

# The Confessional Pastor and His Struggle

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MANY accounts of the Church conflict in Germany have been published in this country; they have been either historical records or attempts to show the fundamental theological and political principles involved. The present study has a different object, viz., to draw out the lessons of the conflict for the practical or pastoral life of the Church herself. This implies that our attempt must be to survey and sum up the facts as well as the truths of the struggle from the standpoint of one who is engaged in the struggle, i.e., to lay bare its inner elements. Thus my essay is to present the German Church struggle in such a way that other churches see it as part and parcel of Church history and Church life in general and, hence, also of their own.

Following upon an introduction treating the fundamental aspect under which all churches should consider the German church conflict, I present in this essay what I may call the three *dramatis personæ* of the "Church drama":—the *Confessional Pastor*, the *Heretic* (the "German Christian"), and the *Confessing Congregation*. The study closes on the problem—still unsolved, in the Confessional Church, and the like in all churches—of a *Confessional Church Government*.

Readers of this study are asked to forget, for the time being, all the special traditions of their own churchdom, if they are Anglican, or Nonconformist, or even German (of course pre-Hitler German). For the life and death struggle of a church concerns the "church within the church," and, hence, it is the struggle of *the Church*.

## I.—"LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION"

The conditions of the whole depraved, wicked, and perishing world may be put, from the viewpoint of a Christian, under the seventh petition of the Lord's prayer:

“ deliver us from evil.” In the present age, we may point in particular to the fact that there has never been in the whole history of the Church a persecution of Christianity so long continued and so intensive as the Bolshevist. The persecution of Christianity in Germany, however, is of quite a peculiar type. To make clear its peculiarity, and the difference from the persecution carried on in Russia, we may place it much more under the sixth petition of the Lord's prayer: “ Lead us not into temptation,” than under the seventh.

This is our argument. Let us explain it.

I begin with two English comments on the Church struggle. One is by the capable translator, and expounder of the German church conflict to the Christian public in England, Dorothy Buxton, and is to be found in the preface to her pamphlet “ *Christendom on Trial*.” In it she writes that for her this struggle is not confined to Germany but is, in essence, a challenge to, and test of, Christendom throughout the world. The second comment occurs in a non-signed supplement to Dr. Oldham's *Christian News Letter* of April 24th, 1940: “ Communism is the declared foe of all belief in the spirit. This type of totalitarianism may destroy Christians, but can in no wise corrupt Christianity. But the other totalitarian monster, National Socialism, if it has destroyed fewer Christians than Bolshevism, can corrupt Christianity, and has profoundly corrupted it.”

Further, I want to mention an incident which occurred in my own church of St. Paul at Bochum in 1936. A speaker was describing to the congregation the Bolshevist persecution and the sufferings of Christians in Russia. In the presence of two Gestapo men he had to answer a question as to what was the difference between the situation of the church in Russia and of the church in Germany. Anxious neither to give himself into the hands of the Gestapo nor to obscure his witness, he replied: “ In Russia every kind of religion is to be driven out, in Germany any sort of religion is to be driven in,” in other words: “ here the deluge, there the desert.” With respect to the mind of the Nazis this means: Nazism aims at making all German things “ religious”: from soil and blood to every cultural and spiritual work and value.

Let us now take a brief glimpse of the inner life of the church in Germany. It is only too true that the German church is oppressed. Nevertheless, the "cannibal stories" of the German struggle are not so numerous as people seem to think. Preachers still have freedom to declare the Gospel. Hardly anywhere in Germany will you find closed churches. You will hardly find enough evidence to verify the proposition that the German Church has no freedom whatever. And it is true to say that the majority of the sermons preached in this country before the outbreak of the war (excepting those which directly bore on the Church struggle in Germany) would not have been censored in Germany. Were then the sermons of the Confessional Church political? Not at all. But in what way then is one to understand the fact of the Church oppression in Germany? Only by grasping our argument that the German persecution falls under the sixth petition of the Lord's prayer, from the viewpoint of the Christian Church.

