



**Issues, Etc.**<sup>TM</sup>

*Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio*

## TRANSCRIPT

*Rev. Todd Wilken, Host*

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### "Reformation Confessors: Hermann Sasse"

**Guest:**

**Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison**

**President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod**

**Editor & Translator of *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Volume I* by Hermann Sasse**

**Friday, October 25, 2013**

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**WILKEN:** When we were putting together the lineup for *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week and we knew that we were going to be talking about the prominent Lutheran confessors from the time of the Reformation, we knew who we'd begin with: Martin Luther, obviously. And we knew who we would end with, too, because in my estimation, there is no greater influence exercised in the true stream of the Reformation, confessional Lutheranism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, than that which was exercised by Hermann Sasse. And you say, "I haven't heard of him" or "I've only barely

heard of him." You've heard of people like Bonhoeffer, but not Sasse. Well, after this hour I hope you know Sasse well, and I hope you are encouraged to delve into his theology and his prescient ideas for confessional Lutheranism today.

Joining us today to talk about the 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran confessor Hermann Sasse: Pastor Matt Harrison, President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He's editor and translator of the new book *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Volume I* by Hermann Sasse.

Matt, welcome back to *Issues, Etc.*

**HARRISON:** Great to be here. Always a pleasure, Todd.

**WILKEN:** In the circles of confessional Lutheranism, when most people think about 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran theologians, they think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They know that name, but not the name of Hermann Sasse. Why do you think that is?

**HARRISON:** Well, it's quite simple, I think. Bonhoeffer was martyred. Bonhoeffer was killed in the Nazi period, in Tegel Prison just before the victory of the Allies. This, on top of his work, and his connection in America – he traveled to the United States and studied in the U.S., of course. By the way, he was in touch with Hermann Sasse and read Sasse's book about Sasse's earlier stay in the United States. And Bonhoeffer was sort of a natural connection. He could be read in a Unionistic way, and in fact, Bonhoeffer was sympathetic to the union of Lutherans and Reformed; he vicared in a Union congregation. So I think Bonhoeffer was kind of the natural person to grab hold of. He was a martyr, he was involved in the intrigue and plot against Hitler, and he was easy for 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal Protestantism to grab a hold of.

**WILKEN:** So let's talk a little bit about the man himself by way of biography. How would you tell his life story – Hermann Sasse's?

**HARRISON:** It's an amazing story, hard to even think about. He was a small man. David Scaer said one time when he picked him up from the airport to bring him to Springfield. Scaer had some kind of compact car and Sasse's feet barely even touched the floor. So the man was but 5-foot, 3 or 4 inches tall, I think. A tiny man. He's often an aggravating man for people throughout, especially liberal and unionizing Lutherans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So they often

refer to him as "that aggravating little man." But he was born in Germany in 1895. He said, "I grew up in the time which was so idyllic; it was the end of the great idyllic period before World War I." He said if you hadn't grown up in that period, you had no idea how wonderful life could be in Germany. He went to school at the time of the great liberal optimism, and studied under Adolph Deissmann, who they called a philologist, that is, one who studies ancient languages. And Adolph Deissmann wrote his famous *Light from the Near East* about the context of the New Testament. Sasse, of course, through Deissmann, ends up being involved in Kittel's *Word Book of the New Testament*, the great multi-volume set. They wrote several entries for Kittel. He studies with Otto von Harnack, the greatest theologian of the period of liberal Protestantism in Germany, at Berlin University, the greatest university. He studies with Holl, Karl Holl, who's sort of the one who reinvigorates, around the turn of the Reformation anniversary, the study of Martin Luther. He's the sort of father of Luther studies. And yet Sasse comes to realize in the years after that Holl comes to believe that basically, Calvin is the greatest student of Luther.

So Sasse has this pinnacle education. Adolph Deissmann is very significant. He is Sasse's doctor-father, and Deissmann was very involved in the ecumenical movement, the faith and order movement, and he got Sasse involved in the faith and order movement already in the '20s. And Sasse served as a parish pastor in Boraninberg, outside of Berlin. In those years, he was a social pastor, I believe, at St. Matthew in Berlin. So he had parish experience. Then he had an opportunity for scholarship to study in America in 1925-26, and he ended up coming to Hartford Seminary. That is a UCC [United Church of Christ] Seminary. So people think, "Well, why in the world would this German scholar come study at the UCC seminary?" Well, Sasse is a

member of the church of the old Prussian Union. This is the church, the famous church that was united in 1817 by the king – Lutherans and Reformed – the Reformed king, of course, King of Prussia, Frederick William III. And the daughter church of the Prussian Union is the UCC.

