

walk of life is already overloaded. It is difficult indeed to make use of the abilities of those who for many years worked under conditions and in an atmosphere not found in the west where they can only be given temporary employment until they are able to return to their homes in eastern Germany. The same problem exists in a different form for the parish priests who, having lost the parishes to which they were assigned, are now employed as a special kind of curate in western Germany. It is however essential that the problem be overcome since the majority of the refugee teachers are the elect of their profession and it is the best who are the last to abandon their responsibilities.

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## THE CRISIS IN GERMAN PROTESTANTISM

ON 11th July, 1948, exactly fifteen years after the dark day on which Hitler founded the 'German Evangelical Church', Dr Martin Niemöller was present at the founding of the 'Evangelical Church in Germany' (EKD) on the Wartburg near Eisenach, which had once been Luther's stronghold; there he coined the shattering phrase, 'the solidarity of the helpless' on the same occasion as the aged Bishop Wurm described this new structure as a 'temporary shelter'. These words were sign enough, even for the uninitiated, that this emergency organization was a long way removed from that source of grace, the upper room at Jerusalem. Rendered indispensable by the sheer stress of chaotic political conditions, the new 'Church' was attempting to reassert its legal continuity with the past and to affirm the 'unity of Evangelical Christianity' in all the occupation zones, especially to bind together the East and the West. Was its motive, therefore, political?

Whilst these lines were being written Wilhelm Niemöller, the pastor of Bielefeld, issued an open letter to Germany which ends with the cry: 'The crisis is upon us!'; and the Reformed Church in north-west Germany has resolved not to attend the EKD conferences any more until they are again animated by an evangelical spirit. What does this signify?

The downfall of the Nazis and their 'Reichs-church' means that, for the first time in 400 years, German Protestantism has been given the opportunity to free itself from the state and to give itself a constitution 'in accordance with the New Testament' as an earlier conference expressed it. However, it could scarcely be anything more than a federal 'church union' in which the remnants of the various

dynastic territorial states each has its representatives. The reason for this is that a strong group of Lutheran provincial churches wish to organize their own specifically Lutheran united church and have nothing to do with the Reformed and the United (a mixture of the two confessions found particularly in old Prussia). It is the same Lutheran group, by the way, which attempted at every turn to make a compromise with Hitler—the ones from Bavaria and Hanover especially. Before the first general Synod of the EKD in January, 1949, at Bethel, the Lutherans had formed a movement within the EKD known as the VELKD ('The united Lutheran Church in Germany'); therefore when it came to the election of twelve members of the council they were able to work it so that the Presidency was not given to Niemöller, whose leadership of the 'Confessional Church' which he had inspired had cost him eight years in the concentration camp suffering for the freedom of the Gospel. Instead the office was filled by that brave shepherd of his flock, the venerable Bishop of Berlin, Dr Otto Dibelius. Second place went to Bishop Hans Lilje of Hanover, who since 1936, whilst Niemöller and his friends were at the mercy of the Gestapo, had been at the head of those Lutherans trying to make a pact with Hitler. Bishop Lilje's right-hand man, Dr Brunotte, was made the secretary of the EKD. But Niemöller had to be content with taking charge of the church's external policy, a post which he has accepted because it gives him scope for serving the German people. Furthermore, in July of this year he was elected at Chichester to the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches, the only German to receive this high honour. There he is in a position to help Germany a great deal, but he cannot prevent the EKD from splitting up because the Lutherans choose to carry out their dealings with Geneva directly instead of through the external section of the EKD. Once again therefore Niemöller is having to mobilize the forces of the 'Confessional Church'.

Such is the foreground of the crisis, which brings up the much deeper question of what is now at stake, the question of the true nature of the Church. Our evangelical brethren have discovered that freedom from state-control is not sufficient foundation for the Church of Christ, since Christ himself has already founded it upon the Rock.

## II

It was on September 27th, 1933, that the Dahlem pastor, Martin Niemöller, fastened a protest on to the door of the palace church at Wittenberg, the centre at one time of Luther's preaching. But this protest was made on behalf of the two thousand members of Niemöller's 'Pastor's Emergency League' and was directed against the

election as 'Reichs-bishop' of Ludwig Müller, Hitler's nominee. Nevertheless this shameful election did take place in the sanctuary itself, and was a piece of National Socialist ritual with the positive approbation of Dr Hans Meiser of Bavaria, who is nowadays the 'leading bishop' of the VELKD. At that time no one, least of all Niemöller himself, could have known that his action had set evangelical Christianity the question: 'Where is Peter? Where is the true shepherd?'

