

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse as Confessors and Churchmen: The Bethel Confession and Its Intended but Unfulfilled Purpose

David Jay Webber

The Lutheran Church is a Confessional church, committed to confessing the same faith that its forefathers confessed, by means of creedal statements that are derived from the Scriptures, that are in harmony with earlier approved creedal statements, and that are intended to be expressions of the faith of the whole church in all times and places. This primarily applies to the official Symbolical Books contained in the Book of Concord, but it also applies, in a limited way, to other formal statements of Lutheran conviction and principle that have been produced on various other occasions and in various places (such as the *Brief Statement* in America and the *Theses of Agreement* in Australia). Lutherans believe that there are indeed pivotal times in history when circumstances providentially call for a renewed confession of the church's faith – not in such a way that what was confessed before is rejected and replaced, but in such a way that the unchanging Scriptural truth of God is expressed with a new emphasis, a new formulation, and a new focus, so as to address new challenges, new falsehoods, and new distortions.

There is a certain sobriety and circumspection among those who believe that they have a divine or ecclesial commission to prepare such a document. Theologians who might otherwise be very imaginative and speculative in their writings, become more conservative and restrained in their work as authors of a confessional statement. There is a heightened concern about being able to say, with a clear conscience before God and before the whole church, "Thus says the Lord!" Ideas and explanations that are not certain and established by clear texts of Holy Scripture will be avoided. Only what can be universally defended in the light of God's Word, and in light of the church's already-existing public Confessions, will be articulated.

But at the same time, a circumstance that would be serious enough to call for a new articulation of the faith, would also be serious enough to require more than a mere repetition of old theological formulations. The theologians who are called to such a task will collaborate fraternally, on the basis of their collective wisdom and pastoral judgment, in figuring out how best to address a new heresy or doctrinal distortion with new terms and concepts that will serve to strengthen and undergird the old faith.

In Germany, in 1933, it was perceived by many that a time for such a weighty Lutheran statement, over against the heresies of the day, had once again come. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse were at the center of this effort. These two men had much in common. They each sprang from notable Lutheran pedigrees – with Bonhoeffer descending from the Swabian Reformer Johannes Brenz, and with Sasse's ancestors including the eighteenth-century theologian Valentin Ernst Löscher. Both came of age theologically in the doctrinally-ambivalent Old Prussian Union. Both came to embrace a more distinctively Lutheran form of faith. Both lived and studied for a time in the United States, and considered their respective sojourns in the New World to be significant for their overall theological development. Both were early and vocal opponents of the Nazi ideology. And both declined offers of teaching positions in the safety of America, as Germany was about to inaugurate a new world war. They each believed that their place as theological and pastoral leaders at that moment of history was with their countrymen, during the time of trial that the Christian church in Germany was facing, and would continue to face with ever greater intensity, before the Nazi nightmare would finally be over.

But Bonhoeffer and Sasse were also different in some noticeable ways. As each of them departed from the Prussian Union style of Liberalism in which they were educated, they went in different directions. Bonhoeffer was drawn to the ideas of Karl Barth's Neo-Orthodoxy. Sasse, in

comparison, was increasingly drawn to the theology of the Book of Concord, and of the nineteenth-century Confessional Revival. But in 1933, as they each looked at the situation that Christians in Germany were facing – with a Nazi take-over of the state, as well as a take-over of certain levels of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy nationally and regionally by the Nazi-inspired “German Christians” – they joined together as the primary participants in the preparation of the “Bethel Confession.”

A preliminary meeting, to discuss the drafting of a new confession in the spirit of the classic Lutheran Confessions, was held at the Bethel human care institution in Westphalia, on August 5, 1933. This meeting involved Friedrich Bodelschwingh (the director of Bethel), Georg Merz (an instructor in theology at the school there), Bonhoeffer, and Sasse. At the end of that day, with great optimism, Bodelschwingh wrote to Pastor Georg Schulz at Barmen, the leader of the anti-Nazi Sydowa Brotherhood:

The wish has repeatedly arisen to work out a position statement concerning current questions from the perspective of the Lutheran confession in order to establish a firm basis within these disputes that might also provide support for lonely warriors. ... We agreed that first a smaller circle of theologians meet here to begin this work.¹

