

(*American Edition. Printed in England.*)

EVANGELICAL CONTINENTAL SOCIETY. FOUNDED 1845
20 MEMORIAL HALL, FARRINGTON STREET,
LONDON, E.C.4.

BOOKLET No. 10—1934

To Be or Not to Be :

The Three Struggles of the Protestant Churches of Europe.

By Dr. Adolf Keller, 1872-

Professor in the University of Geneva and Secretary
of the Central European Bureau
of Inter-Church Aid.

An Address to the National Free Church Council
Conference at Birkenhead,
on 13th March, 1934.

Evangelical Continental Society

THE OBJECTS OF THIS SOCIETY ARE :

- (1) To make grants to Protestant Evangelical Churches and Societies, chiefly in Countries where Protestant minorities are working under exceptional difficulties.
- (2) To serve as an interdenominational uncontroversial liaison Committee between British Protestant Churches and Protestant Churches and representative organizations on the Continent of Europe; and
- (3) To act as a Bureau of Protestant Information to inform British Churches of the difficulties and developments of the European Churches and to inform the European Churches on matters of concern to them in the activities and developments of the British Churches.

“ One Lord, one faith, one baptism.”—*Ephesians IV*, 5.

“ Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”—*Galatians VI*, 2.

“ Grace be with all them that love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.”—*Ephesians VI*, 24.

“ Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”—*Matthew XXV*, 40.

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Your thought has been concentrated on the subject of "The Sovereignty of God". Some of your best thinkers have shown that the Divine Sovereignty is not just a theological proposition lending itself to purely academic discussion, but that the fact of the Sovereignty is the hope of the world. The world seems to have lost sight of God and to have placed its trust in policies and leaders actuated solely by material and political considerations. Never in the history of the Christian Church has there been more urgent need to recover the realization of the Sovereignty of God as revealed by the Seers of the Old Testament, and most of all by our Lord and Saviour in whom God made Himself manifest in the flesh. Always the Churches of the Reformation Faith of Luther, Calvin and their great collaborators had an unshakable faith in the over-ruling Sovereignty of God. It was that faith which gave them the inspiration and the courage to bring back the Church to the light of the New Testament Gospel.

To-day the Evangelical Churches of Europe are faced with three struggles in which they should receive the sympathy, the prayers and the practical help of their brethren of the Churches of the same family of the faith in countries more happily situated. Let me, very briefly, outline the nature of the struggles.

I.

The first is the struggle of nearly all Churches for their bare existence. Wherever we look into little Protestant villages in Spain, or in Siberian woods, in Czecho-slovakian, Hungarian or Rumanian parishes, or into the burning house of the German Church—everywhere the question is alive: Can the Church exist, or will it come to an end? Certainly we are not living on bread alone, but can even the most spiritual Church live without bread at all? Can a pastor's family in Transylvania, with seven or eight children, live on a salary of something like two pounds a month?

Can a whole Church, as the Orthodox or the Protestant Churches in Russia, exist, if one Church after the other is dynamited or transformed into a museum or into a cinema? The Protestant Churches in Russia have been nearly destroyed. From 70 Lutheran pastors still living, 24 a month ago were in concentration camps, and last month we heard the not yet verified news that many more were arrested and taken away from their parishes. Certainly a Church can live spiritually without church buildings, and perhaps even without trained theologians, but can it live without the Bible? Can it live without the possibility of giving a religious education to the children?

But even where Christians have not to face this last question of the Christian faith and martyrdom, even where only the need to get the daily bread is constantly before the eyes, the Christian faith becomes quite a problem. At the present moment the leaders of a large Deaconess House in Poland, Bishop Bursche in Warsaw and Senior Kulish in Teschen, who has transformed a sheep-stable into a Deaconess House, have in their state of need a great likeness to a drowning man. They hear already the laughter of the Catholic majority which would see, not without pleasure, the failure of the first attempt to introduce the blessed work of the Deaconesses into the Evangelical Church of Poland.

A little farther in Southern Poland there is a hero of faith, a father of his people, Dr. Zoeckler, a George Müller of Poland, whose sleepless nights are filled with bitter questions: Does world Protestantism leave alone these little struggling Churches in Eastern Europe? Has God forsaken us? Is it not better to close

the door to the orphans and the crippled, and to abandon them in their distress if Christian brethren and God Himself seem to abandon them?

Among the workers of the Evangelical Movement in the Ukraine there is more than one who, in his hunger-stricken life, asked me last year: Would it not be better to go back to my village and become a farmer or a horse merchant and live peacefully on what I earn, instead of preaching the Gospel and suffering hunger?