Ludwig Müller soon became the tyrant of the Evangelical Church, so much so that even the Lutherans found him too much, especially as he did nothing to realize the hopes which they had set on him, the hope that the Reformation programme of a fully national church might be achieved in the form of a Lutheran Reichs-church in the service of Hitler! As soon as danger threatened their own persons the Lutheran bishops were quick to join the 'Emergency League', which by this time had created its own 'confessional parishes'. Reluctantly they took part in the first confessional synod at Barmen in May, 1934, where the united opposition to the Nazi oppression formed itself into 'the lawful evangelical Church'. It even acquired a sort of dogmatic foundation, which, in its essence, was the work of Hans Asmussen and Karl Barth: the sixth article of the 'Barmen Theological Declaration'. As far as evangelical theology is concerned this was a great innovation.

Until this synod the Pastors' Emergency League had based its campaign on the vows made at ordination, upon the warrant of scripture and upon a recognition of the Reformation. This proved insufficient because Ludwig Müller and his 'German Christians', who at the same time adhered to the Nazis' teaching, took their stand upon the vows made at ordination just as much as the other twelve thousand pastors. It became necessary to define a new criterion whereby the latest errors would be shown up for the naked frauds that they were. This was the intention behind Barmen. Essentially the sixth article is an attempt to remedy the fundamental error in evangelical ecclesiology: that the 'external order' of the church does not follow from anything in holy scripture but is an 'adiaphoron', a right *sui generis*, i.e., a political right to be recognized along with the church's Confession as it had been for four hundred years. It was this political conception that made it so easy for the Nazis to take over an institution which previous to 1933 had simply become a poor imitation of the Weimar Republic, a church based upon universal suffrage in the parishes and upon the semi-state officials who administered it.

Now the synod declared that both doctrine and order, both the faith and the laws of the church rested upon the scriptures and the

Confession. The fundamental principle upon which the church's laws are based is that Jesus Christ alone is Lord of all, that the church is his property and obeys only his gospel. It can neither serve other masters, nor can it acknowledge any other revelation from nature or from history. Certainly this principle did make it possible to contest the state's rights over the church and to limit its totalitarian claims. But the synod found itself unable to take the next step, which would have been to re-establish that canon law which Luther himself had once burnt. Nor could it state how this Lordship of Jesus Christ becomes embodied, who represents it, or what persons or offices are supposed to protect and guarantee these indestructible rights of Jesus Christ when they are threatened by the demands of the world. The synod itself refused to claim any such key-position when it appointed a 'Council of Brothers' who were to see to the protection of the church. Furthermore, one of the Barmen articles had actually said: the evangelical Church is a 'community of brothers' in which no one may exercise this office of lordship. The very sane rejection of the German Christians' pseudo-hierarchy and its political 'Führerprinzip' had blinded them to the true apostolical hierarchy. Their New Testament exegesis had not reached the stage which it has arrived at nowadays as a result of the lessons learnt during the struggle that was to come. Nowadays, for instance, it maintains that it is not the first of Clement's letters but the gospel of St Luke which is the source of the early Church's teaching on the principle of succession and tradition, legally guaranteeing continuity of grace through the Apostles (Ernst Käsemann—Mainz); the pastoral epistles no more than develop that principle (Heinrich Schlier—Bonn).

### III

What the totalitarian state encountered in 1933 was an Evangelical Church made up of twenty-eight provincial churches; the fact that such a state itself tends to take on the character of a 'church' set the Evangelical Church asking questions about its own *raison d'être*. The 'Church of the Word', of inwardness, of faith alone, had neglected church-order, the sacraments, and the teaching and pastoral office of the Church, and its tradition had become one of constant fragmentation. Now, at last, it had to face a trial which would prove what it actually means to be a Church, it had to discover the actual basis for its supernatural claims. It had to bear witness for those claims and to assert effectively its independence from worldly powers. This was precisely what the 'Confessional Church', as it was constituted at Barmen, could not do. In the first place, the dogmatic foundation for it was lacking; in the second place, the

Lutherans in the provincial churches treated the Barmen declaration as nothing more than a political demonstration. Thirdly, there was one mistake common to both groups, to the 'Confessional Church' as it had set up illegal, temporary, organizations within the districts ruled by the German Christians, as well as to the Lutheran Bishops in their legally 'intact' churches: besides 'faith alone', and the sole Lordship of Jesus Christ in the Church, they had proposed a false 'and'.