It may be helpful to imagine for a few moments the whole struggle as taking place in England. Let us imagine that the Prime Minister was a non-Christian who delighted in criticizing, attacking, and mocking the Church, the clergy, the Creeds, and Christian life in general; that any public official would lose his reputation if he were a churchgoer; that newspapers refused to print any articles or information from the Christian standpoint, and that public opinion was fed with superstition, pure paganism, theosophy, modern animism, veneration of heroes, and a new religion of, so to speak, a supernatural naturalistic type, and let us imagine our children being roused and incited against the generation of their parents. Nobody would like or dare to contribute money for Church work, and your church would become more and more empty. The children would no longer like to attend children's services, and the choirs would collapse. In short, the very air itself would smell non-Christian, and even anti-Christian, *religiously anti-Christian*.

Finally, if any pastor should venture to protest against such an attitude of the nation, to defend the Church, and to proclaim Christian morality and the task of the Church, he would have to expect that he would be forbidden to speak, that he would be removed from his parish, lose his income

and his home, and perhaps be imprisoned and punished; at the very least, that he would be defamed, turned out and outlawed. It is in this way that you would have to face the greatest temptation of your life: Am I to remain silent and wait for better times, but in the meantime preach or speak without any fight, and play into the hands of the adversary? Am I to put up with a troubled conscience, and become a hireling? That is the question, and that is precisely the situation in Germany.

But we believers of the Confessional Church did really believe in the Church of Jesus Christ; we became through faith *Ecclesia Militans in statu confessionis*.

## II.—THE CONFSSIONAL PASTOR

The leading figure in the German Church struggle is the militant clergyman, the "Confessional pastor." He is the Christian answer to totalitarianism, the bearer of "the freedom of a Christian."

Although in former and in present times greater tests have been imposed on the servants of Christ, none of them were up against a similar power of seduction and corruption: Niemoeller is not so much a hero of faith and a martyr as a unique example in present-day Christendom of one who is temptation-proof.

That is why the Church struggle began as a struggle of the minister. The pastor fought with the might of his conscience, but not so much for conscience's sake as for the sake of the fold in his keeping. He could not tell whether the community would ever back him—he scarcely dared even hope for it—nevertheless he embarked on the struggle and in so doing proved indeed that it was a venture of faith.

Thus the rebirth of the Church arose out of the *ministerium Divinum*. The command to fight came to the pastor, not from the community on earth, but from the exalted Christ, the Lord of the Church, the Head of His Body. The thrust into the struggle was a simple act of obedience. The pastor did not fight in order to be taken seriously by the community—how dangerous would it have been thus to play with the "reputation of the ministry" in his community, and, moreover, how many members of the community would simply have declined the pastor's care!—but he fought because the Lord of the Church has commissioned him, he fought in order

that he might not lose the souls entrusted to him by the Lord, he fought because in his ordination he had vowed to obey the Lord, and the Lord alone, he fought because he was bound to the true doctrine of the Church. I do not maintain that all Confessional Pastors have thought on all these lines, but there can be no doubt that in general the stand of the Confessional Pastors was, and still is, solely a matter of obedience, and that the spirit uniting them was stamped by their common Ministry, laid upon them in their Ordination. Never would any other motives have led to the formation of the Pastors' Emergency League, which proved its obedience by the unequivocal attitude it immediately took up even in connection with the non-Aryan problem within the Church (although this matter went decidedly against the grain of the average German pastor after the times of the Weimar State). However, by thus pointing to the Office as the point of re-awakening within the German Church, we only want to indicate the place where the Lord of the Church has begun His unexpected new work.

*What the German Church Struggle is not.*

It is not a new idea, not a new movement of faith or awakening; it does not arise out of new knowledge, hardly out of rediscovery of former knowledge. At any rate, in its initial phase, it is not all this; nothing of this sort lies behind the rallying of the pastors and their entry on the struggle. Even though the struggle has caused the wealth of the Bible to become more evident, the dogmas of the ancient Church to acquire greater value, though it has done away with timidity in teaching, and brought home the Confession of the Reformation—no new conception of teaching can be said to have taken place, nor any rediscovery of the Bible, as both took place at the time of the Reformation.