According to John R. Wilch, it was obvious to all concerned that

Bonhoeffer was the driving force behind the Bethel confession project. He met with Bodelschwingh and his theological advisor, Rev. Georg Merz, in Bethel in early August to discuss it and win their approval. Bodelschwingh arranged for Bonhoeffer and Sasse to meet in Bethel in mid-August, together with Merz and Bodelschwingh’s secretary, Pastor Gerhard Stratenwerth. At Bodelschwingh’s request, Wilhelm Vischer contributed a section on the church and the Jews. He aimed to recover the Old Testament as the Word of God and as witness to God’s incarnate Word in Christ.

Bonhoeffer, Sasse, and their colleagues at Bethel, as they labored over this project, also benefitted from the preceding work of other like-minded churchmen when it was brought to their attention. They were not adverse to incorporating some of that material into their own document – showing that “theologians’ pride” was not a governing force in this project. The men at Bethel understood themselves to be servants of God, of the Gospel, and of the whole church. Wilch continues:

Just when the team had begun working on the confession Bodelschwingh received a copy of a confession by pastors in the Tecklenburg area of Westphalia. This Tecklenburg Confession appears to have had an influence on the Bethel Confession, for the following concerns were dealt with by both: the politicization of Scripture; the perversion of Scripture as God’s Word, of the doctrines of creation, sin, and the Trinity, and of the essence of the church; and a call for dealing with the role of the Jews and with eschatology.

Each theologian involved – especially Bonhoeffer and Sasse – contributed unique emphases and concerns to the document, which were nevertheless recognized by the whole group to be

¹Friedrich Bodelschwingh, letter to Georg Schulz, August 5, 1933; quoted in Carsten Nicolaisen, “Concerning the History of the Bethel Confession,” in *Berlin 1932-1933 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12)*, English edition edited by Larry L. Rasmussen, translated by Isabel Best and David Higgins (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 510.

both pertinent and necessary for inclusion. In this way the participants enriched and broadened each other's perspectives. This resulted in the preparation of a document that had the character of being a document of the church, with a level of balance and thoroughness that it otherwise would not have had. The Bethel Confession did not bear the stamp of just one overbearing personality, or reflect only the theological interests of only one person. Wilch observes that

Bonhoeffer was able to convince the other participants to accept his treatment of the Jewish question, while Sasse's contribution is obvious in the areas of Scripture, church, and confession. The overall conception and plan was that of these two. Bonhoeffer and Sasse resonated profoundly well together in Bethel as church theologians, formulating "in contemporary form the witness of the Church catholic," boldly stating what "the Church teaches." Sasse called the work at Bethel "truly a joyful cooperation!"²

Bonhoeffer shared in Sasse's positive sentiment regarding the Bethel conference. In a letter that he penned to his grandmother from Bethel, he wrote:

The time here at Bethel has made a deep impression on me. Here we have a part of the church that still knows what the church can be about and what it cannot be about. ... Our work here is very enjoyable and also very demanding. We want to try to make the German Christians declare their intentions. I rather doubt we shall succeed. ... The issue is really Germanism or Christianity, and the sooner the conflict comes out in the open, the better.³

Politically, Bonhoeffer was doubtful that the confession would be able to energize enough Christians to be able to take back control of the ecclesiastical structures of German Protestantism – especially since the civil government could be counted on to support and sustain its religious allies in such a struggle. But Bonhoeffer sincerely believed that it would at the very least go forth into the church as a faithful testimony to the truth of God, as that truth was specifically being challenged and rejected by the Nazis and the "German Christians."

Bonhoeffer was truly surprised and dismayed when even that expectation was dashed, however, when the document that he, Sasse, and others had produced was soon gutted of its most significant elements. When it was then released to the church – unenthusiastically and un influentially – it was a mere shadow of what it had been. With the collusion of Bodelschwingh, Pastor Martin Niemöller (who had had no role in drafting the document) eviscerated it with his editorial revisions and omissions. Many of Sasse's distinctive accents were diluted out of a concern that the document should be made more palatable to people in the Union and Reformed churches who did not identify with the theology of the Lutheran Confessions. Many of Bonhoeffer's distinctive accents were diluted out of a concern that the document should be made less controversial and confrontational – especially in regard to its criticism of anti-Semitic racism.