**WILKEN:** So it's natural for him?

**HARRISON:** It's very natural. It was completely natural to come to Hartford Seminary. Today, if you look at what's going on at Hartford Seminary, it's just complete – it's studying paganism, basically.

So Sasse comes to America, but while he's in America, he reads Loehe's *Three Books on the Church*, he reads Luther, he starts to pay attention to the Confessions, and he even writes. It's in America; he writes it in his book on the Reformation and what Lutheranism means, *Here We Stand*, translated by Tappert in 1938. He says, "It was in America that I began to understand what confessional Lutheranism was."

**WILKEN:** Really?

**HARRISON:** Yeah. And he becomes familiar – he writes a piece called *Americanisches Kirchentum*, which Bonhoeffer read. It's in the earlier Sasse volumes, *The Lonely Way, Volume I*. And he does an analysis of American Lutheranism, which is really a social Gospel movement. And he comes to the conclusion there that there's really only one church that can seriously put the question to American Christianity, which is either deeply concerned about pragmatism and not the Gospel, sort of a law-for-Gospel, this social Gospel thing; or the Roman Catholic Church, but he says because of Rome's positions on dogma, which have nothing to do with what the Scriptures state, there's only one church that can put the question of truth to American Christianity, and that's the confessional Lutheran Church.

And that's basically what he does for the rest of his life. He puts the questions of truth, of the fundamental positions of the church, of the Small Catechism, the confession of the Lutheran Church. He's a troubling man in many respects. Although I must say, Ron Feuerhahn wrote a dissertation on Sasse, which is a great read. It's *Hermann Sasse as an Ecumenical Churchman*. And Ron demonstrates that before World War II, Sasse is *the* most active continental theologian – that is, of theologians all over Europe – in the ecumenical movement.

**WILKEN:** Really?

**HARRISON:** Yeah. In fact, he's the editor and writer of the volume for the 1927 World Conference for Faith and Order. It's an enormous volume; I've got it in my hand here. It's 600 pages long. Sasse was on the Continuation Committee for the World Conference on Faith and Order; that means the committee that continues between meetings. And he wrote in this volume the first and most significant history of the ecumenical movement, universally recognized by those who study the ecumenical movement. So Sasse is a bona fide ecumenical theologian prior to World War II, and it was during World War II that the Nazis then forbade him to travel outside of Germany.

**WILKEN:** Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest, President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. He's wrapping up *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week with us on this Friday afternoon, October the 25<sup>th</sup>. We're talking about 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran confessor Hermann Sasse.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest. He's President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. We're talking about 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran confessor Hermann Sasse

on this Friday afternoon, October the 25<sup>th</sup>, ending *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week.

Now, before the break you brought us up to the Nazi era in Western Europe. What changes for Sasse with the Second World War?

**HARRISON:** Well, there were several things that went on. Just physically, World War II was a terrible thing for him to go through. He was teaching at Erlangen from 1933 through World War II, and he almost did not get appointed to Erlangen because of his public criticism of the Nazi party. Sasse also came out with the first and most significant public rejection of the Nazi party platform in 1932. Sasse was made the editor of the church yearbook for German Protestant churches, and subsequently, of course, his writing in that was banned by the Nazis about 2-3 years later. So Sasse is hated by the Nazis. Unlike many theologians, like Werner Elert, Paul Althaus, and others of his colleagues at Erlangen, Sasse saw National Socialism for what it was from the moment it began. So he almost does not receive his appointment [at Erlangen] because of the Nazis. He had to go before the regional *Gauleiter* of the Nazis in order to get his approval. Miraculously, he is appointed professor. During the Nazi period, Werner Elert had to continually step in and cover for Sasse. Elert very adeptly – as Lowell Green has shown in his book, *Lutherans Against Hitler*, which is a fabulous read – that Elert used his earlier apparent sympathy for Nazism in order to cover for people later, when he was opposed to Nazism. And he covered for Sasse a lot. And Sasse appreciates Elert, but he's always jabbing Elert. Sasse is part of the young Reformation movement. He's deeply involved with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They're both students at Berlin University. Bonhoeffer's a little younger. They're both involved in the young Reformation movement. Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, who was elected the Reichs-bishop and