The present economic crisis does not only mean a loss of the material substance of the Church, and debts for which there is no end, but a breakdown of blessed institutions like many Evangelical schools in Roumania. But this crisis means also a crisis in the spiritual life of the Church. The material need is becoming a spiritual need of faith. We have received thousands of letters from starving Russian farmers, and in many of them, addressed to their "dear Uncle Keller", the question comes again and again: We do not know how long we can stand, how long we can keep our faith?

What does this struggle for bare existence mean to us all? We have all to learn a terrible lesson from this suffering.

Wherever the Churches have to fight for their existence, they have also to fight for their faith. They still believe in us, and in our help, but have they not too much confidence in us?

Dear friends! What God have these Christians, sitting in darkness? It is not the dear heavenly Father in heaven whom we meet when we are raising our hearts in prayer and adoration, but it is that God, of whom the Psalmist speaks, the God whom we meet also in hell, the unknown God, who is still our God even if we do not understand Him.

In this need of faith a new Protestant consciousness of solidarity and mutual responsibility can be born, which we never had in times of prosperity and happiness. At least when our heart, listening to this crisis of despair, gives the convincing answer: Nearer, my Brother, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

This time of need gives us a vision of that unknown Christian far, far away, who resembles so strikingly the Man on the Cross. The truth which lies in suffering for Christ. We are very thankful

to Christians in this country that they share this need with these brethren and help us through their collaboration in the Europe Central Bureau and the Evangelical Continental Society to assure them of our solidarity.

II.

The second struggle of Continental Protestantism is the struggle for liberty. In a time when the State is becoming totalitarian and omnipotent, where is the place for the Church? What shall the Church do when all power in heaven and earth seems to be in the hands of the State? The State has rapidly become the exponent of a new myth.

The relationship of Church and State is becoming everywhere on the Continent a most acute problem. The State was, especially for the Lutheran Churches in Germany, the Lord Protector of the Church like those dear old Princes in Thuringia were for Luther. It is becoming to-day more and more the gaol-keeper of the Church, shutting it up in a narrow prison of State-will and State-law.

In Spain, up to the Revolution, the State did not allow the Evangelical Church to be visible in public life. It was forbidden to build a church in any street. It was forbidden to build a steeple or to put an inscription on the door declaring the Evangelical character of the building. The Church must be hidden away in a dark court-yard out of sight and mind. The Spanish Revolution put an end to this situation. But in most of the other countries the Church is again in the grip of a State which claims to be invested with the authority of divine right. In Italy, the State tolerates the Protestant Church in spite of the claim of the Pope that Protestantism shall not be tolerated in the Holy City, but this toleration depends on the good will of the Government which could easily give quite a different interpretation to the Treaty concluded with the Vatican.

At the present moment all the Evangelical Churches in Poland are terrified by a new project of Church law, which would take away all liberty from the Evangelical Church and bring it entirely under the arbitrary domination of the State. To be catholic means in Poland to enjoy every possible liberty. To be Protestant would mean for a Church, according this law, to be a slave in

the hands of the State. Germany, at the present time, is presenting to us the greatest problem in this field. A new mystical assimilation, a tuning-in of every expression of life to the ideal of the State, is actually in vogue. No independent Youth Movement! The Evangelical Youth belongs to the State. No variety of individualistic Churches! A Church monism is preached, which is a simple copy of the State monism. No longer does the State or the State party tolerate independent men with the riches of personality. No multitude of charitable works with their manifold features, but one unified will to do the good which the State prescribes.

Nobody would deny the right to a nation to choose the form of State which corresponds to its needs and to build up the same strong national unity which other nations have already fought for in former centuries. It can even be already seen, in the present chaotic and menacing conditions, that only a strong man and a strong united nation can have the hope of resisting the undermining influences of present-day Bolshevism and Communism.

But the question is what does this new conception of the State, its power, its task, mean for the Church? And here the Christian world is gravely concerned with the loss of liberty involved in these nationalistic Revolutions, that liberty which is as necessary for the Church as air is for breathing. A State theology is developing and basing itself on the theology of the Reformation, which in its interest in religious questions, in its friendliness to the Church, is more dangerous for the spiritual life than any hostile power. How much of such State power, of such omnipotent claims of a totalitarian State, can the Church suffer without losing its soul? The Church can lose its fortune, its influence, its protection, but when it loses its liberty, its very substance is corrupted or attacked.

