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Current State of German Theology

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THANK YOU for your kind invitation to St. Louis! I consider it a real privilege to be allowed to share with you some of my observations on the German theological and ecclesiastical situation. We know, that it is still of interest for you—not only because you can find some of your Lutheran sister-synods there, but also because Germany is still one of the world centers, in which new and interesting theological schools of thought are created. In themselves they might not make any real positive contribution for us, but they are often quite influential and, therefore, must be thoroughly considered.

I.

In the opinion of Eberhard Hubner, the German theological situation is a struggle between Barth and Bultmann: Most of the other theologians can be incorporated in this conflict. The very few confessional representatives are on the outside of the struggle and have not contributed to the evolution of the present theological thought. In the epilog to Heinz Bolli's edition of *Schleiermacher*, Karl Barth contributed an autobiography, one of his last contributions. Here he stated that Bultmann and his followers have not really advanced much beyond the principles of Schleiermacher's system. In Barth's judgment, they are still bound to the 19th century theology. There is a question on whether Barth herewith also changed his mind in regard to his original judgment on Lutheran theology. He considered Bultmann and his followers as "Lutheran" when he wrote his well-known booklet: *Rudolf Bultmann—ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen* in 1952. Helmut Thielicke in his first volume of *Der Evangelische Glaube. Prolegomena* (1968) thinks that Schleiermacher's theological principles can already be found in Descartes' philosophy. Thielicke, therefore, distinguished between Cartesian and non-Cartesian types of theology. In the first group are such men as Lessing, Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Tillich, etc.

Our task is evaluating Barth's theology. Does his overconcern for and belligerent attitude to the 19th century, really only make him a child of this century, in spite of all his claims to the contrary? Or can we find something in his gigantic system, which has to be considered as a really new impulse for our day? As you might know, Barth was considered out of date in our country. But this was premature and proved to be an error. We are not only thinking of the Netherlands and other European countries, in which he is still considered to be *the* theological authority of our times, but we are also thinking of men like Moltmann, whose theological thought is also based upon this Swiss theologian's. It is interesting to observe, that men like Klaus Bockmühl, who have done research on Marxism in past years, are now doing research on Barth. We know that Barth's

system reflects the influence not only of men like Wilhelm Herrmann and Soren Kierkegaard, but also Christoph Blumhardt, Jr., Kutter and Ragaz. It must be remembered that Barth joined the Swiss Socialistic Democratic Party in 1915. The most important followers of Barth's thought are theologians who are or have been open to Marxist ideas. Consider Helmut Gollwitzer or Hromádka. Thus it might be possible that Barth did open the door for this new trend in German theology, in which a certain understanding of the Gospel is combined with Marxist ideas. It is self-evident that these thoughts are not against Bultmann's basic conception. Bultmann's anthropological basis is a restatement of the self-understanding of man, so typical for western Europe in the second half of the last century.

We do not want to act as arbitrators in this duel between Barth and Bultmann, because both theologians are not representative of our theological position. We only want to mention a few things in passing. It is hardly coincidental that both Barth and Bultmann together with Emil Brunner, Friedrich Gogarten and, to a certain extent, Paul Tillich, also were once part of the same group, when the Dialectical Theology, (the "theology of crisis," as it was named by Tillich) began its attack on the theology of the twenties. All these systems have the same anthropological position. Negatively, it was formulated by Barth. Its main purpose and aim are the ontological insights. Bultmann, under the influence of Heidegger, later eagerly demonstrated the existential meaning of man's faith, etc. Barth had definite socialistic leanings. Gogarten joined the "Deutsche Christen." This brought many of our German territorial churches right into the hands of the Nazis in the thirties. Nobody bothered to question the tenets of their thinking. Nobody bothered to ask whether such tenets were sound. These tenets later formed the base for their entire system of ideas and thoughts. It is quite remarkable to observe how some theologians try to combine the results of one theological system with another. An example of this confusion is the Dutch theologian, J. Sperna Weiland, in his remarkable publication *Oriëntatie*. How is it possible to build a roof in the air, hoping that the building established under it might finally find a foundation to support it? Such imagination is hardly *the* real faith. It is an illusion.

These developments, however, brought forth some other efforts, which need careful watching. They can be very influential in the general theological trends, which affect my area positively. Here I want to mention a man who has been a scientist and later on became a theologian at Utrecht University: Arnold E. Loen, a follower of Barth. His publication *Sakularisation* can be considered as his opus magnum. He is now professor in the field of philosophy of religion. Nobody who wants to be considered a serious theologian in Germany can ignore this publication. It is written in a quite difficult Heidegger-diction and discusses the problem of what the term "theology" really means. To Loen's credit, he raised the question—and tried to answer it to a certain extent—how the different branches of sciences have to be understood and how far they were or are of influence on theological systems. I personally believe that his results are too optimistic as far as the relations between science

or knowledge and theology are concerned. Still it is my conviction that this work gives many suggestions and provides impulses that might clear up the theological field as far as its tenets, illusions, categories and methods are concerned. We have to see whether these valuable thoughts will really bring into existence a real reformation in the field of theological thought.

