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Ronald R. Feuerhahn: Historian, Theologian, Churchman, Pastor

Two months before our gracious Lord saw fit to translate Dr. Feuerhahn from this world into “the life everlasting,” Concordia Publishing House released the last of three volumes of Hermann Sasse’s *Letters to Lutheran Pastors* in English translation. In the foreword to that volume, Dr. Feuerhahn described Hermann Sasse as “an *historian* with a breadth of learning, a *theologian* of thorough biblical knowledge, a *churchman* of wisdom, and a *pastor* of caring words.”¹ Written of Sasse, these words also most fittingly describe the academic and churchly service of Dr. Feuerhahn to both the church and the world.

As an *historian*, Dr. Feuerhahn focused his academic interests on the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century, with a particular emphasis on the life and works of Hermann Sasse. His doctoral dissertation at the University of Cambridge (1991) brought to a watershed nearly three decades of study, teaching, and writing—both as preceptor at Westfield House in Cambridge, and at his alma mater, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where he served as professor and archivist for over two decades. His groundbreaking bibliography on the works of Sasse (1995) became seminal for Sasse scholars worldwide, providing a meticulously assembled reference work to primary source documents on Sasse and a renewed energy to the Sasse renaissance of English translations launched by his colleague, Norman Nagel, a decade earlier. The thorough and careful nature of Feuerhahn’s scholarship is evident everywhere, but particularly in the footnotes to anything he wrote on Sasse. He also accumulated a personal library of some 6,500 volumes and thousands of periodicals, as well as hundreds of photocopies and originals of critical Sasse documents—all carefully organized and documented, as only an historian of his caliber could do. Last November, Concordia Historical Institute of St. Louis awarded Dr. Feuerhahn its Distinguished Service Award, its highest honor, “for his exemplary historical and archival contributions to the cause of Lutheran history in North America and beyond.”²

As a *theologian*, Dr. Feuerhahn’s lifelong study of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, particularly as they were played out through the life of Sasse and the ecumenical movement, led him to confess and teach the church as truly catholic, not in some sectarian sense of LCMS-only or even Lutherans-only, but as the Lutheran confessors declared it to be made up of “people scattered throughout the world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions” (Ap VII/VIII 10). Agreement on the gospel “in all the articles of the faith” (FC SD X 31)—that is, true catholicity and ecumenicity—was Sasse’s contention for church unity throughout his interaction with the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century, and so it became for Feuerhahn. For true unity, the gospel of Jesus Christ means everything to every article of doctrine, and is therefore all that matters. Dr. Feuerhahn was fond (as was Sasse) of referencing the hymn stanza by Nicolaus Selnecker:

In these last days of great distress
Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness
That we keep pure till life is spent
Your holy Word and Sacrament. (*Lutheran Service Book*, 585, stanza 2)

As a *churchman*, the confession of pure teaching and confession of the faith was manifested in Dr. Feuerhahn's clarity of thought and gentle spirit. For example, he served with distinction as a member of our synod's Commission on Worship during the "worship wars" of the 1990s and the advent of the Lutheran Hymnal Project, when he wrote:

We pray that God would spare us from despair, from that great sin which lies on the verge of faithlessness (as Luther might describe it). For we do, at times, despair that the church will ever come to face the issues involved in these so-called "worship wars." And we despair too when we see the faithful champions of a sacramental, means-of-grace churchmanship being put down.

We are called to a renewed churchliness. There was a time when "churchman" seemed to mean a church politician or official; it was a negative designation. But that is the wrong impression. To be churchly is to be catholic (among other things) and to have a high regard for the tradition. . . .

This also serves to remind us that the liturgy is not our property—not the property of any one pastor, nor a single congregation, nor even the entire LCMS—not ours to do with as we please. The liturgy belongs to the church in the broadest sense, and we too are gifted by that tradition. For the liturgy was not formed by a man, but by those men who live together as saints in the church.³

Through challenging times, Feuerhahn called himself and those around him to a "renewed churchliness"—to a heightened awareness of the Lord giving his gifts through those who had come before, gifts of pure doctrine, of right teaching, and of the church's liturgical treasures in word and song; and of the churchly task to faithfully hand them on to those who follow, with humility and in the confidence of knowing the Giver and whose church it really is.

Dr. Feuerhahn's students and colleagues remember him as a scholar, theologian, and churchman, but perhaps more than anything, they remember him as a *pastor*. Indeed, at his funeral, one student described him as a "pastor's pastor." His many years of parish service in Great Britain had made him that. His regular use of a father confessor gave him that. Another student described it well: "There was not a single seminarian or pastor who ever came to him, burdened and struggling under the load of end-time stress, to whom he failed to speak words of comfort, words of grace." Ron Feuerhahn served so many as a true Seelsorger, as well as a model of pastoral care for seminarians and pastors alike.

In 2002, Dr. Feuerhahn's students, colleagues, and scholars from around the world prepared a *Festschrift* in honor of his sixty-fifth birthday.⁴ The Lord gave Dr.

Feuerhahn six more years on the faculty of Concordia Seminary, and seven more years in retirement, living on the seminary campus and interacting with students and colleagues as historian, theologian, churchman, pastor . . . and friend.

*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis,
sed nomini tuo da gloriam.* (Ps 115:1)

Jon Vieker

Jon Vieker is the senior assistant to the president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and was Professor Feuerhahn’s last doctoral student.

Endnotes

¹ Ronald R. Feuerhahn, “Foreword,” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, 3 vols., trans. and ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013–15), 3:ix. Emphasis added.

² <http://www.lutheranhistory.org/2014awards.pdf>. Accessed May 25, 2015.

³ Ronald R. Feuerhahn, “Unified in Act and Song,” in *Through the Church the Song Goes On: Preparing a Lutheran Hymnal for the 21st Century*, ed. Paul J. Grime, D. Richard Stuckwisch, and Jon D. Vieker (St. Louis: Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1999), 222.

⁴ J. Bart Day, Jon D. Vieker, et al., *Lord Jesus Christ, Will You Not Stay: Essays in Honor of Ronald Feuerhahn on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Houston, TX: Feuerhahn Festschrift Committee, 2002). Available through Concordia Publishing House. For more about Dr. Feuerhahn’s family, life, and career, see Scott A. Bruzek’s introductory essay, “Faith’s Ancient Strength,” 1–8.