*What has the German Church Struggle actually been?*

The Church struggle is a direct and radical sign of life on the part of the Church, carried on by the appointed servants of the Church who are ordained and have received the authority. It is no demonstration of "strength of character," and it is deeply deplored that the world both within and without Germany has continually tried to interpret it as such. On the contrary, the very atmosphere of the struggle, the pas-

tors' resistance as well as their offensive, is a matter of Grace, and nothing else but Grace.

Thus the effort to which the Confessional pastor is called does not find its Scriptural basis in any teaching as to moral responsibility, but rather in the story of the Good Shepherd of St. John x. This message, the one most frequently cited in the Church struggle, supplies the basis of the "Theology of the Confessional Pastor";—the sayings about the good shepherd, the wolf, the hireling, and the flock, are the Biblical key to the Church struggle. In this struggle, the constant reference to St. John x. justified the assertion that in the first instance the battleground is to be found in the *ministerium divinum*, its call and its power.

Next to St. John x. the second most cited word, and one to which hardly any attention was paid before the Church struggle, is given in Acts xx, 28: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the Church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."

In addition to these words dealing with the call to office, and affecting those called to leadership by the help of the Confessions of the fathers, and by prompting of the Holy Spirit, a third word is given as the personal word of comfort by which St. Paul (2 Cor. vi.) announces and glorifies the struggle as the focus of the full revelation of grace. *Militia Christi* pass "through honour and dishonour, through evil report and good report," giving proof of themselves "as unknown and yet well known, as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things," as the servants of God "in the word of truth, in the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left."

A new fraternity among the bearers of the office, a new confidence born of faith, between ministry and community, and a new proximity between the Lord of the Church and all His disciples prove the Church struggle to be ordained by God.

### III.—THE MILITANT HERETIC (THE GERMAN CHRISTIAN)

The National Socialist revolution was to create a new type of heretic, though not a new heresy.

How are these to be distinguished ?

The heretics of old offered the occasion for the Church to avail herself of the State against the heretic. The new heretic avails himself of the State—against the Church. One feels tempted to say that he is fighting against “Church-parsons” on behalf of “State-parsons,”—a grotesque situation unparalleled in Church history.

There never was a more sorry heretic in the Church than the German Christian. The old heretic glorified the self-sanctification of the Christian man, the new derides all sanctification, thus abandoning the attractive quality of all the heretics of old, notably their enthusiasm and ardour. The heretic of old severed himself from the Church because she seemed to him too worldly, too slack, too un-Churchlike. The new heretic pursues his individual path because, for him, the Church is too much in earnest, too Christian, too Churchlike, because it is not worldly enough. He declares that the Church, being placed as it is, within the world, the only possible Churchdom at present time must consist in a compromise with the world, a mixture of Church and world.

We, of course, fully admit that Christ's Church is never without “the tares among the wheat,” but this does not mean that the Church herself should sow tares as well. The “German Christians” set the Church also that task which in fact is nothing else than the devil's own business.

This point is helpful in the fundamental discussion between Confessional Church and German Christians. Even though the true Church in her theological outlook pays no regard to the condition of the world (spirit of the age, psychological conditions of present-day man—so-called “Anknuepfungspunkt”—world-historical tasks), she by no means neglects it in a practical sense. It is a totally different matter whether the Church in pastoral function keeps her eyes open to the condition of the world and takes it continually into account, or whether she raises it into a standard among other standards for the teaching and preaching, the life, and the order of the Church. The Confessional Church when resisting with all her might the German Christian theology of the “Anknuepfungspunkt”—well known under other names in all churches—resists with the same might all the other theologies of the “Anknuepfungspunkt.” But she is never so foolish as to deny the need of the Christian preacher's

tact and considerateness (which none disputes) in all his teaching. Yet, through her struggle with the German Christians, she is called upon to attack in all churches and to defeat that legion of pelagian preachers who attempt to cover with ridicule the belief in "Justification by faith alone" with the help of that platitude—the need of the preacher's tact and considerateness.