Some other problems have to be worked out, if we want to get back to a solid basis, upon which we are able to judge the theological systems of our day. Here real research has to be done. I want to state very modestly, that my contributions on the relations between theology and science, etc. were considered quite positively in my country, and that I had the opportunity during the last months to teach at your Springfield Seminary on the relations between theology and culture, and theology and society. Here are a wealth of materials, that show why, at least, the theological trend during the last two and a half centuries went the way it did. The history of theology can teach us many experiences, which we, as responsible Lutheran theologians, can and dare not ignore.

II.

You might be skeptical of the picture I tried to sketch. Lutheran theology often does not want to argue, but it is more eager to testify and to confess. This is true and good, and as I have written several times, theology is much more than merely a scientific reflection of the Lord's saving deeds. It is a spiritual process inside the Christian Church, namely, the talk with and of God in adoration and confession with words and deeds. It is subject to the Lord's commandment as reported in Matthew 28:19f. and can never be understood as an end in itself. Theology is not by any means a science, but it can, under certain limitations, use secular disciplines and sciences as auxiliary means if they are of real help for attaining God-given aims. Here theologians have to be better "scientists." They know what the true assumptions, categories and methods are, with which they work and who the real authority is whom they must obey. Let me very briefly explain some theological terms, which sometimes make us feel a little bit uncomfortable: the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures and Trinity. They try to describe with terms what is said in the Bible. We feel that those terms are not really adequate. But we cannot change them, for we do not have better words. Often the danger comes up, that we try to define them in a philosophical way—positively or negatively—and both ways are wrong. We feel that our language is too short and too limited, when we want to express in one word, what is revealed in our respective regards in God's revelation. Those terms are nevertheless of highest value for us. They have to be understood theologically, i.e., we have to use them in full responsibility, in which we stand under God. They have a very heavy ethical content, because they teach us, that we cannot use them as instruments for our own aims and systems, but that we are bound to that, what God has said to us in His Word and in His revelation of Himself. Those terms belong to our true adoration to God and to our faithful confession of Him as of our Lord and Saviour.

I was deeply impressed, when one of my friends, now professor for mission-theology at the University of Tübingen, told me that he was forced to rethink the term "verbal inspiration," a phrase he once hated. This man is deeply involved in the German theological and ecclesiastical struggles. He sees the necessity of rejecting our neo-liberal systems. It has led him back to the terminology of the old Lutheran dogmaticians, of which he is now beginning to think very highly. This is amazing as he was not a Lutheran before.

Theology is a spiritual process within the whole Church. Therefore, an intellectual play with certain ideas and philosophies, psychological thought or social and cultural moments in this field cannot be limited to a certain theological level—e.g., as an academic theology, etc.—but must be effective in the life of the Church. We cannot direct the Spirit. When theological systems begin to manipulate the Spirit's vehicles, the Church will then begin to break down. When scientific theology questions the truth of Christ's Gospel and thus Christ and His saving deeds themselves, the Gospel leaves nothing to be believed, and people will lose their interest and leave the church. Or else they will establish groups and parties in order to attack their opponents within their synods. These polarizations will automatically lead to the total destruction of the respective empiric Churches. It has been said that the present church-structure in German Protestantism will break down within the next ten years. Christianity has been a minority within the Protestant population for many decades, but custom and the state and territorial church-structures prevented them from leaving. The many interruptions of the Nazi period, the war, and the following decade prevented clarification. When the Protestant synods did not reform their structures after the last war, but brought forth only a restoration, and when the above mentioned theological systems and their extreme followers were tolerated and reinstated, most of the people turned away. The number of confirmands in the eastern zone this year is 6-8 per cent. More than 350,000 members left the peoples' churches in Western Germany in 1969, and the number is increasing. The average church attendance is about 0.5 per cent in northern Germany and about 3 per cent in southern Germany. An increasing number of people refuse to pay the "church-tax." Books are published against Christianity and many editions are printed to meet the demand. They are promoted by big and famous publishing houses. (I want to mention two important books, one written by a cultural-Protestant Christian, who comes from the groups around Otto Dibelius; Hans-Georg von Studnitz: *Ist Gott Mitläufer?*—the other one a very young theologian, who received his doctor's degree at the Marburg University with a dissertation on Gogarten's theology and left Christianity in order to become a Marxistic economist; Joachim Kahl: *Das Elend des Christentums, oder: Playdoyer für eine Humanität ohne Gott.*) Marxistic groups are founded with the declared aim to destroy the synods from the inside. Satan's masses are held in churches, sculptures of Christ are ruined in famous church-buildings, etc. Everybody who sows the wind, will reap the whirlwind.