In other words, the church's jurists and practical politicians had convinced the theologians that 'legal continuity' must be maintained. To only a very few did the claim to be the 'legal evangelical Church' in Germany connote also the abandonment of its false status in favour of an entirely new position, a position deriving its validity from the New Testament. What most members of the synod meant by it was that the ecclesiastical machinery of administration which Hitler's slaves had usurped should belong to the 'Confessional Church'. Consequently all the different groups accepted the conception of the 'Reichs-church' of the 11th July, 1933, *although* that conception was impregnated with National Socialism. The advantage, as far as they were concerned, lay in the guarantee given to it in the law of the Reich by Hitler's signature. For the sake of a very material legal continuity, which carried with it many of the privileges of public corporations, tax-exemption and state-support, they had clung to those very laws of the state-church which the despised 'Reichs-bishop' had used as instruments for the suppression of the church. They believed that the state-courts, which had not as yet been ironed out, would behave justly towards the 'Confessional Church' and would repair Müller's injustices. They were hoping that the legal forms accepted by the Weimar Republic would help them to score a victory in a totalitarian state. There is no need to tell the story of this dismal failure. One day Hitler simply eliminated these courts because they were a nuisance to him, and then nominated an ecclesiastical Minister who had full powers over the Evangelical Church's laws besides being allowed to dictate its policy. That was in September, 1935, soon after the Naval Agreement with Great Britain, when the force of British public opinion need no longer be feared.

Immediately the 'intact' Lutherans forgot the 'sole Lordship' of Jesus Christ. They thought that they had been victorious just because Ludwig Müller had been deposed. The state promised them legal security and peace, in return for which they supported the 'Ecclesiastical Commission' imposed upon them by the state, at the head of whom stood the respectable old Dr Zoellner, the 75-year-old Lutheran Superintendent General. This group behaved quite politely, but was

altogether unable to distinguish error from truth because it was composed mainly of Lutherans, Confessional people favourably disposed to the government, or else German Christians. They would make everything all right. But this was just what they could not do, because the Minister promulgated a law attaching serious punishments to any activity on the part of the 'Confessional Church's' emergency organizations. This made Niemöller's organization illegal. Of course, his followers did not take any notice of the law, and those who did not go over to the state continued to exercise their spiritual direction over their flocks. The 'Confessional Church' trained young pastors, carried out ordinations and was able to prevent many arrests; it also launched courageous pronouncements against public injustices and against the idolatry of blood, soil, race and the folk, against the heresy of an 'eternal Germany' and against the clamour for war. It had a great deal to suffer on account of all this, especially about the time of the Olympic games in the spring of 1937, when the ecclesiastical commissioners such as Dr Zoellner were dismissed and replaced by state commissioners. Niemöller was arrested and given an honourable trial in court resulting in a prison-sentence which was regarded as having been served by the time he had spent in custody; but the Gestapo intervened and threw him into the concentration camp as a 'prisoner of the Führer'. His friends also were frequently taken into custody, and later, during the war, whilst he was serving as an officer, Pastor Fritz Müller, the chairman of the Confessional Bruderrat, was poisoned by Hitler's henchmen. With the Lutherans of the 'intact' provincial churches it was a different story; on the whole, by keeping quiet and doing what they were told they managed to retain their positions until 1945. In the summer of 1945 when Niemöller and a handful of his friends made their appearance at a meeting of church leaders his opponents were already there in force, ready to return to their old ways. It is true that the 'Confessional Church' had taken over the key-posts in Prussia and in Hessen, where the struggle had raged at its fiercest, but it proved impossible to translate the lessons of the struggle into legal forms because there was a very strong suspicion of any sort of centralization. The old legal formulae and the practical difficulties of everyday life seemed to oppress all of them.