Millions of our fellow Christians in the Continental Churches are either afraid of the State as of the beast of the abyss, or are already engaged in a struggle for liberty which deserves the attention of the whole of Protestantism, because Protestantism stands and falls with the principle of liberty.

If no liberty is granted to the Church, she has to go down to the catacombs or to the mystical inner realm, where she can live in peace and freedom, but has no more any influence on the

world. The Church in Germany is therefore already in open revolt against the State Church or nationalistic party-Church which denies her liberty. Pastors and pastoral fraternities in the Rhineland have been invited openly and publicly to resist the official Church government and to suffer if necessary for the liberty of conscience. A free Synod in the Rhineland has publicly invited elders, ministers and parishes to disobey any measure directed against the true Evangelical nature of the Church.

But how can a Church struggle with a State? I think that Great Britain set the example when the Puritans in England asserted the "Crown rights of Jesus" against State denial of spiritual liberty, and in Scotland a Moderator of the Scottish Church declared: "There are two kingdoms in this country, of one of which James I is the King, and of one of which Jesus Christ is King".

We are on the eve of equally important events in Church history. Either these Evangelical Churches and their leaders will break through all fear and worldly walls and declare, like Luther, their hero, "Here I stand, I cannot otherwise", or the Church will be crushed in the fatal coils of the Python of State-power and party politics.

It is still to be hoped that State and Church will find that peaceful relationship whereby the nature of each can be safeguarded, the might of the State in all matters temporal, and the liberty of the Church in all matters spiritual. Hitler himself desires such a relationship with the possibilities of collaboration between State and Church consistent with the totalitarian claim. Let us rejoice to-day that liberty, one of the highest aims of Free Churches, has once more become the object of one of the noblest struggles which mankind can undertake to safeguard the conditions of spiritual life. The Christians in Germany themselves feel how inspiring such a struggle is, and feel it worth while, although they have to face all kinds of oppression. One hundred and twenty pastors have already been suspended from their office.

In their struggle for existence, the Churches on the Continent are again learning to be poor with Christ. In the second struggle for liberty, the Churches learn again to be valiant and intrepid with Christ.

III.

The third struggle concerns us more directly. Seen from a distance, this third struggle seems to rage in the area of Church politics, for or against the Aryan exclusiveness, for or against the State-imposed Bishop, against the victory of a party, for certain rights within the Church, for or against a questionable theological interpretation. But these are only minor aspects of a struggle of a deeper spiritual nature. It is the struggle for Evangelical Truth, the struggle for the true nature of the Church. What is the true message of the Church? Is it a Gospel immanent to the nature of man, the mystical Gospel of the inner divine spark in the human soul as the great German mystic Eckart taught in the XIII century, and as Mr. Rosenberg, chief of the cultural education of the Reich, is again proclaiming? Or is it the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Is it the myth of elect blood, the Aryan Germanic race, the totalitarian State or the Gospel of pardon, of grace, of love, of spiritual rebirth? And where do we find this Gospel? In the myth of the XX century, as Alfred Rosenberg's great book, "The Myth of the German Faith", now put on the Index by the Pope, or is it in the Bible, the New and Old Testament? And what is the task of the Christian Church? Is it to educate the people for the nationalistic totalitarian State, or to announce the undiluted Gospel of Jesus Christ?

These are no more questions of Church politics than of ecclesiastical parties. They are the fundamental questions of our Christian faith, decisive questions waiting for decisive answers. Our German Evangelical brethren of the opposition, of the "Pfarrernotbund", the "Fraternities" in the Rhineland, the Free Synods, are here engaged in a decisive battle for the spiritual heritage of the Reformation. And this battle, fought so heroically and with such great sacrifices, means a rebirth of the spirit of the Reformation, such as we have perhaps not seen for three centuries. Again, as in Luther's time, Christian men are taking their stand with Christ, trusting in God alone and defending the Bible, the whole Bible of the New and Old Testament. And again, the spiritual nature of this Gospel is revealing itself invincible by worldly powers, stronger than persecution and even death.

The fundamental spiritual questions of which I speak cannot be solved by State decrees, by governmental action, by ecclesiastical leadership, by party power, but only by a deeper theological reflexion, by spiritual decisions of individuals and individual groups, by re-thinking the great Truths of the Reformation.

The German Revolution contains therefore, in so far as the Church is involved, a fundamental theological problem. Adolf Hitler cannot understand his fighting pastors if he does not study a little bit of theology.

It is the controversy whether Christendom shall, in the future, be based on a theology of creation or on a theology of redemption, whether the primary data of creation, our human existence, the blood, the race, the State, shall be the fundamental element of the Christian faith or the revealed Gospel of sin and grace.

