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The Confessing Church in National Socialist Germany¹

When National Socialism gained its long desired or feared power in Germany in the spring of 1933, it proved immediately to be a tyranny of previously unheard of dimensions, partly on account of the inward and outward condition of the German people since the World War, partly by virtue of the power of propaganda in its ideas, symbols and formations, partly by virtue of the unusually energetic method of government which it used. There was at once no sphere of life on which it did not make demands and from which it would not have claimed practical response to its demands pretty quickly. The political parties, commerce, administration and justice, art, the universities, the schools and youth education in its widest sense, the press, public and private welfare, and countless

1. *Zwingli-Kalender*, 1936. Written summer 1935.

people who had been regarded previously as “characters” have submitted to its demands, because they had to and could do. The whole proud heritage of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proved incapable of resistance, obviously because it contained nothing that *had* to resist and *could* not give way.

Who would have expected that there would have been anything different to say about the evangelical Church, which has become in our time so weak in itself and of so little public significance? Yet in the evangelical Church there has come about, meagrely, painfully, unsurely, but undeniably, a rediscovery and an open confession of a Christian nature which, being subject to no earthly power, did not let itself be geared to the National Socialists, and for the sake of which, therefore, people had to swim against the stream, for better or worse.

The questions before which the evangelical Church was placed, as it were overnight, in the spring of 1933 were these: Whether it was possible to adopt, as it were, into the Christian faith the ideas of National Socialism (blood, race, nationality, the soil, leadership etc.) which had suddenly won the day and were being proclaimed in all the streets with the most popular persuasiveness and at the same time with the highest authority, and therefore to let these ideas become authoritative also for the preaching, teaching and organization of the Church. Whether the event of the National Socialist revolution was to be regarded and honoured as a kind of second revelation alongside the Gospel of Christ or even as its continuation and contemporary form. Is there really an “eternal Germany” which is equal to God and which is the valid expression of His will for us today? Is the voice of the Aryan blood, i.e. the command of Adolf Hitler, equal to the commandment of God, or contained in it? Should the Church

too be ruled authoritatively and militarily by “bishops”, like little “Führers”? Is it really the province of the state to make a “total” claim on the life of men, and the Church’s business only the right and duty to repeat and glorify this claim as divine and to reconcile and entrust men to it?

Whoever is surprised at these questions may well consider how little the evangelical Church in the last centuries has understood how to stand on her own feet, to repel alien spirits of the age, to set her light on a lamp-standard instead of under some bushel or other. So there was no cause for amazement at the fact that under the powerful impression of the new situation of 1933 a trend immediately appeared and was at first victorious in the evangelical Church (it called itself “German-Christian”). It thought it was able not only to be confident in the face of all these questions, but also to affirm them with the greatest enthusiasm. Christ *and* Hitler; the Bible *and* the glorious present! Cross *and* Swastika! The “S.A. (Storm Troopers) of Jesus Christ” thought they would win under this banner and had indeed some success at first. One of its people, the otherwise unknown and unimportant naval chaplain Ludwig Müller, set himself at the head of the evangelical Church as “State-bishop”. The superior ecclesiastical powers in most regional Churches ended up after some fuss in the hands of this party. Its spirit, its words and slogans, its enthusiastic “and” ruled for a while up and down the country even in places where they seemed to have less to say or had even been rejected. Their purposes seemed to countless good and earnest Christians of all previous persuasions to be good. At that time there was good reason to be amazed at what an easily managed waxlike concern even the so-called “faithful” Christianity had obviously long since become, to allow itself to be treated in such a way.

But now there appeared on the heels of the “German-Christians” (still Christian in name) an unmistakable continuation of the earlier free thinkers and monists. This was a series of other religious groups (collected today in the “German Faith Movement”) who thought they could affirm those questions better with quite open omission of Christ, Bible and Cross, and therefore set their heart on the founding of a “German National Church” with a non-Christian, even, as they deliberately said, a “pagan” content. According to § 24 of its party programme National Socialism and the German state which it rules today stands “on the ground of positive Christianity.” But scholars are still arguing about the exact interpretation of this. What is certain is that both the “German-Christians” and these German pagans may be glad to have the far-reaching direct and indirect support of the organs of the National Socialist party and government. It is also certain that both these trends (and the German pagans even more than the “German-Christians”!) have on their side the course of National Socialism and thus of the whole historical development. Of course, the “Führer” has not yet expressed his personal decision.

The realization of what this putting into gear meant for the evangelical Church and the realization that the Church would have to resist it, dawned only very slowly and gradually. To begin with, it was only the revolutionary tempo and the somewhat lusty proceedings, especially of the “German-Christians,” that gave offence in different circles. People were grieved at the failure of the attempt to make Pastor von Bodelschwingh State-bishop and thereby to ensure a peaceful continuance in Church life in mild harmony with the new age and order. People thought they should and could avoid basic decisions for a good while. They emphasized warmly

and strongly that the Bible and the old Confessions of the Church must remain “untouched” even in the Church of the new Germany. But State-bishop Müller and the German-Christians were saying precisely this themselves. How far did people intend and desire anything different? At first they were not pointed either by the Bible or the old Confessions to the obligation to give clearly and decisively any other answer to the questions put so burningly, than that of the German-Christians. Here and there conflicts broke out over this or that. But it was the fight of a disbanded army with no united aim and no common way. There was room for suspicion that the opponents of reform in the Church as the National Socialists envisaged it were merely slow in comprehending the new age. And the opponents quite possibly hoped that these nonconformists would sooner or later abandon their scruples, which after all did not represent a fundamental intention.