#### IV

Meanwhile men's hearts had been changed during these years in such a way that they could never be the same again. Even the theologians were affected and had learned a lot. These twelve years of bitter suffering for the cause of Christ had deepened the faith of many people and had opened their minds to the fullness of the truth.

What was happening in the hidden places of men's hearts is best understood by fixing our attention upon some of the persons in question as they trod this sorrowful way.

During his time in the concentration camp the 'Pastor-commander', Niemöller, had ample reason and opportunities for meditating and for studying. Once more he returned to the study of theology, having learnt to his sorrow that the principles set forth at Barmen were insufficient. At the Fourth Confessional Synod held at Bad Oeyenhausen in February, 1936, when the 'Confessional Church' split over the attitude it should adopt towards the state-imposed officials, Niemöller issued a challenge: we will follow Peter, who walked upon the waters in order to come to our Lord. This very picture of Peter used to hang above his desk. He asserted that the only way of combatting these ecclesiastical commissions was by giving to the Church a new inspiration and direction, which would encourage witnesses for the faith, would feed the 'little flock' of the faithful in the name of Christ, and would fulfil its prophetic office instead of constantly bowing before the laws of the state. This did, indeed, happen in Prussia. But in general the urgent demands of the situation were not recognized, and there were always individual pastors whose hesitations proved difficult to overcome. Individualism and pietism had paralyzed the Evangelical Church. Most painful of all, however, to Niemöller was the sight of the Lutherans actually opposing the 'Confessional Church's' prophetic witness and therefore nullifying its opposition to the apostate government. There was no end of evangelical truths which the state simply mocked at; the truths of Christianity—they were nothing but idiotic lies! Shut up in the concentration camp Niemöller devoted his time to studying church history and dogma, poring over the Roman Missal and listening to the conversations of his Catholic fellow-prisoners. Finally, in the winter of 1940-41, after the Moscow catastrophe, he wrote to his parish at Dahlem to say that he had come to accept the validity of Trent and the Vatican Council, and that he wished to follow out this decision to its logical consequences. This announcement was broadcast to the world by Goebbels in order to blacken Niemöller's reputation, though its effect was quite the opposite. Despite the consternation which it produced in Dahlem his congregation refused for a long time to have any hard words said against converts. And, in fact, it was the signal for a whole series of well-known personalities to move over to the Roman Church, although Niemöller himself promised to wait until he was released. But other spiritual forces now came into play!

Just about this time Niemöller's old friend, Hans Asmussen, began to give a series of lectures in the neighbouring parish of Lichterfelde

on the subject of the Roman Church, during which he dealt with the Augsburg Confession in order to show how far it was still valid. His conclusions, which appeared in book-form, are to be found in his recently published commentary on the Papal Encyclical *Mediator Dei*. There he recognises the Papal teaching as the voice of the good shepherd, in contrast to the Protestant corruption of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Words of reverence for the Pope and the Mass! What a revolution!

And yet it must be said in truth that Niemöller in 1943 returned to the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone—perhaps on account of his unfortunate experiences with his Catholic brethren. Will he remain in this position? To enquire into the motives of such a person who has suffered so deeply with the Evangelical Church would be impertinent. It may not be irrelevant, however, to point out that his unsettled friend, Asmussen, was made President of the Church Secretariat in 1946 but resigned his office in 1948 not only because he seemed too Lutheran but because he already seemed too 'Catholic'.

## V

The men who marched under the banner of the 'Confessional Church' in order to honour Christ alone and in order to convince both Christians and heathen that total lordship belongs to him alone have all gone their various ways. But the Petrine question has presented itself to all of them as one which demands their decision, and at the moment this decision is keeping many of them in suspense. It is even implicitly involved in the Lutherans' effort to find a basis for a genuine church of their own; not until they are able to agree on the fundamentals of their creed will they perform that teaching office which the Evangelical Church has neglected for many centuries.