then pushed out, already, I think, in '32 or '33, by the Nazis and replaced by Heinrich Mueller, Hitler's old chaplain from World War I – who, by the way, shot himself in the head in the bunker just like Hitler did. Friedrich von Bodelschwingh invites Sasse and Bonhoeffer to Bethel, where the great institution was that Bodelschwingh was involved with for the developmentally disabled. And they produce the Bethel Confession, which becomes a predecessor to the Barmen Declaration. So Sasse's deeply involved with Bonhoeffer – he knows him pretty well.

Sasse is constantly harassed by the Nazis. He makes it through the war. He's physically emaciated. Behnken, former president of the Missouri Synod, talks in his memoir about meeting Sasse and seeing how emaciated he was. Sasse tells a story in a letter to Leif Auland in the early '70s, when things were not going well in the Seminary faculty, where Auland served in Scandinavia. Sasse told the story about his mental breakdown in the Nuremberg train station. He said he just fell apart. He had been made rector, head of Erlangen University – the whole university – because he was clean of Nazism. He also wrote an expose on the professors, particularly the theological professors and their connections with Nazism, being told that this would remain secret and believing that this "coming clean" would help them retain their positions. Well, this came out publicly and they really attacked him. He has a complete mental breakdown. He said, "I woke up three weeks later in a mental hospital and the doctor said I would never work again." And he chuckled a bit and said, "But they exaggerated their diagnosis."

**WILKEN:** How does he escape Bonhoeffer's fate? How does he escape death, the execution that the Nazis were more than willing to mete out against theologians like him?

**HARRISON:** Yeah, well, I think, as I said, Elert covers for him in part. Sasse says, “I would lecture on Hitler, but I would call it ‘Lectures on Robespierre’.” I think it was a miraculous thing that he avoids that kind of attack. He’s certainly well known by the top echelons of Nazism. So that’s a really interesting question; I don’t know the full answer.

**WILKEN:** So maybe [it’s an] accident of history, because it certainly sounds like he would have been a candidate for the Nazis’ attention, all the way to an execution.

**HARRISON:** Yeah, clearly so. Here he is, as I said, the most active ecumenist in Germany and the whole continent, and he’s forbidden to travel because he’s actually – when he goes to visit the Bishop of Chichester, Dean Bell, in England, and the Anglicans, he actually tells them: in Bell’s memoir, he talks about how moving it was to have Sasse actually telling them in England what was really going on in Nazi Germany. And the Nazis got word of this. There was always intrigue; there were always people who were willing to compromise halfway with the Nazis and would inform [them]. Sasse was informed upon and he was forbidden to travel because he was telling the true story of what was going on.

**WILKEN:** You said “troubling man.” That’s the term that you used there. What do you mean by that, with reference to Hermann Sasse?

**HARRISON:** Well, Sasse’s main thrust was simply to be a confessional Lutheran. And he believed that you could not have a church, a confessional Lutheran church that was united with a common government, with a church that did not confess the Lutheran Confessions. And so you couldn’t have the situation where in the same church, you could have either Luther’s Catechism or the Heidelberg Catechism in one church. You have this, for instance,

today, in even the St. Mary’s in Wittenberg. Even though they use Luther’s Catechism, constitutionally in the church body, the catechism of Calvin has just as much right to exist. And this is to deny the fundamental truth of the Reformation. Luther stood for the truths of the real presence, for justification, the heart and soul of the faith, and to compromise that has meant, for the Lutheran Church, to end up compromising everything. You see in modern Lutheranism where it can no longer say “yes” and “no” to the clearest questions. The Church of Sweden and the ELCA approve homosexual marriage, etc. And the Lutheran World Federation is silent. Geneva is silent. It can say nothing – nothing! That is the end of Lutheranism, because Lutheranism speaks where the Bible speaks and is silent where the Bible is silent. What happens then is Lutheranism begins to speak everywhere the Bible doesn’t speak and nowhere the Bible actually does speak. So Sasse sees these opportunities lost. At the end of World War II there’s a chance, if the eleven bi-constitution territorial churches, the Church of Saxony, Hanover, etc., would stand up and say, “We want to have a Lutheran church and not a Union church which compromises doctrine.” And what happened was those who got the attention – Niemoller, who was certainly a hero during Nazism, on the other hand was a complete Unionist; Karl Barth, Sasse’s nemesis through all of this at Barmen – Barth believes the situation is so dire against Nazism that the confessional differences don’t matter anymore and we need to confess as one church. So he uses that opportunity to push the age-old reform assertion that the Lutherans just need to be helped to come out of Catholicism a little more, and these differences of real presence in the Sacrament, these are differences of schools within one church. So the old Melancthonian, Barthian, Calvinistic view of what Lutheranism should be comes to gain the upper hand, which is