Bonhoeffer and Sasse were grieved and angered by these changes. Both of them withdrew their support for the so-called Bethel Confession in its distorted form. And in the end

² John R. Wilch, "Hermann Sasse and Third Reich Threats to the Church," in *Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times?*, edited by John R. Stephenson (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998), 80.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, letter to Julie Bonhoeffer, August 20, 1933, in *Berlin 1932-1933 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12)*, 157, 159.

no one else supported it either, so that it basically disappeared from the ecclesiastical scene very quickly. Wilch reports that

Bonhoeffer angrily rejected the final version out of hand and privately circulated a copy of the earlier version. Sasse had written to Bonhoeffer in September, suggesting to use the Bethel Confession as the basis for a free Lutheran church independent of the German Protestant Church. He also advised Bonhoeffer to go to London, for “I saw in him one of Germany’s best theologians and did not want to see him go under in the petty war against the Gestapo and Rosenberg.”⁴

Bonhoeffer did in fact take Sasse’s advice, and followed through on his previous intention to take up pastoral duties at a German-speaking congregation in London. He also began at that time to travel widely in Britain, speaking on the church struggle in Germany. On November 28, 1933, “Bonhoeffer addressed a group of pastors in Bradford, Yorkshire. In his report on the heresy of the German-Christians, Bonhoeffer mentioned the confession which he, ‘Merz und Sasse’ had prepared but that had been ‘frustrated’ by Bodelschwingh and ‘thwarted’ by ‘a couple of pastors.’”⁵ Bonhoeffer had also expressed his disappointment with the way it had all turned out in a letter to Barth, saying that “the Bethel confession, into which I truly had poured heart and soul, met with almost no understanding.”⁶ Barth himself did understand it, but as a Reformed theologian he did not like it. He considered it to be “too Lutheran,” and was glad to see it go by the wayside.

What eventually came to replace the Bethel Confession as a would-be rallying point for the anti-Nazi Christians in Germany was the Barmen Declaration. But the Barmen document was inferior to the Bethel document both in the way in which it was produced, and in its content. Unlike Bethel, which was written by a team of gifted and thoughtful theologians, Barmen was essentially the work of one man, Barth. And unlike Bethel, Barmen was written as a time-bound Neo-Orthodox Reformed document, reflecting the personal theological interests of Barth, and not as a document that was consciously erected on the foundation of the catholic creedal tradition of the past. This made it distasteful to German Lutherans – who constituted a clear and overwhelming majority of Protestants in Germany – and prevented it from actually becoming a large-scale rallying point for the Evangelical opposition to the “German Christians.” Even someone who was not generally sympathetic to what was attempted at Bethel was compelled to observe that

the original version of the Bethel confession remains a brilliant, sharp and impressive witness to what theological work was still capable of achieving in summer 1933 – indeed specifically because of the great German Christian upsurge in German theology at this time. Ponderous though it was and loaded with numerous passages from the Bible, from Luther, and above all from confessional texts, this confession was nevertheless

⁴Wilch, 85. The quotation is from a letter from Hermann Sasse to Eberhard Bethge, Sept. 28, 1956. “Rosenberg” is the notorious Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg.

⁵Guy Christopher Carter, *Confession at Bethel, August 1933 – Enduring Witness* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Dissertation Information Service, 1988), 266; quoted in Lowell C. Green, *Lutherans Against Hitler* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 164.

⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, letter to Karl Barth, Oct. 24, 1933, in *London, 1933-1935 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 13)*, English edition edited by Keith Clements, translated by Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 23.

theologically and politically clearer and more exact in some passages than the famous Barmen declaration of May 1934.⁷

The Barmen Declaration, like the Niemöller revision of the Bethel Confession, also avoided explicit mention of the specific problem of Nazi racism. This was not only a political issue, but it was an issue that should have compelled the church to give its divine witness, in terms of what is taught in the First Article of the Creed, in the Fifth Commandment, and in the Great Commission. And what does racist anti-Semitism in particular say to the mystery of the incarnation, wherein we confess that God, for our salvation, became a Jewish carpenter and rabbi? Bonhoeffer was one of the clearest voices in articulating a proper Biblical and Christian response to this Nazi and “German Christian” heresy. One would think, then, that this would have prevented Bonhoeffer from associating himself with Barmen – due to the deliberate absence of any mention of this issue in its text. But Bonhoeffer’s commitment to the “Confessing Church” movement as a whole was so strong, that he did ultimately remain associated with those who had subscribed the Barmen Declaration. Sasse, however, in the end could not follow this course. In his case this was chiefly because of the unionistic and Reformed character of Barmen. And so ended the active collaboration of Bonhoeffer and Sasse.

