

A Brief Orientation for the Reader

The journey on which the following conversations took place extended across the whole of the North American continent from Los Angeles to New York, from Texas to Chicago. It took place upon invitation of numerous universities and churches. Almost every day I found myself at a lectern or in a pulpit, not infrequently several times each day. As a rule the lectures extended over several days in each city; at the University of Chicago they extended over two months. In all I was on the march for almost six months. It was my second visit to the United States; the first was in 1956.

It is impossible in brief compass to indicate even the high points of this journey. I mention only one event, because it occurred during this time: the assassination of President Kennedy. It was only a short time previously that I had delivered some lectures and enjoyed a delightful hospitality in Dallas where he died. Two days after his death I conducted a service in the chapel at Harvard University, where he and his brothers had studied and the memory of the family was especially vivid. I shall not forget the solemn dignity of that hour.

On such a journey there is naturally occasion for many discussions and conversations—at meetings of faculties, with students (with these above all; they were almost insatiable!) with whites and Negroes, with pastors and generals (I preached at a service for the military in the Pentagon), with newsmen and television personnel. There was never any lack of variety in themes and participants in the dialogue.

I was constantly accompanied by my young American secretary, Darrell Guder of Hollywood, California. He studied with us in the University of Hamburg and lived in our home for several months in preparation for the journey. It was he who helped me carry on the conversations, since my English was too weak to stand on its own feet. Thus, after having delivered a lecture or sermon in English, I was able to use my mother tongue in the discussion and express myself quite freely. We soon learned to work together so well that every little phrase and clause was swiftly translated by Darrell and the listeners were hardly conscious that the initial language was alien to them. We called it "playing ping-pong"; for as we stood before our listeners, throwing the ball to each other, their faces kept bobbing back and forth, from one to the other. It was a very amusing sight.

About the conversational situation in America: I always felt it to be an attractive and sympathetic thing that the listeners seemed to be trying to encourage one and make one feel that they were kindly disposed. One had the feeling that they were listening with a real expectation, that one would have to put one's foot in it very badly indeed to evoke a derogatory criticism. In Germany one often has the opposite impression as a speaker, namely, that one is at first received with skepticism and that a positive attitude is something that must be earned. Naturally, this too is not without its stimulation (but is perhaps more taxing!).

I enjoyed most of all the conversations with students. They are less intellectual than German students, perhaps somewhat more naïve and therefore also more "original." They come less with reflected problems acquired from reading, which are not yet rooted in their own existence, than with their personal and very genuine problems. And when it is necessary to traverse some rather complicated and theoretical terrain to get to their solution, they are quite ready to go along. It is absurd to think that they are interested only in practicalities.

I really enjoyed it when they gathered around me informally, sitting on the floor in American fashion or on the grass in the

warmer fields of California and Texas. To look into these young, open, and thoughtful faces was inspiring and it drove away all feelings of fatigue.

Naturally, the conversation frequently led to some definitely and deeply insistent theological discussions, especially when they had been preceded by a corresponding lecture. In independent conversations, however, I noted, in contrast to talks with German students, how strongly these young people are concerned with questions of practical piety. Again and again questions such as these were asked: What must I do to become a Christian? How can I know that I believe? What assurances are there that I will continue to believe? How can we be sure of faith? How can we develop a regular prayer life?

About the piety of American Christians: I experienced piety as a total phenomenon here for the first time. At this point we Germans are far more critical and reserved. The attacks of dialectical theology upon subjective experience, upon all pious psychologism, are still having their effect among us, producing a kind of allergy to anything that might even remotely look like Pietism. In this respect we have probably thrown out the child with the bath and not only attacked the propensity to emotionalism but also have impugned the spiritual life itself. We have robbed it of the spontaneity of its expression; we have taken from it its naïve naturalness. On the theoretical level we are enormously concerned with the question of how Christ can be related to our existence and to everything that occupies us in this life. But we are shy of doing this in the presence of others and of allowing it to find expression, say, in common or free prayer.

Seeing these easy, natural practices among American Christians, I have come to feel that this is a lack among us. I attended hardly a single meeting where there was no prayer. Even the prior of a Catholic monastery who was welcomed as a guest in a theological colloquium was called upon, and without hesitation he obliged. One can imagine the inhibitions we would have in such a situation—to say nothing of how the prior would have squirmed!

It may be that the average American theology as it exists among the clergy and the congregations and finds expression in sermons is relatively unconcerned about the theological problems that emerge when we think through the relationship of the gospel to culture, philosophy, and society (though here the race question appears to be producing a break-through). The American Christian who prays in every life situation is nevertheless aware of this affinity of Christ to every situation of existence, probably in a much more unreflected, naïve, and less theoretical way, but therefore on a more immediate spiritual level.

