



***A Christian in
East Germany***

Johannes Hamel

A Christian in East Germany

Pastor Hamel is the spiritual and intellectual leader among many of the Christians of Germany 'behind the iron curtain'. Christian discipleship in a Communist state involves fresh thought and cold courage. Fortunately some of the East German pastors, Johannes Hamel among them, were trained in the 'Confessing Church' in Hitler's Germany, and for their witness under Marxism draw on reservoirs of theology and prayer.

Dr Charles C. West, Associate Director of the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, has translated and introduced Pastor Hamel's most striking letters and essays.

' . . . the book makes no attempt to catalogue the disabilities of Christians in a Communist State; indeed, they are only mentioned casually. What Mr Hamel succeeds in doing most impressively is to show how a man lives joyfully in the Mind of Christ, surrounded by injustice and poverty; and how in that situation it is still possible to discharge a ministry immeasurably higher than the trivialities which fill the days for most of us. Quite definitely, one of the most refreshing books I've read in years!'

Methodist Recorder

On the cover is a reduced reproduction of a Communist poster in East Germany. A young German, having sorrowfully contemplated the symbol of German Protestantism (the cross over the world), turns with joy to the symbol of the Communist youth movement.

Second impression

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A Christian in East Germany

For Father Louis,
united in prayer and with
every best wish,

please bless me

to Emmanuel

C.V.

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**A Christian
in East Germany**

JOHANNES HAMEL

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case, and the truth in each case can appear quite differently.

What is the real status of the oath of a prisoner before the police commissioner, or of the defendant before the investigator? In such situations no order is heard more often than 'Tell the truth!' What does the pledge to tell the truth mean to one who is being interrogated? One thinks perhaps of the frequent use of forged documents to bring criminals to a confession.

Then there is the problem of truth for journalists, salesmen, politicians and their counterparts, newspaper readers, customers, and the revenue office, voters and participants in big meetings. Can one expect the same truth from a leading statesman in his public speeches as a father expects from his six-year-old son? If not, does this give the statesman a licence to lie? A curious mystery surrounds the problem of a people's trust in their statesmen. His people and his colleagues either have this trust in him or they do not.

And finally: am I responsible for the truth towards those who want to cause my downfall by using my words and utterances to ruin me? Or has my opponent already removed the claims of community between us by his purpose, thus giving me the freedom to deceive him? Every one of us runs into such a situation at least once in a lifetime.

Ninety-nine per cent would answer this question without hesitating. Of course I have the right to deceive another in such a situation, to disguise my own opinions and to mask myself. I would be stupid to do otherwise, or simply irresponsible towards my family, my job and to those people entrusted to me in my profession. But am I not breaking the fellowship now on my own side? Is it right for me to meet the man who wants to destroy me on his own level? 'Whosoever spills the blood of his fellow-man shall have his own blood spilled', says the Bible. Will not my act of misleading, deceiving and dissembling drive the ill-inclined adversary even further into evil? Perhaps in the Last Judgment the Hitlers will rise up

and accuse us: 'Not one of the Christians ever told me the truth'! What will truth look like then?

We are indeed commanded to speak the truth and to summon the courage to do so. But reality is far more complicated than this simple formula. It is a shifting, distinctive kind of truth that I owe to this or to that person, according to this or that situation.

'What is Truth? What is Untruth?'

Let us look first for a negative answer: truth is not an idea standing behind individual cases, and above all it is not something at our disposal. No institution can determine what truth is, not even the Christian Church! No human being has the right to say with Ignatius Loyola: 'If something is white and not black, but the Holy Church decides that it is black, I am obliged to believe that it is black.' Neither the Church nor the State; neither a party, a philosopher nor a theologian may speak in this way; and neither may any world view make this claim. 'Truth' is not the same thing as my knowledge of the truth. What I know, believe, suppose, think, feel or want may serve the truth, or perhaps give truth a place. But it does no more! Truth itself can only be revealed in the encounter of God with man. Wherever the true God places men before him, truth is upon these men. There they stand, just as they are, without mask and covering before God. This is the difference between the history of the Old Testament and the man-made pictures which are woven into the sagas and myths of all peoples. In the encounter with the living God—who is truth in person—all illusions, all 'truths' about mankind melt away. In this encounter man stands before his Maker, who created the worlds and who is the only Lord and Judge of man.

And with this, what it means to lie is already defined. It means to take this truth prisoner, to deny this living God practically and theoretically as Lord and God in his truth and majesty, not to love, praise and worship him. It would

be lying then too, if one played the role of God and Judge, Lord and Saviour; or if one interpreted as God something which had been made—idols of silver, gold or stone, another human being, a loved one, or a leader, children and family. But because we live in the untruth of this kind of idolatry, we have fallen into the aspirations of our evil hearts, and destroy our fellowship with one another with wrangling, greed, hatred, slander, gossip, flattery and lies.