According to Wilch, their cooperation at Bethel had borne fruit in spite of the fact that “Bonhoeffer and Sasse were something of an odd couple.”⁸ This “oddness” between them did not manifest itself in obvious ways at Bethel. Their different approaches and emphases in that context were seen then to be complementary and mutually-enriching, and not to be a basis for quarreling or disputing. But as we know, the Bethel Confession failed to accomplish its intended purpose of providing a clear theological rallying point for all Lutherans in Germany – both those like Bonhoeffer and those like Sasse – against the Nazified “German Christian” movement. And so, when Bonhoeffer and Sasse then began to pursue their callings as churchmen separately, and not together under a common Bethel banner, their differences became more pronounced.

Bonhoeffer and Sasse drifted apart after their close collaboration at Bethel, even though the two kept themselves abreast of each other’s work. Bonhoeffer especially took note of Sasse’s 1937 book *Was heisst lutherisch?*,⁹ published while Bonhoeffer was serving in the emergency seminary in Finkenwalde. Eberhard Bethge observes:

Ever since meeting him in Berlin before the church struggle began, Bonhoeffer had read everything published by Sasse with particular attention; even when roused to sharp disagreement and dismayed criticism, he invariably found something that impressed him. For this reason he discussed the book with the ordinands and also during the informal study conferences. By then Bonhoeffer’s earlier delight at his discovery that Sasse’s resistance and the views he held sprang not from ecclesial conservatism, but from a new relationship to the Confession, had, of course, given way to profound disagreement over the assessment of the function and dignity of historical confessions. Sasse, for his part, had come to see Bonhoeffer as an “enthusiast” because the latter

⁷Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Vol. 1, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1987), 456

⁸Wilch, 80.

⁹An English edition of this work appeared in the United States in 1938, under the title *Here We Stand*.

credited the living event of communal, actual confessing with so much power that antitheses dividing churches dwindled to antitheses dividing schools. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, saw Sasse as the confessional formalist who, when there was “dissent on only one score,” regarded the antithesis as “wholly torn asunder” and who for this reason “went beyond Luther.”¹⁰

As Bonhoeffer criticized Sasse for his “over-the-top” Confessionalism, Sasse was not the only one to notice Bonhoeffer’s departures from Lutheran Confessional norms in more than a few superficial ways:

In fact many theologians thought it strange at the time that Bonhoeffer should question individual points of Lutheranism that were held to be inviolable, yet at the same time should choose to base his Christology, for example, on Luther. He asked whether “we Lutherans” were not preoccupied with too narrow a concept of “Law” and, as a corollary, of “Gospel,” and again whether in Scripture “Law” was not attested in at least two ways although it was customarily restricted to one. He further asked whether it was sufficient to regard the whole of Biblical testimony as being comprised in the forgiveness of sins.¹¹

If Bonhoeffer and Sasse had continued to think and teach and work together within a Lutheran confessing movement driven and shaped by the Bethel Confession, they may very well have continued to have a pronounced influence on each other, in a framework of fraternal engagement and mutual respect. In a reminiscence expressed in his later life, Sasse even opined in regard to Bonhoeffer that “The longer he lived the more Lutheran he became.”¹² We are, of course, deprived of any parallel reflection on Sasse, on the part of Bonhoeffer in later life, because a Nazi hangman’s noose deprived Bonhoeffer of a later life. But we can still imagine that if a close relationship had been preserved between them, Bonhoeffer may not later have gone off on his own, in the direction of some of the idiosyncratic theological projects that he pursued (such as with the experimental theological positions that he put forth in his work on *Discipleship* – positions that have generally not held up over time, at least not among Lutherans). And Sasse may not have become as timid as he seems to have become after this:

Sasse attempted to maintain a low profile. He became more subtle in his opposition, once admitting to lecturing against the religion of Hitler, but his topic was “The Religion

¹⁰Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, translated under the editorship of Edwin Robertson (London: Collins, 1970), 475-76. The quotations are from Bonhoeffer’s notes on Sasse’s work. Bonhoeffer’s opinion that Sasse’s confessional meticulousness “went beyond Luther” is difficult to square with Martin Luther’s own words on this subject as found for example in his “Lectures on Galatians” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 27 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964], 37-39).