existing now. And Sasse's opposed to that, as is the Missouri Synod.

**WILKEN:** So he goes from being a champion of ecumenism, rightly understood, to being an opponent of what ecumenism became.

**HARRISON:** Yeah, that's right. He's often called a confessional ecumenist, and he will recount what happened at Lausanne in Switzerland. By the way, it's a beautiful little place. I've traveled through there on a train. But he and others were pushing at Lausanne for a basic assertion that the Nicene Creed, for instance, is to represent fundamentally the essentials of the Christian faith.

**WILKEN:** It's very basic.

**HARRISON:** Yeah. And he says, "We almost had it, but we failed. Our witness was too weak." So Sasse was interested in ecumenism, which recognized confessional differences and did not give short shrift to dogma, to doctrine of the Scriptures. I think Sasse's confessional ecumenism is exactly what we're doing now in the Missouri Synod, as we dialogue and partner with other denominations – the North American Lutheran Church, the conservative Anglicans, even in growing talks with the Roman Catholics – we act where we can together. We don't have altar and pulpit fellowship. That's precluded unless there's full agreement in all the points of doctrine. But it doesn't mean we can't work together for good ends in various issues, like the fights against government intrusion on religious freedom and other kinds of issues.

**WILKEN:** Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest, President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. It's Friday of *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week. We're talking about 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran confessor Hermann Sasse.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** We're rounding off *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week on this Friday afternoon with Pastor Matt Harrison, talking about 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran confessor Hermann Sasse.

Matt, let's turn to his works. This could occupy hours of conversation because he wrote so prolifically. He wrote to his times, and yet his writings are still amazingly relevant for us today and for the future. How would you describe the body of his work? Where would you take us?

**HARRISON:** Well, if you want to know the corpus, Ron Feuerhahn produced a bibliography of Sasse: *Hermann Sasse: A Bibliography*. It's by Scarecrow Press. It was very expensive when it came out, but now you can pick it up for ten bucks on the Internet. Used books are a fabulous opportunity. There are probably 600 discreet entries in there on articles, books, etc. Sasse begins writing the sort of exegetical pieces, some of his earlier things. He writes hundreds of book reviews early on, probably the most significant things he writes. He writes a piece titled *Wie heißt Lutherisch*, "What Does It Mean to be Lutheran?" which is translated into English as "Here We Stand." This is basically his assertion that in the wake of various interpretations of the Reformation, there is an interpretation of the Reformation which really holds, and that is, it is an episode in church history where the Gospel comes to the fore. It's not nationalistic; there is a nationalistic interpretation of the Reformation. It's a great high point in German history where Luther is the great national hero. There's a cultural, historical interpretation of the Reformation where there's this cultural turning point – and there's truth in all of these. There's a heroic interpretation of the Reformation, where you've got this great German hero who saves the day against the awful Pope. Sasse lays out a theological, confessionally Lutheran definition of the Reformation. Early

on, he becomes very interested in Christian fellowship and writings on the Sacrament of the Altar, so in 1941 he publishes a book, *From Sacrament to Psalters*; I believe it's 1941 and it's a collection of essays by a number of people on why the Lutheran Church needs to maintain its positions on church fellowship. Sasse is a proponent of the Formula of Concord. A lot of squishy Lutheranism basically believes that the Formula of Concord went the wrong way, and you need to get rid of the Formula of Concord and just stick with the Augsburg Confession because it's not so prickly. We take the interpretation of the Augsburg Confession, which is given to us by the actual Lutherans, the second generation, who said basically over against Calvinism and its incursions into Lutheranism. The true interpretation of the Augsburg Confession is given in the Formula of Concord, and where the Formula of Concord is lost, Lutheranism is lost, clearly so. This is Sasse's view.