Thus, in that attempted substitution of standards for facts we recognize the hand of the Tempter. The German Christian—feeble in faith, who seeks to escape from the distress of his intellectualism—succumbs to the temptation of spinning enchanting ideals out of external facts such as present secular conditions, nationalism, language, and so on. From this position the new heretic, the deceiver, himself deceived, assails the Church. There is hardly any point at which it becomes more evident than here to how great a degree the Church fight represents a struggle against the temptation to deliver the Church to the world.

If it shows great perversity of spirit to stage a Church struggle—as did the German Christians—with Church malcontents, with religiously unawakened persons, and with children of this world, it is indeed small wonder that heretics of this kind should suffer defeat upon defeat, although they have not to fight the powers that be but, on the contrary, are supported by them. It is true that these powers cannot save them from defeat; but they constantly save them from pursuit by their victorious opponents of the Confessional Church. The new heretic has at his disposal an entirely "new weapon" in the history of the Church; he takes advantage in his heretical struggle of the division of power between State and Church. The heretic of old knew no breathing spaces during the struggle, the modern one continually changes his front whenever an interval of rest occurs. With the close of an unsuccessful round, his front is occupied by his ally, the State, the Party, the political power; and the constantly defeated, rapidly exhausted heretic can recover himself once more. Doubtless his ally despises him for these reasons, but as he nevertheless stands in need of the heretic in order to keep up a semblance of standing for "throne and altar," the German Christian with a "truly National Socialist sense of honour" puts up with the contempt of the National Socialist, while the latter is not

ashamed to make use of a parasite for his window-dressing purposes.

Such methods and modes of fighting, however, on the part of her adversary, make it impossible for the Church to benefit from her victories. Having no "intelligence service" at her command, the Church never knows whom she is encountering in any particular section of the battlefield, whether heretics, or political powers. And while the Church attacks the heretic without being directly hindered from this by the State ("religious discussion is free") she can, according to the will of God, wage only a defensive war against the State, even when the State in its deeds appears as the beast from the abyss—a fact which many dreamers in other countries, who turned their own political wishes into plans for the German Church struggle, did not care to recognize.

How could the Confessional Church be preserved altogether from weariness and resignation in this continuous repetition of fight, victory and loss of the victory? The struggle of the new heretic, in the long run, tends much less to a revolutionary destruction of the Church than to a process of complete wearing down through continual temptation.

The Church people, however, who cannot all at once forget what had been the experience of whole centuries past, i.e., that a heretic stood always in opposition to the State, cannot possibly see through the imposture of the struggle waged by the new heretic with the aid of National Socialism. This imposture is realised only by the innermost nucleus of the community, and it is this realization which welds it together.

At this point again a comparison with the heretic of old is illuminating. He was, and is, more or less pro-Jewish; the more so as the Prophets, and often also the Mosaic Law, were of great importance for most of those old heretics; if the Church often enough was anti-Jewish, up to the time of the German Christians the heretic, so far as I know, never has been so.

But the war of the Nazis against Jewry is an act of rebellion against God, against God's history in the relations with man, i.e., against the Scriptures, and, consequently, against "the Jew Jesus." In this way we can explain the strange fact that "Christian" practice in concentration camps is made more difficult than the practice of the "Jewish religion";

thus Friday evenings and hours of memorial prayer for the deceased, as well as minor celebrations on Festivals, are often tolerated. In its hatred of a Judaism visible to the world, the Third Reich has destroyed the synagogues. But it has no serious objections against the practice of its religion and concern with God and the Bible on the part of a Judaism pushed back into the Ghetto, and made altogether proletarian. Rather it regards such a thing with cynical satisfaction. For the real antagonism of National Socialism for the Jew is not economic antagonism, nor cultural, nor racial—though all these play their part—but lies outside and beyond all intellectual conceptions, theories, standards, and practical objectives. The Jew and the Holy Bible, the two arch-enemies of Nazi religion, the two bearers of "mysteries" which cannot be got rid of from this world, in the Nazis' view belong together. The total war against Judaism is the act of total rebellion against God and His Saviour. When the last heretic of old, the liberal man, has given up the Godhead of Christ, the new heretic gives up even His Manhood. In the new heretic's still professed faith Christ has become an empty name, and a lifeless shade. He, "God and Man" for His believer and follower, is, for the German Christian, "neither God nor Man." The new heretic is the grave-digger of the Christian Faith.