Let us sum up the main ways in which this profound, but as yet unresolved, crisis has affected our separated brethren in Germany. There is general recognition that the church can have no other basis than that claimed by Jesus Christ and early Christianity, i.e., the apostles; the sole exceptions to this generalisation are those whose prejudices are too firmly ingrained, or who believe in direct personal inspiration. For instance, Bultmann's two outstanding pupils, Käsemann and Schlier, are at one upon this issue. The primacy of Peter is proved in his 'Neutestamentl. Theologie' by Ethelbert Staufer (Erlangen), and the only question which remains is whether this truth is 'applicable' to ourselves. It was an evangelical friend who said that the question would receive a practical answer at last when there was another Martyr-Pope; and that the next martyr-bishop in Germany would provide a hearing for the message of St Ignatius of



Antioch. Unity will follow upon the following of Christ. That is why evangelical Christians have been so moved by the Pope's admonition to both priests and people in *Mediator Dei* that they must be prepared to carry the cross with Christ.

Equally generally recognized is the fact that church-order depends on the sacraments and, above all, on the Holy Eucharist. The sacraments have become the crux of evangelical theology nowadays, which hopes to renew itself by attending to the sacraments more. It is admitted that the Lord's Supper was made into a hole-in-the-corner affair, not by Rome but by Luther's immediate disciples; once more it must become the principal act in divine worship. Already in the Eastern provinces church leaders are trying to turn 'daily divine service' into an act of Eucharistic thanksgiving because they see it as *the one means of driving out the devils*. Yet Niemöller in Hessen thinks that the present moment is not a propitious one at which to bring up such matters; in common with the Reformed Church he is hoping for a renewal of the Church through 'political divine service', by which he means that the Church should assume responsibility in the political sphere if it is to save this chaotic world.

The Church of the 'Word' is now approaching its end. Already it is being said in prominent places that church-order is featured in revelation and has eschatological significance since it is the way in which the community of the faithful is made worthy to receive the Lord at his second coming and ready to share the Lamb at the divine banquet. Even in public, and in the presence of catholic bishops, it has been admitted that the premisses of the sixteenth century were false ones. Many painful trials will have to be lived through before the full consequences of this changed attitude are worked out. It is false to assume that man comes to receive grace as an individual separated from the community; grace is only experienced in the Church. It is false to assume that the kernel of one's personality is found in reflective consciousness, that the 'Word' is the decisive means of grace, or that justification by faith alone is 'the very core of the scriptures'. Christ was not just a preacher and prophet, for by his bodily death upon the cross he has given us access to the Father; grace streams from his wounds, and in the sacraments Christ is present, reaching out beyond pure consciousness to seize upon the whole man and to change our *being*. The risen Lord shares the secret of his person and his body with his worshippers, and the reality of the mystery leaves all theological expressions of it far behind. Similarly it would be false to believe that a theological doctrine could provide a foundation for a church. The mere 'event' of preaching could not form such a foundation, unless the reality which is being preached is also in some way communicated.

## VI

Even after reading so short an essay on these great changes as the present one it will be obvious that the change cannot be explained as some kind of aberration on the part of the Germans, but must be attributed to the working of divine grace. Nor will it surprise anyone to learn that such an acknowledged exegete as Schlier ventures to make a detailed comparison between the evangelical church with all its corrupt habits and errors and the pretentious Church of the Corinthians which Paul had to summon back to apostolic obedience. And the journal in which Schlier's commentary appeared was the same theological journal that was once dominated by the disciples of Karl Barth! Amongst the general body of Christians these striking events have passed almost unnoticed because so much attention has been concentrated upon de-nazification, atrocities, currency-reforms, etc., but ultimately their significance overshadows these other questions. Over a land which had been cast into darkness, a land marked by such frightful guilt, the land of the Reformation, a new light has appeared. Men have come to see that religious division (the blame for which falls on both sides) is really responsible for the rise of apostasy and its increase, as well as for our contemporary political-religions. This division has made it impossible for most people to believe the Church's message. Now, therefore, the truth is dawning that by God's grace penance for this guilt may afford a turning-point in the history of the West. Greetings of brotherly friendship expressing their common faith in Christianity were sent to one another by the *Katholikentag* in Mainz and the Evangelical Assembly at Hanover. Who would have believed that possible some years ago?

The Germans have a penitential *Ave Maria* which runs: 'Jesus who died to bring together into one all God's children (John 11, 52). Holy Mary, Mother of God, merciful mother of the united Church, pray for us . . .' Whoever heeds this message will go on to pray with the Church in the Mass for the ending of schism: 'Deus, qui errata corrigis et dispersa congregas . . . valeat famulari'.

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