¹¹Bethge, 476. One wonders where Bonhoeffer got the notion that a consistent Lutheran Confessionalism would require a person to think that “the whole of Biblical testimony” is “comprised in the forgiveness of sins.” The Small Catechism testifies with the greatest possible degree of Lutheran symbolical authority that “where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” One senses an exaggeration for effect here.

¹²Hermann Sasse, as recalled by Robert Kolb, who heard this as a student at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis when Sasse was a guest lecturer there in 1964; quoted in Charles E. Ford, “Luther and Bonhoeffer Misunderstood” (2006), 3.

of Robespierre.”¹³

When, after the Barmen fiasco, Sasse’s sense of his duty as a churchman became more defensive and less offensive, and as he accordingly concentrated his efforts as a professor at Erlangen in the direction of keeping the Lutheran churches of Germany Lutheran, this resulted in a certain “muting” of his opposition to Nazi falsehood in general, and to the racist component of Naziism in particular. This racism eventually caused real suffering and death for Jews and other non-Aryans in Europe on a massive scale. On this issue at least, Bonhoeffer, in effect, had been Sasse’s conscience. Under Bonhoeffer’s influence he has subscribed the section in the Bethel Confession that addressed this directly, and if Bethel in its original form had remained in play on the ecclesiastical scene in Germany, Sasse would, we hope, have remained steadfast in his public adherence to what Bethel had originally said about this racism. But after Bethel, and especially after Barmen, Bonhoeffer was no longer exercising an active influence on him. And so Sasse slipped away from a resolute articulation of a conviction that he apparently had not held to very tightly on his own. One who otherwise is a great admirer of Sasse has written as follows in regard to this shortcoming:

Sasse was adamant in his defense of the Old Testament as true Word of God for Christians. However, it appears that Sasse was ambivalent toward the Nazi persecution of Jews, even of Jewish-Christians. After agreeing to remarkable statements by Bonhoeffer and Vischer against such persecution, he was willing to let many of them be eliminated from the Bethel Confession when they were opposed by other theologians. He was one of few theologians in 1933 who realized that the time to speak to the Nazis in compromising ways, hoping to win them over to the church, was already past. Instead, he knew that they must be confronted directly and forcefully wherever they endanger the Gospel and the church’s doctrine. Why, then, was he so indecisive on the Jewish question? Why did he fail to see that, when racism rears its ugly head against the people of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh, it blasphemes the incarnation and the person of Christ Himself? On this major point, Sasse failed to recognize an essential *causae confessionis*.¹⁴

Sasse was by no means the only theologian who remained relatively silent on this. Most did, in fact. But we might have expected better from Bonhoeffer’s Bethel colleague.

The Bethel project may, however, have been doomed from the start, because of the inherited Prussian Union “albatross” that hung around the necks of the organizers of this project. All of them, except for Sasse, were “Lutherans” within the Prussian Union, and not members of distinctively Lutheran churches. And even Sasse had been a member of the Union Church until very recently, transferring to the Bavarian territorial Lutheran church only upon his move to Erlangen in the not-so-distant past.

The theory behind the Prussian Union was not that it was a homogenized “merger,” but that it was an administrative structure that would contain within it two confessional ecclesial identities: Lutheran and Reformed. One troubling provision of the Union that consistent

¹³Wilch, 92. Wilch does also note here that “Sasse could have accepted a call to Wartburg Seminary (Dubuque, Iowa) in about 1936 through the auspices of J. Michael Reu, but he felt that such a move then would appear as a desertion from the Church Struggle.”

¹⁴Wilch, 94-95.

