

FOREWORD

THIS BOOK HAS A VERY EVENTFUL HISTORY. PERHAPS, therefore, the best way to salute my English-speaking readers is to tell them something about it.

In 1941, in the midst of World War II, I was forbidden by the Nazis to speak or to travel. I was interned in a small city. This was their revenge for my having on several occasions rebelled against the tyranny by word and act. Previous to this time they had already dismissed me from my position as a university professor. I was also forbidden to publish books and articles; this is the way the Nazi authorities saved paper. Finally, however, permission was obtained for me to deliver one evening lecture a week in the Stuttgart Cathedral Church (*Stiftskirche*).

At that time the bombing raids had not yet begun. I suspected, however, that dreadful visitations were still in store for us, and it was this that made me feel that people should be prepared for eternity. I considered how this might best be done and came to this conclusion: the Nazi tyranny has not only pitched us into a ghastly war which every day is destroying our men, our brothers and sons, on the battlefields; it is not only exercising the most monstrous reign of terror within the country, but it has also attacked and desecrated everything that is holy to us. It has introduced pagan gods and is bent upon using them to drive out Jesus Christ. It interprets all of life, it interprets birth, death, history, and eternity in a way that is different from what we learned as Christians and also found to be true and reliable. This has brought bewilderment and confusion to many people, and

besides, this godless interpretation of life has made an impression upon not a few. And how can young people, especially, help being susceptible to all this, particularly when they are scrupulously and consistently shut off from all contact with Jesus Christ—exactly as they are in Bolshevik countries today.

This diagnosis brought me to the conviction that I must prepare people for the terrible things that lay before them by giving them instruction—quite simply, just instruction—in the mysteries of our faith. I wanted to help them to see their life and the course of history from the standpoint of Christ. I wanted to show them that faith not only has something to do with our state after death or with our inner religious life, but that it also opens our eyes to a wholly new way of looking at life here and now, that when we meet Christ we see nature, history, our fellow man, our community life, the problem of law and justice, war, and even our death with new eyes. I wanted to try to show them that as his disciples we lead a rich and full life, that for those who have found him there is nothing that is alien, that through him joy is sanctified (and thus really made full), and that in terror and death we shall nevermore be left desolate and alone. And so I lectured to them on the fundamental truths of our faith—simply following the course of Luther's *Small Catechism*—and endeavored to show them that this also sharpens our view of real life, of politics, international relations, and everything that environs us, making it more realistic, perceptive, and penetrating. The lectures continued, with brief interruptions, for almost three years.

In this book a number of excerpts from these lectures have been assembled. My friend and translator, John Doberstein (how wonderful that I should meet with this interpreter and liaison with the United States!) gave me counsel with regard to what parts of the large body of material in the lectures might be of special interest to my American readers. Only one chapter (on the reality of the demonic) has been taken from another book, but it too originated in this same period. I shall say something further about this presently, but first I must tell a bit more about how the lectures fared.

From the beginning they drew large crowds. Evening after evening some three thousand persons gathered together: workers

and businessmen, students and professors, soldiers and generals, Nazi functionaries (naturally in civilian clothes!) and Jews, Dutch compulsory laborers (they had been deported to Germany and I gathered them together secretly) and sometimes whole classes from the schools. It was an overwhelming time for me. Never since have I experienced such intense listening.

Then came the air raids. One church after another collapsed or burned, thousands of homes sank into rubble and ashes, and the original congregation of hearers was scattered; but new ones kept coming. And when the streetcars stopped running they came on foot, often from many miles away through the fields of ruins and rubble which were dark, spectral, and frightening on those winter evenings.

Finally the cathedral church, too, was destroyed by fire. I can still see the towering torch of this venerable house of God. Not even when at almost the same time my own house burned down, and I stood there holding in my hand a key to a door that no longer existed, was my heart so wrung . . .

We sought out two other auditoriums which were still standing on the outskirts of the city. Since they were smaller, I intended to speak in both on succeeding evenings. When I arrived, on a bicycle and having had often to walk and scramble my way through the fields of rubble, they too had been destroyed; not even the streets on which they were located were there any more.