Nazis with Christ—as the German Christians or such a man as Julius Streicher—and pagan Nazis without Christ—as the so-called German believers ("Deutsch-Gläubige"), to-day the large multitude of party members—are together one indistinguishable mass of apostates.

#### IV.—THE MILITANT CONGREGATION

The second miracle in the Confessional struggle, unexpected even to the Confessional pastors in that bleak winter of 1933-34, was the action of the congregations. No one would have credited them with it, not any more than anyone, and least of all the congregations, would have expected the pastors to take up the gauntlet. Made over-confident by these beginnings, some Christians of the Ecumenical Church now think they may expect such miracles from the German Church "off the conveyer belt."

The fact is, however, that the events taking place in the *ecclesia militans* are never the work of those individuals or

communities from whom they might have been anticipated. Again and again the first will be the last, and the last the first.

The German Church was almost unknown abroad. What was known was German theology—or at least certain schools of it. The German Church, as Church, had in fact become "non-visible" within the Universal Church, because throughout several generations of German Christianity theology had taken its stand in the forefront of the life of the German church, hiding it and reducing its position to one either of dependence or of impotent opposition. All this has been changed at one blow through the Church struggle. Since then, the precise opposite has taken place; theological science in Germany is now hidden from view by the Church.

The Œcumenical Church was entirely taken by surprise at this new development. She has in the meantime indeed taken note of it, but without actually quite grasping its significance. She continues to regard the Confessional Church as a kind of theological school within the Church. It has not yet dawned upon her that in the question of the Confessional Church, her essential issue of Church and congregation is at stake. She asks indeed whether, or in what degree, the Congregation is backing the Confessional pastors; but such queries are in themselves proof that she has failed to recognize the fact of the Confessing Congregation as that for which it actually stands: *Church, and Church alone*.

It is thus that the need arises clearly to interpret the issues of the Confessional struggle for the benefit of the Universal Church. For this latter, the outstanding figure of the struggle was and still is, the Confessional pastor, who owing to the very fact that he stands out alone has become the unauthorized Œcumenical symbol of the Church Militant. To a certain extent the adversary—the heretic—is also perceived, although those very persons who in other churches have gained this sort of discernment, know how little such discernment so far prevails. Up till now, however, the Militant Congregation, the very Church, has been hardly recognized at all, at least not from a proper Church standpoint.

With the outbreak of the struggle a great change occurred in the German church and its congregations. Responsibility

was now placed no longer on the Christian individual, but on the ecclesiastical office, and no longer on separate societies of individuals within the congregation. To the congregation *as a body* importance was now given.

Neither the "individual," nor the "Church of Societies" raised any opposition; on the contrary, both have failed totally, and would fail in any other church in exactly the same way. It is to those two, however, to the Office and to the Congregation, that the Lord is mightier than their mutual lack of confidence in each other.