Lutherans could not tolerate, however, was that the Reformed and Lutheran elements within the Union would mutually recognize and practice altar and pulpit fellowship with each other. And in time this seemingly small “leaven” did permeate the Union in such a way that most (but not all) of the “Lutherans” within it eventually stopped “feeling” Lutheran, and thinking and believing in noticeably Lutheran ways.

At first Lutheranism was expected to remain at least as a quantifiable school of thought within the Union. But what actually happened over time was that the Lutheran element of the Union was mostly absorbed into the nondescript “Evangelical” theology that came to dominate the Union – an Evangelical theology that was neither Lutheran nor Reformed, and that was, we might say, significantly “less than the sum total of its parts.” And even though Lutherans constituted a clear majority going into the Union, they were not treated fairly (in comparison to the Reformed minority) as far as respect for their enduring ecclesial tradition was concerned. This was no doubt due largely to the fact that the ruling House of Hohenzollern was aggressively Reformed, and that the Union was in many ways simply a superficially veiled attempt on the Prussian kings’ part to turn the Lutheran churches of their territories into Reformed churches, in fact if not in name. Sasse himself observed in 1936:

It has been said correctly that in most of the regions of the Prussian State, the Union meant that hitherto Lutheran congregations were declared united. For the most part the Reformed congregations continued to exist. The allowance of dispersed Reformed Christians as guests at the Lutheran Supper had already been introduced by church law in the eighteenth century. The only consequence of the Union was that the Lutheran Church was gradually robbed of its Lutheranism. Today most of the congregations within the Old Prussian Union are *de jure* Lutheran, but they do not know it; they have forgotten their confession. Thus the boundaries between United and not United churches are fluid, and there is without doubt in many areas of Prussia a more Lutheran consciousness among pastors and congregations than in many a Lutheran Church in which the Union is only known by hearsay.¹⁵

Sasse’s observation that there were still some pockets of Lutheran consciousness within the Union gave him a measure of hope that there might still be a chance to dismantle the Prussian Union – especially now that its bureaucratic apparatus had been totally taken over by the “German Christians.” Sasse hoped that both Lutherans and Reformed might become so disgusted by how easily the administration of the theologically vacuous Union could be taken over by rank unbelievers, that they would find a way to withdraw from it, and to reestablish separate Lutheran and Reformed organizational identities. And the Bethel Confession might very well have served as a catalyst for that kind of ecclesiastical awakening among the Lutheran element. History gave Sasse a slight feeling of optimism that it could happen:

There is at least one church in Germany which returned to Lutheranism from the Union. This is the Bavarian Territorial Church, which for a generation, from 1818 to 1848, was actually part of the Union, insofar as also the Reformed congregations in Bavaria west of the Rhine and the United churches of the Palatinate were under the jurisdiction of the Munich *Oberkonsistorium*. Here a church government had succeeded in releasing entire regions of the church from its oversight in order to become a church government

¹⁵Hermann Sasse, “Union and Confession,” translated by Matthew C. Harrison, in *The Lonely Way*, Vol. I (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 294-95.

genuinely bound to its confession.¹⁶

Indeed,

Many pastors and laypeople devoutly willed the dismantling of the Union churches and the restoration of the Lutheran and Reformed denominations. Even Barth saw a problem here. [Guy Christopher] Carter writes: “Even Barth had stated, in his general observations, that the old problem of Lutherans and Reformed was going to have to be dealt with at some point.” Nevertheless, Barth approved the unionism expressed in the later Barmen Declaration, and his personal magnetism tended to draw men such as Martin Niemöller and Hans Asmussen away from their Lutheran roots and into positions that equivocated concerning the Lutheran and Reformed confessions.¹⁷

A break-up of the Prussian Union was not to be. Sasse overestimated the degree of the lingering Lutheran “feeling” among the “Lutherans” in the Union. Apparently he overestimated the depth and staying power of the “Lutheran” feeling within Bonhoeffer too. But Sasse was also dissatisfied with the theological condition of the supposedly uncompromised Lutherans within many of the officially “Lutheran” churches of Germany. Perhaps with some measure of sympathy for the criticisms that Bonhoeffer often leveled at the conventional Lutheran theologians in his lifetime, Sasse wrote that