But still we did not give up. I then announced that the lectures would be continued in a more distant suburb, Bad Cannstadt. Because of their fear of the Nazis, the newspapers would not allow me to insert a large advertisement but only the following notice in small print, not even mentioning my name, but only the initial: "Thursday, 8 P.M. T." But this was sufficient to mobilize the scattered congregation, and again they were there. The hall was so overcrowded that I was apprehensive of what might happen if an air-raid alarm occurred. And this actually did come during the second or third meeting. I asked everybody to leave quietly in order to go to the bomb shelters and then gave the benediction. The organist played an evening hymn as the crowd left the hall quietly and without any panic. When I went out, the last to leave, the flak was already roaring, since the fliers

we were beginning their attack upon us. By the light of the flashing guns I finally found a shelter. But it was already closed and because of the danger they refused to open the door. However, the faithful student who had stuck with me and I beat on the door so mightily that finally it was opened and we were quickly pulled inside. Then came the most dreadful attack I ever experienced. Two of my hearers, one of them the organist who had just been playing, were killed.

A few weeks before this I had already had a similarly moving experience. After an air attack I was helping with the clean-up operations and was standing at the edge of a huge crater opened up by an aerial bomb. It had killed an officer and fifty women auxiliary air force aides. A woman came up to me—she was the wife of the officer who had been killed—and asked whether I was Helmut Thielicke; for I was covered with dust and grime and she did not recognize me at first. She then showed me her husband's cap and said, "This is all that was left of him. Only last Thursday I was with him, attending your lecture. And now I want to thank you for preparing him for his death." Then she quietly shook my hand.

What we were doing there was teaching theology in the face of death. There the only thing that was of any help at all was the gospel itself. Everything else simply dissolved into thin air. We were living only upon the substance of our faith. And these desperate hours also helped us to find that substance.

The miracles of God which we experienced in all this time were incomprehensible. After each lecture some two hundred stenographers remained and I dictated to them a brief résumé. Stationery stores donated mountains of paper to me for this purpose. Each one made ten or more copies and those who received them through the mail did the same. They were all sent to our soldiers at the front. After the war some of my books went through a not inconsiderable number of printings, but I shall probably never again have such tremendous editions as I had with these pages written by hand. And people trusted what came to them in this written form, whereas they had the greatest distrust of everything that was printed, for all of it was censored by the tyranny. How many of those who remained on the battlefields

wrote to tell me they had received these pastoral letters and that the eternal Word had been a comfort and a stay to them in the cold steppes of Russia or the desert sands of Egypt!

The chapter on the reality of the demonic is taken from my book entitled *Fragen des Christentums an die moderne Welt* ("Questions Christianity Addresses to the Modern World").¹ I wrote this book secretly in this same period. The manuscript was smuggled into Geneva by diplomatic pouch and was published there by the Ecumenical Council anonymously. It was sent primarily to prisoner-of-war camps, where it was used as a textbook in the camp universities, especially for student courses. I myself did not see my own book until long after the war. I could tell a long story of the adventures of that book, too.

As I write this I am suddenly struck by the thought of how strange it is that an author should be telling such stories about his book in a foreword. Isn't there something dubious about that? Ought not a book speak for itself? If one has to show that the contents performed a service back in the past, during the war, this still does not prove that it has anything to say to the present generation.

Well, I believe that all the questions discussed in it are still relevant today. Otherwise I certainly would not recommend it to English-speaking readers. Even in Germany the original book is still being reprinted. Those times illuminated many questions about faith, human nature, history, and life with an intensity and a depth that is hardly ever seen in more peaceful times. In such tensile tests of fate one could not attract people with the topics and clichés of the day. Only pure, hard metal was accepted. God had sent us into a hard school in order to make us find this metal. And that is why I have let everything stand as it was said at that time. And this, too, is why I have felt I might tell something of the background and the times when the lectures originated. Terrible as those times were, times when we were surrounded by bizarre ruins and daily expected our own

¹ *Fragen des Christentums an die moderne Welt, Untersuchungen zur geistigen und religiösen Krise des Abendlands* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1948), pp. 170-217. (Trans.)

death, we often think of those days of terror with a certain nostalgia. We are glad, of course, that we can look forward to Sunday without wondering whether the church in which we may hear the Word of God is still standing. And yet, in this time of peace the voices of eternity have grown fainter. And never since have we perceived as clearly as we did then that God is stronger than fire and destruction and that even in the valleys of deepest darkness, rod and staff are put into our hands and bridges are thrown across the abyss. What more could I wish, than that even a little of this should dawn upon the reader today?

It is a wonderful providence that so many of my books of sermons and addresses should be the first to appear in English dress; but now it will not be long before the more scholarly works, especially the *Theological Ethics*, are presented to readers in the United States.

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