This is the current state of Protestantism in our country today.

We do not know what the future will bring. We only know if German Protestantism collapses, then world Protestantism will also suffer under these consequences. For the West German Protestant synods pay a high percentage of the expenses of ecclesiastical alliances, like WCC, LWF, etc. It would be difficult for these world-wide groups to function without the financial support of the German synods. It will be quite evident for those who did not notice it until today that the famous model for a union between different Protestant confessions as formed in the "Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland" is not only unable to work, but will also bring about the final ruin of Protestantism. This is not a polemical remark. The facts of our present situation show this clearly.

III.

In the last part of this essay, attention will be given to the pietistic "Confessing Movement: No Other Gospel" or the "Church Gatherings to Bible and Confession." Their origin can be explained against the background material provided in the first parts of this essay.

These groups are not the first ones to contend for the true understanding of the Gospel and its unconditional acceptance within the territorial churches. There have been such movements dating back 150 years. The Lutheran Free Churches in Germany are successors of some of these movements. The new factor in these two newly formed groups is that they realize that it is impossible only negatively to oppose doctrinally false developments within theology and church politics. For this is a negative position, resulting in no blessings. These two movements know that they have to act in a positive manner. They recognize, that they might be the cells of German Protestantism of tomorrow. They might just be that island where the remnants of Protestant Christianity will find a haven after the destruction of present church-structures.

The "Confessing Movement: No Other Gospel" and the "Church Gatherings" are groups inside their territorial churches. They do not oppose the synodical machinery as such, but they positively confess their faith through different channels, including evangelism. They have considered the possibility of establishing their own synods, if necessary. They want their groups to have a churchly structure even though they are only groups and not official churches. The first time that the Lutheran Free Synods tried to establish a real and permanent contact with these groups, especially with the Lutheran "Church Gatherings," it was my privilege to represent our synods in their praesidium.

These 'Gatherings' have contacts in other countries. They are allied with similar groups in Scandinavia, and they hope to find good relations to confessional Lutheran groups and synods in the U.S.A. and Australia. They have experienced that there is not much hope for their cause as far as world alliances as WCC or LWF are concerned. These federations care first of all for the institution of the denomination and have little interest with confessionally concerned groups. They center their activity on the church's political structures

and not where it should be, namely, confession and the church's real life. Personalities inside those federations might regret this state of affairs. But it is axiomatic that federations of churches are concerned about the structures and not the principles.

It should be noted that the 'Church Gatherings' and the 'Confessing Movement' have not merged. They do not even want to establish a church fellowship with each other. The fact is that there is no agreement on certain confessional points, e.g., the understanding of the sacraments. In other words, these two movements do not want to repeat on a smaller scale the bad experiences of the FKiD. We are of the conviction that only the absolute oneness in faith is the real basis for one church-body or ecclesiastical group, if it is to be active and effective in its communities. Every compromise, in this regard, weakens both sides.

We also know, that there are other levels, upon which cooperations are possible between groups, which otherwise do not have church fellowship with each other. Therefore the 'Confessing Movement' and the 'Church Gatherings' work together as closely as possible, whenever possible.

A final word on the situation of the Lutheran Free Synods in Germany: They established church fellowship with each other in 1947/49. They have tried since then to come into a closer relationship with each other. They hope to merge within the next two years. These attempts to unite prevented our synods from being active in a way which is necessary for the Germany of today. For me, it became clear that we would have been more obedient to the Lord, if we would have concentrated our efforts on His primary commandment, to do mission work, than on so many human traditions and personal ambitions, which still hinder a quick union of our church bodies. Some in these newly formed groups do not consider these synods as ideal examples for positive concern because their own little problems and aims are always intruding. Everybody respects, nevertheless, the confessional status of these synods. We can only hope that these synods will finally leave their ghetto in order to direct their activities according to Christ's mandates to His Church.

We spoke of the theological and churchly situation in German Protestantism of today. It is not difficult to come to a conclusion in two short statements:

1. Germany can be considered no longer as a Christian nation, but as a mission-field, in which a western brand of Marxism and a Christian minority will fight for the souls of men.
2. Christ's Church of tomorrow in Germany may be a very small minority, which will, however, be stronger and effective. Consequently, its faith will be able to find its "first love," which has to be expressed in gratitude by the means of clear confession and through the selfless actions of 'diakonia.'