It was not Lutheranism as such, but a sick Lutheranism that gave Nazism an open door into the Church. It had fallen asleep. It had lost the power of distinguishing between spirits. Christians of all persuasions were carried away, including Lutherans of all complexions. ... People picked out of Luther’s teachings those statements about governmental authority which they wanted to hear, but what Luther said about the sins of governmental authority and the boundaries of obedience was not mentioned. So they supplemented Luther with Robespierre ... On the other hand, it was the churches of Prussia, having long before ceased to be Lutheran, who succumbed in large measure to the German-Christian movement, whereas it was the very Lutheranism in the churches of Bavaria, Württemberg and Hannover [Lower Saxony] which prevented a similar collapse from occurring there.¹⁸

The pro-Nazi unionism of the “German Christians” was abhorrent to Sasse and Bonhoeffer. But while Bonhoeffer made his peace with the anti-Nazi unionism that was inherent in the circle that supported the Barmen Declaration, Sasse definitely did not. Sasse sought to evaluate the state of affairs in 1930s-era Germany from the “long view” of history. He simply did not accept the notion that the crisis brought about by the Nazification of the German Evangelical Church in the twentieth century was a threat superlatively greater than any other that had been faced by German Protestantism since the Reformation era, so that the confessional barriers between Lutheran and Reformed must now finally be broken down. With disdain Sasse recounts and rebuffs these claims:

Unity against a common foe is necessary. Yesterday this foe was the Turk; tomorrow it

¹⁶Sasse, “Union and Confession,” 295.

¹⁷Green, 167. The quotation is from Carter, 192.

¹⁸Hermann Sasse, letter to Herman A. Preus, quoted in Wilch, 90-91.

may be Russian atheism or some other power threatening the church. Now nationalism is the great enemy, now idealistic philosophy or some other terrible heresy that has suddenly arisen in the church. But no matter what or who the enemy may be, the slogan is always the same: it is necessary to unite in a solid front, in the fellowship of the single church to which we really belong, in order to oppose this foe – yes, this particular foe who has never appeared before. This is the Calvinistic idea of union with which the Lutheran Church has been wrestling since the days of the Reformation.¹⁹

The rise of the “German Christian” movement – under the leadership of Ludwig Müller and Joachim Hossenfelder – was not a good or indifferent thing in the estimation of any genuine Christian in Germany. But it was also not a reason for Lutherans to stop being Lutherans, or for Calvinists to stop being Calvinists, in their opposition to this movement. Sasse states:

To say that the question of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar should no longer be schismatic but only a difference between theological schools, just because a Herr Hossenfelder had appeared on the scene in Berlin, is as impossible for us as it would be for our fellow Lutherans in America if a new prophet were to appear in San Francisco. ...for the time being there is nothing else but for us to stand side by side as good Lutheran and good Reformed churchmen, and to confess the faith of the fathers in common where we can and divided where we must.²⁰

If the original plan at Bethel had been allowed to move forward, the Bethel Confession would likely not have drawn very much support from the Reformed, or from Reformed-leaning unionists. The Reformed would need to have composed their own parallel statement. But there could have been a high level of cooperation and coordination between Lutherans and Reformed, and Sasse would have supported such cooperation. What he could not support, however, and what he did not support, was an anti-Nazi effort which said – in effect if not in so many words – that Lutherans are not to oppose the Nazi ideology as Lutherans, but only as unionists; and that they may not confess their Lutheranism in its totality against the “German Christians,” but only so much of their Lutheranism as the Reformed can also confess.

If the Bethel Confession had survived as a Lutheran witness of the truth of God against the heresies of the day, the Lutheran territorial churches, and the Lutheran-leaning element within the Union Church, could therewith have joined forces in, and strengthened themselves for, a large-scale united and comprehensive confession of Christ to their nation and to the world. If that had happened, then Lutheranism in Germany, with ripple effects beyond Germany, would have been instructed and bolstered in truths such as these:

We reject the false doctrine that tears apart the unity of the Holy Scriptures, rejecting the Old Testament or even replacing it with non-Christian documents from the ancient pagan history of another people. For the unity of the Holy Scriptures in their entirety and their unity alone is Christ.²¹

¹⁹Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, translated by Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1939), 188.