You all know what the Reformed Swiss, Karl Barth, Professor of Systematic Theology, means in this struggle. He is the champion who, without interfering with the affairs of the State, repeats what the Scottish Moderator said in a similar struggle about the two Kingdoms in Scotland. He has forged the theological weapons for that valiant army of intrepid pastors, protesting Synods, disobeying Presbyteries, faithful parishes, that not at all contemptible army which, like Elijah, sees the invisible and invincible heavenly cavalry surrounding and protecting the City of God besieged by a hostile worldly power. Just as the prophet prayed to God to open the eyes of the boy and to show him that invisible presence, Karl Barth is opening the eyes of thousands of believers to the true spiritual nature of the Church of Jesus Christ. His pamphlet on "Our Actual Theological Situation", now sold in 30,000 copies in Germany, sounds like a trumpet call to the troops to assemble around the sole leader, Christ—and *ubi Christus ibi Ecclesia*—not to be afraid of the world and to obey God rather than men.

What does this struggle mean for Christian Germany, which to-day is fighting on a double front against a natural theology of a vague and general Christian humanism and idealism, and a neo-pagan theology, which under leaders like Rosenberg, Hauer, Wirth, and Bergmann, is forming a third Confession, alongside the Catholic and the Protestant, and claiming, as modern heathendom, the same place in the Reich with equal rights, support, possibilities of education and mission?

What does all this mean for German Protestantism, which represents not only the first Church of the Reformation from a historical point of view, but the largest bulk of the Protestant Churches on the Continent, and, at the same time, a crucial question, a real shibboleth for world Protestantism?

The deeper meaning of these events for German Protestantism can be found in the following points :—

1. Religion is no more a private matter, as in the time of our well-known Protestant individualism and liberalism. It has become a public matter, a question of life and death for the whole people which to-day has to take a decision for or against Christ.

2. This means nothing less than a new consideration of the nature, the meaning and the task of the Church. We Protestants had not thought out clearly what makes the Church a Church; we left it too much to our Anglican and Catholic brethren. To-day, a new Church-consciousness is awakening, a new *ecclesia militans*, struggling for its place in the modern world.

3. But as the Church is not one, in spite of the proclaimed Church monism, a winnowing process is necessary, a crisis in which, amidst suffering and persecution, the spirit of the Reformation is reborn and expresses itself again in the function of "*Protestari*", which means likewise to give witness and to protest against any tainting of the Gospel with worldly aims.

4. The inner family conflicts of German Protestantism lead Lutherans and Reformed people towards a serious and brotherly taking up again of that inter-Confessional conversation, which came to an end prematurely at the day of Marburg when Luther said to Zwingli: "You have another spirit than we".

In spite of denominational criticism and a growing denominational consciousness, Lutheran and Reformed voices are increasingly saying: "You have the same spirit as we, although you may express it in different forms." Karl Barth, for instance, is very keen to keep his people together within the whole Church, and not to allow it to seclude itself in a kind of a Reformed ghetto or to abandon the fate of the whole Church by founding free Churches.

5. The present struggle brings forth a new preparedness of a part of the Church to re-think and re-shape its faith. Now, as never before, is the time of witness and of those Confessions of Faith which have always been a decision of the Church for Truth and against heresy.

6. At a moment when the heresy of worldliness invades large parts of the Church, when the Church as such is suffering under coercion and an unevangelical autocracy, our brethren are discovering the congregation of believers as the last refuge of the living faith, binding together its members into a new family, which in its spiritual life and faith can defy any autocratic Church Government or heretical temptation.

7. The fact that Protestants and Catholics have to defend to-day a common Christian heritage against a new and organizing heathendom and against the claims of a totalitarian State is instrumental in the forming of a joint Christian front, and of a new relationship between the two Confessions. There can be no question of building up a common Christian German Church, but a community of interests become visible which did more for a mutual understanding than scores of controversial conferences.

But the Church revolution in Germany is not merely a German concern or limited in its effect to the Lutheran or Reformed Churches in Germany. It is momentous for the whole of Protestantism, and therefore I dealt more in detail with the deeper meaning of this revolution.