At first I was somewhat disappointed that my chief work, the *Theological Ethics*,¹ was not the first to be published in the United States, but that I was rather introduced by a number of volumes of sermons and essays. I soon observed, however, that this order of things was far more helpful as far as my trip was concerned than I, in my human shortsightedness, had anticipated. These books prepared the way for a certain spiritual trust with which my hearers approached me. Moreover, they prevented my work from being given a premature theological label and pigeonholed in a particular school of thought. So people of all denominations and theological tendencies were apparently ready to listen to me. The liberals probably thought: He speaks in modern style, so he must be one of us; the Baptists said: He has written a book on Spurgeon, so he is close to us; the fundamentalists noted that my sermons were expositions of biblical texts and often included me in their ranks; and the Lutherans said: After all, he comes from Hamburg, *ergo*. . . . And so it was with the other denominations too. Again and again I had the feeling of being in a large, familiar family and of being in a higher sense "at home." It may well have been because of this constellation of circumstances that my hearers often came together, perhaps for the first time, from situations beyond the

¹The first two volumes will be published in the spring of 1965 by Fortress Press, Philadelphia. A part of the later volumes, *The Ethics of Sex*, was published at the end of my trip to America by Harper & Row, New York.

existing barriers. I have been gratefully aware of this ecumenical outcome.

The following conversations make it apparent that I was conscious of having a special responsibility when I met with evangelicals and fundamentalists, and that I believe that one of the crucial questions that will affect the destiny of American Christianity is whether and how it comes to terms with them. I have gratefully and respectfully noted that the evangelicals and fundamentalists in this country want to preserve the substance of the Christian faith and that not infrequently they are the most dependable and self-sacrificial members of their congregations. But I have also observed with sadness how often they are criticized from the high horse of Enlightenment and then, naturally, they are unfairly dealt with.

I have given much thought to the question of how one can help the fundamentalists; for that one must help them was clear to me. They must be freed from many repressions and above all from the dichotomy of their life. But this dare not be done with a superior intellectual attitude of knowing better; for then they put up their defenses and lose the openness of trust, because they imagine the "ancient foe" is on the other side. One can talk with them only by speaking on the basis of the same faith and showing them that they are in danger of losing the very thing they want to gain.

I do not wish to anticipate here; the first dialogues will indicate how I tried to speak with them. It is a bit awkward that the very first dialogue begins rather abruptly and departs from the ordinary style of conversation. It had to be first, however, for practical reasons. The observant reader will surely discover why it was not a specifically "American" conversation, even though the interlocutor was a fundamentalist.

A comment which gave me the greatest satisfaction after one such discussion was made by a student pastor. He said, "You have freed the fettered and bound the wandering spirits." This is certainly overstated, but it rightly expresses the intention I had in

mind. The same is true of another reaction expressed by one person as we were taking leave: "You have disturbed our peace and upset our doubts."

Perhaps the sealed orders I carried with me on this journey were that I should speak with the fundamentalists in this way. For perhaps only a person who comes from the outside and cannot be classified in some fixed position can count upon a certain willingness to listen to what he has to say. And so I want to say very explicitly that I found brothers in the faith in these circles.

American fundamentalists, with some exceptions, of course, are different from many German representatives of this group in that they are relaxed, altogether human, endowed with humor, and willing to listen (when they have learned to trust a person). Conversations with them were most successful after they had first listened to a sermon and had sensed that we were standing on common ground. Then they were quite willing to have theological comments made on the sermon and to consider whether *on* this common ground they need to change the direction of their march.

If American Christianity loses these people, who are often the most vital members of its body—if it should, say, drive them into sectarianism and thus allow them to die away—this could be fatal to its cause. Therefore, wherever it was possible, I tried to call attention to these questions and blow the horn as loud as I could.

Now a word with regard to the form of the dialogues. They hardly took place in the literal form in which they are printed here. They are not based on tape recordings and stenographic transcriptions, but rather on the comprehensive notes which I wrote down after each occasion. For the sake of conciseness, I have in most cases summarized a number of conversations.

I had noted down about thirty questions which cropped up again and again. Actually I had intended to deal with all of them here, since they were obviously typical and to that extent characteristic of the intellectual situation. In order not to allow this book to bulk too large, however, I have selected only a few theological and political questions. For the time being I have left out the large

contingent of spiritual questions and preaching problems, though it was hard for me to do this and my notes tempted me to present these conversations too. Perhaps this may be done at a later time.

The reader will note in the various conversations that they took place on quite different levels; sometimes the interlocutors were laymen untrained in theology and sometimes they were academically trained ministers and theologians. My concern was always to allow the “contours” of my partner in the conversation to emerge as clearly as possible. My purpose was not to discuss the theological themes “as such”; I wanted rather, and was obliged, to speak in each case in a very definite direction and to particular positions.

I would think that these conversations in their present form might be useful in study and discussion groups. America is a land of discussion, and to me it would be a pleasant thought if by way of this book I might be a continuing participant in these dialogues.