And so issues around the Lord's Supper consume him enormously. He has several individuals who write dissertations for him while he's a professor at Erlangen. There is a dissertation on Valentin Loescher's struggle against the union of Lutheran Reform already around 1700. There's a dissertation on J.G. Scheibel, who rings the bell just before and during the formation of the Prussian Union in 1817. The Prussian Union is a very significant issue for Sasse – he writes about it often. That's where the king forced Lutherans, thousands of Lutheran churches in Prussia, with two dozen Reformed. He forces them together and Lutheranism is lost in Prussia. This infection of Unionism spreads beyond and continues to spread to our day. There's a real significant turning point when after the Evangelical Church in Germany is formed – the *EKID* – in 1947-48, and the Lutheran World Federation meets for the first time in 1947, Sasse writes to them and causes quite a stir to the assembly. But the

assembly ignores him, basically – ignores the unionizing churches. The Lutheran World Federation immediately begins inviting Union churches in as members who have never clearly confessed the Lutheran Confessions. He says, "This is a moment lost." When the Evangelical Church in Germany is formed, there's church fellowship between Lutherans, Reformed churches, United churches, and he says, "Another crucial moment lost." Then the theological faculty at Erlangen hires a Mennonite who ends up joining the State church where he was teaching, and joins the Bavarian church, but he's got anti-Lutheran views on the Sacrament. Sasse protests that, protests this to his Bishop Meiser and finally says, "I must leave." He gives his public confession and goes into exile for the rest of his life in Australia. So this is a very crucial moment for his writings. He begins producing, along with the books, which he continued to write, he produces letters to Lutheran pastors, beginning in 1948-49. He writes about a half-dozen before he leaves Germany, and then he continues writing almost 70 of them total before he ceases writing them in the early '70s. And the volume that you mentioned earlier, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Volume 1*, is 1948-1951. We have a second volume that's in the hopper right now; it's coming very soon, and then a third volume.

**WILKEN:** How did he look at confessional Lutheranism in the United States? What did he see, in particular in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, that he would both criticize and commend?

**HARRISON:** Well, he would often say that Lutheranism in America is a very long train. At the front end is the LCA, in the middle is ELCA, and at the rear end of the train are the Missouri Synod and the WELS. But the train is all heading in the same direction. And I think before 1974 that was really true. That isn't true any longer. Sasse once said, "*Missouri unsere letzte Hoffnung ist*":

“Missouri is our last hope.” And he owned Dr. Walther’s very significant work, *Law and Gospel*. He was familiar with the controversy on election, which occurred in the 1880s in the Missouri Synod. He believed the Missouri Synod got it right and confessed the Formula of Concord properly. But he was very frustrated. Dr. Behnken wanted Sasse’s influence in the Missouri Synod and Sasse came to lecture and visit in 1948, but the faculty then at the St. Louis seminary, Sieck, the president, several other faculty members – and I’ve seen the faculty notes and letters – they very much did not want Sasse. They did not want Sasse to come. Sasse was a view of the past; Sasse was an isolationist, an unstable man. Just as Missouri thought its influence was really rising in Europe and there was hope – Graebner and others thought there was this great hope for a rebirth of Lutheranism after the war – Sasse was saying at the foot of the Wartburg in Eisenach, “the Lutheran Church was buried when the Evangelical Church in Germany was formed.” And just this time, Missouri [Synod] in St. Louis was coming out of its ghetto, and Sasse would say many times, “St. Louis comes out of its ghetto right into Unionism.” It was prescient. It was like he understood where the St. Louis faculty was going already. He saw it absolutely, just like he saw Nazism. He saw it happening in the late ‘40s. He came in ‘48 to the Seminary; he was snubbed. Sieck ignored him, chastised him for going to some Synodical conference meeting, which Behnken had asked him to go to. And he wrote famously in a couple of letters, “I see black for this church.” He saw it already then, and he was right. But that being said, he loved the Missouri Synod, and he loved our confession. Coming from the halls of Berlin University, he never identified completely with our position on Scripture, though he came a long, long way in that regard. But I think he really spent his years in exile, more than anything, trying to continue to encourage the “lonely Lutherans” in