The fundamental question is whether we are not engaged in the same struggle, not in the struggle for our existence or our liberty, but in the fight for a deeper reality, for the original religious interpretation of the Reformation and of its rediscovered Gospel. The Evangelical opposition in Germany is certainly very grateful for any expression of sympathy coming from brethren in the faith. But as Karl Barth would remind us, their opposition is not directed against the State as such, against a political party as such, against a certain Church Government, but it is an attack on a worldly Protestantism wherever it exists in the present world, a spiritual combat with a purely natural theology, against an unholy marriage of cultural and religious elements, of reason and revelation, culture and Gospel, religious conscience and the Word

of God. This gigantic effort to keep the Gospel of Jesus Christ untainted by our own worldly, political, social and personal desires challenges the attention of the whole Evangelical world, which is confronted everywhere with the question: What is the bedrock of the Church? What is its message in a world which seems to place us before final decisions in the struggle for or against Christ? What can we do in this struggle?

We have seen that we ourselves are involved in this struggle in which large groups of Continental Protestantism are engaged. We are sharing their struggle for the bare existence of the Church by supporting them with our brotherly sympathy and our help. We are participating in their battle for liberty, because Liberty is one of the great concerns of Protestantism the world over, and particularly of the Free Churches in this country. But we are more than concerned as onlookers or wellwishers in their struggle for Evangelical Truth, because here we all stand and fall together, *Tua res agitur*—It is your job. Wherever brethren have to suffer and to fight for Truth and for the true nature of the Church, it is our suffering and our sacred battle.

But what can we do? I feel deeply the great responsibility in trying to find an answer to this question. Hasty judgments, not based on intimate knowledge of the deeper motives in the German Revolution, and of the theological reasoning of important Church groups, or mere protestations against certain aspects of the Church revolution, would fail to have any effect on the German mind and provoke even reprisals which would be hard to bear by our German friends.

What Evangelical Christians and Churches abroad can do is to share deeply the fundamental and decisive struggle in the German Church, not by accusations or protestations, but by re-thinking the essentials of our Christian Faith and by stating as resolutely as possible what, in our mind and faith, is the nature of a Christian Church, what does Christ and His Gospel mean for a sinful world, what is essential to a Church of the Reformation? The time may perhaps be not very far distant when such definition and confession of faith become necessary again, even in the courts of the land, if it must be proved in the face of competition of other more or less Christian or even unchristian, groups, claiming the same rights, which is the true Christian Evangelical Church,

which group is truly in line with the historic Church and represents, so to speak, the apostolic succession of the Spirit of the Reformation. In such case it might be a great help if one united chorus of Christian Evangelical Churches could say unanimously as the united voice of the Churches of the Reformation : We declare and confess as the common conviction of these Churches that an Evangelical Church recognizes the Bible, of the Old and the New Testament, as sole source of our Faith, that the Christian Evangelical Church is based on revelation in the Gospel, and not on a natural theology or on historically dubious events, that Christ alone is the Head of His Church, and that He does not listen to the voice of a stranger. It may be that such a simple and clear declaration of faith may be more helpful and decisive than any protestations or criticisms, which we may apply to a new situation. The question will arise here whether the other Evangelical Churches will be able to arrive at such a Protestant syllabus or common opinion, whether a natural theology based on the immediate data of the fallen creation, on blood and race and the desires of our own hearts, whether this natural theology, this humanism and secularism which we have to combat in another Church, is not to be found in our own ranks, whether the Evangelical Faith of criticising Churches is not adulterated with the same secular elements, the same human ideals which we deplore in other Churches.

The decisive battle in Germany has become a crucial test for our own groups, and once more we are all confronted with the terrible question : What is the Truth? Not our Truth, but God's Truth, Christ's Truth? And are we ourselves willing to obey this Truth?

If we are sharing in this way the deep spiritual need of our German brethren, their fundamental quest for truth, we are maintaining that ecumenical spirit, which we need in a time when nationalistic and party interests seem to dominate even the Christian Churches. We speak of sharing in our individual spiritual life and use this term of a new movement when we are participating not so much in our mutual preferences and virtues, but in our shortcomings and our sins. Is such sharing possible only for individual Christians, or can Christian Churches as such also share their lack of faith with each other, their errors and failures, their pride and

their temptations? If we have to suffer and to carry our weak or erring brethren amongst ourselves with patience and faith, is it not then our duty to maintain that universal fellowship which the Christian Church represents in spite of its differences, its various interpretations, its shortcomings and its sins?

We can do it under one condition : that we place ourselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that we face the inescapable question of Truth, and that we believe, in spite of all the seductions of a powerful error : *magna est vis veritatis*. Great is the power of Truth, of that Truth which is Jesus Christ, our common Lord and Saviour, that Truth which is grounded in the infinite Majesty of God Himself.

