front in World War I, exorcises the hissing, in *We Confess Jesus Christ*.

K. Marquart

THE REDEDICATION OF THE SPRINGFIELD BELL

A special service took place around the belfry of Kramer Chapel on 28 April 1986 in connection with the rededication of the so-called Springfield Bell. The bell was cast in Troy, New York, in 1882 for use at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois. It was installed later that year in a copula atop the dormitory building known as "die Kaffeemuehle" (Coffee Mill), a building so designated because of its square shape. The bell hung there until the Coffee Mill was razed in 1932. The class of 1932—in particular, the "Coetus" fraternity—was instrumental in preventing the bell from being sold for scrap in that year. It was stored in Springfield and, when the burden of the Depression eased, it was installed on the portico of Craemer Hall. From 1939 on it was rung by students to mark the completion of their seminary studies. It was brought to Fort Wayne when Concordia Theological Seminary was moved in 1976. The bell was stored in the old barn on the seminary campus until members of the Alumni Association began asking about it in 1984. The bell was rediscovered and moved to the concrete bunker. Finally, the class of 1986 resolved to have the bell hung in Kramer Chapel belfry.

On the occasion of the rededication of the Springfield Bell the hymn of invocation was "Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord." The Rev. Prof. Daniel G. Reuning, Dean of the Chapel, led the congregation in a responsive rendition of Psalm 150, followed by the reading of Colossians 3:12-17. The academic dean, the Rev. Prof. David P. Scaer, Th.D., made the following remarks:

"Religions can be divided, according to the categories of the discipline of *Religionsgeschichte*, into two types. The more developed type is the established religion whose foundations are rooted in one location. The Jewish people have Jerusalem as the center of their worship. Muslims have Mecca. Roman Catholics look to the Eternal City where the basilica is built over the final resting-place of the prince of the apostles. The more primitive type of religion is the nomadic,

found in the wilderness. It is never at home in any one place, but like Elijah and John the Baptist its adherents move according to the directives of the divine will. The nomadic religion never has to go into all the world because its peripatetic nature requires that it always travel with no place to rest. The ancient Jews through the time of Joshua up to the time of David had a nomadic religion. They were in exile, moving from Canaan to Egypt and from Egypt into the Sinai peninsula and back to Canaan. Their model was Abraham, who by faith sojourned in a foreign land, living in tents. They looked not for an earthly city, but for the city which is to come, whose builder and maker is God.

“If our sister institution in St. Louis belongs to the more established type of religion, our institution is nomadic and exilic in nature. In our 140-year history we have folded up our tents and packed our baggage three times. If numbers mean anything, we have 260 years of exile before we reach the golden number of 400. Perhaps by coming to Ft. Wayne, we have returned to our Canaan. People say that one can never go home. This is especially true of the loyal students and faithful alumni of Concordia Theological Seminary, since she has moved from place to place. Our alumni have an alma mater, a stepmother, but the stepmother has a history of filling out change-of-address cards every so many years. Here today and some place else tomorrow. After the Jews had wandered in exile without any permanent home from the time of Abraham to the time of Moses, God did not at first give them a land of their own. He gave them the ark of the covenant so that they could have permanent symbols of their past. The manna, the tablets of stone, Aaron’s rod were reminders of God’s grace. They were nomadic and their lives were in constant flux, but God’s redemptive love in their election as the messianic people was constant, unmovable, and firm.

“The bell which we dedicate today ties together our old home on the campus in Springfield, Illinois, with our new home here in Fort Wayne, Indiana. It goes before us and follows after us. The bell whose knell called our brothers in the ministry, many of whom have received the final crown, to prayer, to the preaching of the Word, and to the participation in the Blessed Sacrament will now call us to perform our sacred obligations. The places where this bell has rung have changed, but those who today hear and obey the call of the bell confess the same faith and believe the same Lord. We all bless one holy name, we partake one holy food, and like those before us we press on to our one hope, endowed with every grace of God. We who hear today the call of this bell will with all saints hear the final triumph sounded over our graves, and then we will hear the trumpets of a myriad of angels when the Lamb of God whose message we proclaim and whose flesh and blood we drink will Himself be the host at the everlasting banquet of heaven.”

The president of the seminary, the Rev. Prof. Robert D. Preus, Ph.D., Th.D., performed the rite of dedication of the bell. Following the Lord’s Prayer and the benediction, the service concluded with the singing of another hymn: “Built on the Rock the Church Doth Stand.” Various officers of the graduating class and the student association were the first seminarians to ring the rededicated bell. In the ensuing weeks the new candidates reinstated the old custom of ringing the bell to mark the completion of their student days in Concordia Theological Seminary.