Germany, and he picked up Rudolph Rachall’s autobiography with the title *Einsame Weg*, “The Lonely Way.” So he talked about himself often as a “lonely Lutheran,” and he was rallying the lonely Lutherans in Germany and around the world, and especially he was trying to rally confessional Lutheranism in the Missouri Synod. He was just aghast when the St. Louis Seminary could say nothing about the union between Lutheran and Reformed. There were things said, from time to time – that’s an overstatement – but Sasse tends to overstate things a lot. Everything for him was a “tragedy.” But Sasse had a prescient ability to understand what was going on, and he tried to wake up the Missouri Synod. The great irony is on these confessional issues, that Sasse has more, I think, more influence in the Missouri Synod today than ever before.

**WILKEN:** Well, let’s take a break, and when we come back, we’ll talk more about Hermann Sasse, a Lutheran confessor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest. He’s President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, editor and translator of the new book, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Volume I*, by Hermann Sasse.

Here’s something that Dr. Ron Feuerhahn mentioned recently in this conversation, what he had to say about *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*. He says, “In this remarkable collection of letters, we meet an historian with the breadth of learning, theologian of thorough Biblical knowledge, a churchman of wisdom, and a pastor of caring words.”

We’ll be right back.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back. It’s the last day of *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week. We are remembering 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran



confessor Hermann Sasse. I'm Todd Wilken; this is *Issues, Etc.* And President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Pastor Matt Harrison, is our guest.

Now, let's respond to some of our listeners' questions about Hermann Sasse. Here's a Facebook post from Kate in Rockford, IL. Kate says, "I have suggested to non-Lutheran friends interested in Bonhoeffer to read Sasse, since they were contemporaries and, I believe, colleagues for a short time. Which of Sasse's books would you suggest I recommend first, especially to the non-Lutheran?"

**HARRISON:** *The Lonely Way, Volume I.* In there, there are quite a few essays that have to do with the Nazi situation, and there are a number of them that are very stirring. I would suggest that that would probably be the best place to start: *The Lonely Way, Volume I.* If they're very interested in the issue of the Sacrament of the Altar, the greatest book ever written on that is *This is My Body*, 1959. It remains the best; there's nothing else like it. There's nothing else that comes close, in my view. *This is My Body.*

**WILKEN:** What is so extraordinary about that book, with about a minute here?

**HARRISON:** He lays out the history of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, its context in the Middle Ages, where it was understood and how it was understood at the time of the Reformation, why Luther made the points he made, its connection to Christology, the basic importance of the Words of Institution as the primary focal point for the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, and the Lord's Supper's ramifications for the life of the church.

**WILKEN:** Another question. This comes from Michael in Natoma, Kansas. "Why does Sasse get so much more respect today than he did when he was alive, particularly in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod?"

**HARRISON:** Sasse was respected while he was alive. He was certainly deeply respected by Robert Preus and also Jack Preus, who were friends of Sasse's. Sasse sent them a lot of mail, and they usually sent brief notes in reply. He had friends across the Missouri spectrum, but he clearly sided with the anti-Seminex crowd in the wake of Seminex. Maybe one thing is, I think, the Missouri Synod decided in the '70s to remain a confessionally Lutheran church, and a very simple thing is it just takes time for a mass of writings to be translated into English. I think one reason we suffered the dissensus and devolution, theologically, that we suffered before Seminex was that within a generation, we were basically robbed of all of Luther's writings and the most significant writings – all devotional literature, everything – in a generation that lost German. So it's just taken time. We got Luther's works up through the '70s, and now another extension of Luther's works is on the way, in the hopper. It just takes time to translate stuff into English.

**WILKEN:** Is that why you – and you mentioned earlier Ron Feuerhahn and several others – have devoted so much of your life, your time to bringing Sasse and his writings to life?