Between the Office and the congregation there exists, however, only one single spiritual point of contact in connection with the call issued by our Lord Christ; and that is the *ordination* of the office-holder within the congregation. The ordination of the servant of Christ makes clear the mutual responsibility and mission of congregation and ministry. It is true that the ordination does not bind the congregation but only the servant of the congregation, but the congregation learns that their shepherd is not his own master, and that together with him those likewise who have been entrusted to his care, are subject to Him who alone is Lord. The call to preach the Gospel in the right manner, is also the call to hear the Gospel in the right manner. Both preacher and congregation, the administrator of the Sacrament and the communicants, are subject to one Word, one call, and one Spirit. In this consists the experience which the congregation has shared with its shepherd, during the Church struggle. In this experience the shepherd has his share as a member of the congregation, although he is the member who feeds the flock. And it is *this* experience which calls the congregation into the field and awakens the sleeping fold; through *this* experience comes the realization that the congregation is gathered and called by the Holy Spirit. It is only together with the bearer of the Office, the true servant and priest of the Lord, that the congregation becomes really "Church." But this in no wise means that it becomes through him what it never becomes without him; for "the Lord has chosen his congregation of old." One of the false theories about ministry and congregation, disproved in the Church struggle, is to be seen in the ever-recurring attempts to interpret the congregation as built up solely by means of

the ministry, or the ministry as arising out of the congregation. If the call is equally to the ministry and to the congregation, the call is to both simultaneously, so that the Office is called upon to feed the congregation, and the congregation, including the minister as its member, to follow the Lord. He, the living Word, is placed over both of them.

The best times of the Church know no conflict between ministry and community; by the best times, we mean her times of crisis in which she is being visibly ruled by the Holy Spirit. And the fact that such a unanimity between ministry and congregation was granted in the Church struggle affords the proof of the working of the Holy Spirit in this struggle.

But such a gift is by no means an inalienable one. Both ministry and congregation have the same guardian, the Confession,<sup>1</sup> and Ordination makes manifest the function of this guardian in the life of the Church.

As an outcome of the Church struggle we can therefore state the following: Neither St. Matthew xvi. nor xviii., neither St. John xxi. nor xx., neither St. Matthew x. nor xx. 28, neither St. Matthew xx. 23 nor xxv, 40, neither St. John xx. 28 nor 10, neither 1 Corinthians xii. and Ephesians iv. nor 1 Timothy v, or at last 1 Peter ii., nor any other single word of the New Testament may be quoted by itself to define the conception: *Ministry, Congregation, Church.*

Thus the right order is no simple result of study; but the right usage of the Scriptures is bestowed upon us in the struggle of the Church wherever this struggle is more than mere strife of doctrine. Hireling and good shepherd do not wrestle for the sake of doctrines, even though they fight with the aid of doctrines as their weapons; they wrestle for the right existence of congregation and of Church.

The Church struggle is effecting a spiritual purge of the Church. The Body of the Church Militant is shrinking, but, at the same time, it is being strengthened, revived, united, and sanctified.

<sup>1</sup> The word "Confession" always means in the German Church the Creed of the Church plus what the Church of England calls "articles of religion." The Confession of the German Church therefore consists of the "three Creeds" of the Ancient Church reiterated in the Confession of the Reformation, the "Confessio Augustana," and this Confession itself together with the subsequent supplements.

## V.—AND WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH GOVERNMENT ?

But there is one boundary which has not been crossed in the Confessional struggle. If it is enough for the Church of Christ not to suffer defeat under the greatest might of this world, then the German Church has indeed been victorious against Nazism. But this Church has failed as regards Church government, for not even within herself has she found a convincing solution for the problem of Church authority. The Confessional movement experienced a certain standstill over this question at the last Confessional Reich Synod, held in 1936 at Oeynhausen.

It is, however, questionable whether a battling and suffering Church can further be called upon to solve the problem of Church government without the aid of the entire Church. To me it seems that as regards Church government the problem of the German church struggle is becoming one which is directly Œcumenical. It was the business of the Universal Church to recognize in this connection that the call to battle, which had come to German Christendom since 1933, has been extended to the whole of Christianity, and that since 1939, the German church struggle has developed both in men's consciousness and also outwardly, and spread to all countries of the Christian Œcumenical Movement.

We now hand over the task which we had set ourselves in this essay to others, better qualified for it. We abstain from citing names but we know who are the few in the Œcumenical sphere who have been and are testifying both to the Œcumenical aspect of the Confessional Pastor's struggle, and also to the new fact of the Œcumenical war in which all Christian churches are involved.

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