But something else happened. How it came about is in the last resort hardly explicable. The senseless external pressure with which the new Church governments and the German Christians sought to establish themselves everywhere, the spiritual and intellectual inadequacy of all their leading people, surprise at the heathen backgrounds in this affair and perhaps too the beginnings of political disillusionment, even disappointment – all these things have, humanly speaking, certainly contributed. But there must have been some other factor at work when, at the beginning of 1934, the view was suddenly expressed that “Confession” in the evangelical Church must have some meaning beyond the devout repetition of what the godly fathers of the faith had expressed centuries ago in their times of need; that it must far rather mean an answer to contemporary questions which the Church today must utter with the certainty and compulsion of faith. It was not the

old leaders of the Church, nor the theological faculties, it was neither the circles of the free Christian charitable and missionary organizations and societies nor the religious brotherhoods (nor was it the German “religious socialists”!) but it was very quietly, now here, now there, a few hundred pastors with their congregations, who formed free synods and parish conferences with the aim of giving an account to themselves and the rest of the Church, to the German-Christians and pagans, and to the National Socialist state itself, of what the Church today is and is not, what it wants and does not want. Quite spontaneously it became apparent under the pressure of the attack that there is something in the evangelical Church of whose existence in Germany and elsewhere we might with good cause have been doubtful, and not only in the past few years: namely, an independent knowledge, power and liveliness not subject to any worldly power, but rather, when necessary, defiant. It became apparent that the evangelical Church has a mission and a message which she may dishonour a thousand times but which she cannot ultimately abandon, which in an emergency forces itself on to the lips of Christians almost against their will and becomes a witness in positive statements with a clear Yes and No. It became apparent that there are situations in which even a weak, degenerate Church *must* confess and then indeed *can* confess.

Here are some of the statements which were heard at this time as the witness of the Confessing Church in Germany:

“We must turn our backs on the error that man can place his own honour beside or above the honour of God.”

“We are not free to call anything ‘God’ which we think divine, but we must keep to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, as He is witnessed to us in Holy Scripture.”

“We can offer unreserved trust to no good alongside God.”

“We can only serve men by serving God.”

“All of us live by God’s grace and not by any human perfections.”

“The message and order of the Church cannot therefore be directed according to any human aims, not even by the aim of a totalitarian State.”

“The responsibility for her teaching, form and organization is in the hands of the congregation alone.”

If these statements seem all too simple and obvious to anyone, let him remember that they have all been uttered here as answers to definite questions, in contradiction to definite errors, with an eye to basic decisions. In a time and situation when the very opposite is proclaimed in all the streets and in all the newspapers with an unprecedented display of power! No, the insight and the decision necessary for the public expression of such statements were simply and understandably lacking at this time and in this situation. And because those who did speak out were ultimately neither cleverer nor braver than other people, we may and must say that Christian faith performed a miracle in the confession which was suddenly heard here despite the repeated stupidity and weakness of its confessors.

For this also must finally be said: The story of the Confessing Church in the National Socialist Germany of these years is no glorious chronicle for its participants, no heroic or saintly story. What became evident was just a thin red thread of evangelical clarity, loyalty and courage. It has become stronger with time but also even thinner. And it has been and is always being buried by whole avalanches of most remarkable unclarity, by subtle political foresight and irresolution, by misplaced “love”, by futile activity and

equally futile clumsiness. The time-honoured connection of the Gospel with human reason, of the Church with the State, has shown itself in all its danger in the Confessing Church too. We can and must reproach this Confessing Church for not recognizing the enemy early on in its real dangerousness and for not unambiguously and forcefully opposing to him early on the Word of God, which judges human deceit and injustice, as was her duty as the Church of Jesus Christ. She has fought hard to a certain extent for the freedom and purity of her proclamation, but she has, for instance, remained silent on the action against the Jews, on the amazing treatment of political opponents, on the suppression of the freedom of the press in the new Germany and on so much else against which the Old Testament prophets would certainly have spoken out. Her path in its own particular course has been, when examined closely, almost a continuous series of errors, confusions, and disappointments. We can and must therefore call her "Confession" very unsatisfying. How will her struggle end? Remembering the human factor, it is not only very possible but very probable that it will end with a lazy compromise.

In the final instance we can perhaps only be amazed and glad that the inward and outward weakness of Christianity did not prove even greater at this time. But it seems to me that we shall have reason to be thankful not only because of that red thread, but also because this bit of Church history has brought one fact into the open so clearly: In the Church, glory belongs to God alone. In the midst of all human infidelity, God has proved faithful here once again. No-one who followed this struggle with attention, participation and comprehension will be able to forget that. And has the Church not always lived, does she not live in all places, by the hope which, despairing of herself, she sets in the Lord alone?