²⁰Hermann Sasse, quoted in Ronald R. Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse and the Path of Confessional Lutheranism in the Mid-20th Century,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (December 1995), 11-12.

²¹“The Bethel Confession,” in *Berlin 1932-1933 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12)*, 379.

We reject the false doctrine that in a particular “hour of history” God is speaking to us directly and is revealed in direct action in the created world, for it is enthusiasm to think that one understands the will of God without the express words of the Holy Scriptures, to which God is bound. ... We reject the false doctrine that the voice of the people could be the voice of God... It is the voice of the people that cries both “Hosanna!” and “Crucify him!”²²

...the Bible and confessions understand the human race as one united race in its origin and its final destination (Adam – Christ, Acts 17:26). ... In the course of history this unity has unfolded as numerous tribes and peoples. But the modern concept of race is not found in either the Bible or the confessional writings. ... To speak of the Creator God, who made the entire human race, is to speak of the humanity that exists over and above the distinct peoples.²³

We reject the false doctrine that would see sins only as moral or biological errors or imperfections or ignorance, which human beings could correct by doing better the next time. Our sins brought Christ to the cross, and only through the death of Christ are sins forgiven.²⁴

The church teaches that Jesus Christ is Son of God and Son of David, true God and true human being, the Sinless One in the sinful flesh, and the sole salvation of humankind...

We reject that false doctrine that Jesus appeared as a “flare of Nordic light” in the midst of a world tormented by signs of decay. Christ is the reflection of God’s glory..., and the Son of David who was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

We reject the false doctrine that says we confess Jesus as our Lord because of his heroic devotion. He is our Lord only because he is sent by our Father, the Son and Savior crucified and resurrected for us. ...

We reject the false doctrine that would make the crucifixion of Christ the fault of the Jewish people alone, as though other peoples and races had not crucified him. All races and peoples, even the mightiest, share in the guilt for his death and become guilty of it every day anew, when they commit outrage against the Spirit of grace.²⁵

Worldly authority and the church are both from God. They are separated by boundaries that cannot be transgressed... The church can never be absorbed by worldly authority, that is, it can never be “built into” the structure of a state. The content of its proclamation always places it over against all worldly authority.²⁶

The church teaches that God elected Israel, from among all the earth’s peoples, to be the people of God. ... Jesus...was rejected by the High Council and the Jewish people... They wanted a national Messiah who would liberate them politically and make them

²²“The Bethel Confession,” 386.

²³“The Bethel Confession,” 388-89.

²⁴“The Bethel Confession,” 395.

²⁵“The Bethel Confession,” 396-98.

²⁶“The Bethel Confession,” 413-14.

masters of the world. ... The place of the Old Testament people of the Covenant has not been taken by another nation, but rather by the Christian church, called out of, and within, all nations.

God glorifies his overflowing faithfulness in remaining true to Israel according to the flesh, from which Christ was born in the flesh... God...has preserved, according to the flesh, a sacred remnant of Israel, which neither becomes absorbed into any other nation..., nor becomes itself a nation among others..., nor can be annihilated by measures such as those used by Pharaoh. ... The church has received from its Lord the mission to call the Jews to conversion and to baptize those who believe in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins. ... A mission to the Jews that refuses altogether to carry out baptisms of Jews because of cultural or political considerations is refusing to obey its Lord. ...

The fellowship of those belonging to the church is not determined by blood, therefore not by race, but by the Holy Spirit and baptism. We reject any attempt to compare or confuse the mission of any other nation with that of Israel, which is part of salvation history. It can never in any case be the mission of any nation to take revenge on the Jews for the murder committed at Golgotha. ...

We object to the attempt to make the German Protestant church into a Reich church for Christians of the Aryan race... ...faith in Christ must not be distorted in the direction of a national religion or a Christianity according to race. The Christians who are of Gentile descent must be prepared to expose themselves to persecution before they are ready to betray in even a single case, voluntarily or under compulsion, the church's fellowship with Jewish Christians that is instituted in Word and sacrament.²⁷

*This essay was originally written in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the course "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in the Master of Sacred Theology program of the Institute of Lutheran Theology. In a revised form it was published in **Logia XXI:4** (Reformation 2012), 13-20.*

²⁷"The Bethel Confession," 416-21.