**HARRISON:** Well, I could answer for Ron, but it would be much better to ask Ron himself, but I'll tell you why I did this and continue to do it. I was put on to Hermann Sasse by Kurt Marquardt, first, and Marquardt knew Sasse. He served on the Commission on Theology in the Australian Church with Sasse. It's funny to read the early letters where Sasse and Marquardt were at odds with each other, but they became good friends over time. And I began to collect Sasse's papers, especially when I became a parish pastor. I think the overwhelming impulse is to respond to difficult situations very tersely and absolutely. What Sasse helped me do is to

see there is a long, long history of the Church, and Sasse gave me the confidence as a Lutheran, solidly Lutheran, to work with the rough edges and to know where I'm going, and to maintain the fundamental conviction, but necessarily to know the Church has a long history which we must always consider. And terse actions can make the situation actually worse in the long run instead of better. For me it was almost a pastoral-theological decision. I just found Sasse so rich and so helpful in helping me broaden my perspective, ecumenically and otherwise, and yet have a fundamental Lutheran Formula of Concord compass. That was huge for me.

**WILKEN:** Do you have – this is probably the most difficult question – do you have a favorite quote from Hermann Sasse?

**HARRISON:** There are many of them racking around in my brain all the time. I think one of them is his preface to union and confession, which is just fantastic, where he talks about the lie, “The lie is the death of men; it is temporal and eternal death” – that’s the first line, and I would recommend it. That’s in Volume I of *The Lonely Way*. But really, a favorite one is this Sasse 1932 yearbook shot at Nazism, and it’s just amazing. “One can perhaps forgive national socialism all its theological sins. But this Article 24” – that’s the Arian paragraph rejecting Jews, of the Nazi party platform – “this Article 24 excludes any possibility of a dialogue with the church, whether Protestant or Catholic. Rosenberg’s myth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for all its blasphemies and extravagant nonsense about the history of religions and of the world is a harmless and venial lapse compared with this article. The same can be said of the whole theology of the swastika and the Messianic cult of the Führer. Evangelical theology can enter the dialogue with the Nationalist Socialists on all the points of the party program, even about the Jewish question and its understanding of race. It may, perhaps, be able to take

seriously the whole of the rest of the program. About this article, however, no discussion at all is possible: for the Protestant Church would have to begin such a discussion with a frank admission that its doctrine constitutes a deliberate, permanent insult to ‘the German race’s sense of decency and morality.’” Sasse quotes the platform there, which says “all religion is fine, as long as it doesn’t insult the German sense of decency and morality.” [Sasse:] “And hence, she [the Church] can have no expectation of tolerance in the Third Reich. According to the Protestant doctrine of original sin, ‘the newborn infant of the noblest Germanic descent endowed in body and mind with the optimal racial characteristics’ is as much subject to eternal damnation as the genetically gravely compromised, half-cast from two decadent races, and we must go on to confess that the doctrine of justification of the sinner, *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide*, is the end of Germanic morality just as it is the end of all human morality. We are not much interested in whether the party gives its support to Christianity, but we would like to know whether the Church is to be permitted to preach the Gospel in the Third Reich without letter hindrance, whether, that is, we will be able to continue undisturbed in our insults to the Germanic moral sense, as with God’s help we intend to do.”

**WILKEN:** He’s actually kind of prescient there, too, isn’t he? I mean, that says something to us today in America.

**HARRISON:** Oh my goodness, yes.

**WILKEN:** With only about thirty seconds here, Matt, what would Hermann Sasse say today to confessional Lutherans like ourselves?

**HARRISON:** Well, he was very aware of the culture of secularization, which was happening already in the mid-part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which happened in Germany already. He would say, “Stick to the

Lutheran Confessions. Stick to the Holy Scriptures. Stick to the doctrine of the office of the ministry. Stick to the true teaching on the priesthood of believers. Be a confessional Lutheran in the context that you're in." He would advocate dialogue with other churches, particularly confessionally-minded churches, and he prophesied already, I think, already in the '50s. He said, "The confessional Lutheran Church may be a smaller body moving into the future, but it may be a smaller body which confesses the faith and bears it into the future for a different time." So it's a challenging day; the culture is upon us intensely. Sasse felt that with Nazism like we've never felt it. He always would say, "Jesus prays for His

church." And he'd quote John 17, and then he would quote the Apology: "*Ne, desperemus.*" – "Let's not despair. Jesus prays for His church, and confess."

**WILKEN:** Pastor Matt Harrison is president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He's editor and translator of the book *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Volume I* by Hermann Sasse. Matt, thank you so much for being our guest.

**HARRISON:** Thank you.

**WILKEN:** I'm Todd Wilken. Thanks for listening to *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week.