So the question, 'What is the truth', is really wrongly asked. Truth is no thing. God himself is the truth, and this truth became man in Jesus Christ. That signifies three things.

1. Truth has made its home among us liars. It has given itself into our hands. Yet we still play our game with this divine truth. We called him a blasphemer, a child of the devil and finally condemned and hung him. We did not believe God's truth: we rejected Jesus' word. His own disciples fled from him full of horror, and we made God's truth into a mockery. This, then, is our relationship to truth.

2. But God's truth did not react to this as we might have expected: it did not annihilate us. Instead Jesus calls sinners to repentance, eating and drinking with tax-collectors and prostitutes, forgiving the godless and the sinners. He prays for those who nail him to the cross and promises paradise to the hanged murderer, and the presence of the compassionate God. He makes Peter, who denied him, the founder of the Church, and he makes Saul, the bloody-handed persecutor of Christianity, into the apostle of the nations. The Jews had cast away the truth in person as a useless stone is rejected by the builder, but he gave first place to them in the joyful message of the forgiveness of sins in faith. The rejected one does not reject us, but rescues all those who call upon his name. The truth makes us free!

3. Whoever would live otherwise than by the mercy of the Rejected One, lies. It is a lie to live otherwise than as a man who has been freed by Jesus from sin, death and the power of

the devil. The proud person who seems to himself better than others is thus a liar. So is the pious person who looks down on the ungodly. So is the indifferent person who has no concern for the others, those for whom Jesus died. So is the dissatisfied person who does not have enough of this gracious truth of God, but wants more. So is the self-justifying person who trusts in his good deeds or in his conversion. So is the despondent one who does not reckon with the resurrection power of this Jesus. So is the secure person who is not prepared to be judged by Jesus. All these are liars. They all deny, theoretically and practically, that Jesus Christ has become our only Lord and that we belong to him alone in time and in eternity.

‘Truth Begins with Ourselves’

What does it mean to emphasize the importance of truth, to speak the truth? What does it mean to live as a true man, as a truthful man?

He who speaks the truth is first and foremost a man who praises and honours, and by this he is known. That God’s truth has saved us must be celebrated always and in all circumstances, in privacy, and before all men. This praise of the whole congregation as well as of each individual is the sign of divine truth. It is intended that God’s praise be publicly sung, recognized and spoken. God told us his truth while we were still godless and enemies, but he did not set the condition of our prior obedience. How should we wait then with our praise until our life pleases us in all aspects? How should we presume to have the right to complain and grumble until we arrive at a condition in which we think we have the right to be? We can only *claim* rights to eternal damnation with all the terrors of this earth. But we live under the love of God and his truth. Not to praise God every day for this is to lie.

At this point a question forces itself upon the Christian in the DDR. Do we not place ourselves once again under the

power of untruth when the silencing of God's praise becomes the characteristic of our lives, or when we refuse to take the conditions as they are out of the Father's hands with thankfulness? The Christian does not begin to lie only when he says something against his convictions. He has already begun when he ceases to praise:

Whom have I in Heaven but thee? And there is
nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the
strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

(Ps. 73.25-26.)

Before God asks us about our hypocrisy and adaptability to a godless ideology, he will ask us: 'Have you really praised me because my truth was more precious to you than wealth, power, position, house and furniture, legal security, peace and other good things?'

To speak the truth means even more: it means that we recognize ourselves as sinners before God and stop making ourselves the judges and dividers of good from evil. God judges the godless. No one escapes his judgment, not even we ourselves. Who are we in comparison with others who do not know of God's truth or who even mock and ridicule it? We are people who live on the truth that God in an incomprehensible way has loved us, although we have really earned the opposite. We have enough to do asking God to forgive our own sins. What right do we have then to look down on those who, in the blindness of their godless hearts, regard God as nothing?

Here again we must face a question. Do we Christians in the DDR not involve ourselves in continuing guilt when we criticize with merciless sharpness the evil around us (usually in secret since we are afraid to do it openly), and thereby dismiss those 'others' who are guilty of it? In comparison we believe ourselves to be better than those who oppress us. But

will God ask us about the evil deeds of others in the Last Judgment, or will he ask us what we have done and what we deserve? We cannot wash ourselves clean with the evil of others.

The truth holds still one more commandment for us. We should be Jesus' messengers no matter what it costs. 'We must pass through much suffering to enter into the kingdom of God,' say Paul and Barnabas to the new Christians in Asia Minor who have come to experience the fury of godless men in their lives. As messengers of Jesus we must testify, to men who know no peace, of the peace which God has made with us all. We must make God's compassion credible to those who hate God. We should make it easier for the distrustful nihilists and cynics to trust our heavenly Father: we should make it easier for the atonement to speak to the heart of the hate-filled fanatic. To the man who has surrendered himself to the modern rhythm of work and organized entertainment; to the machinery of a welfare state and a centrally managed life, we should proclaim the hour of God: 'Now God bids you repent, to fear, to love and to trust him above all things, whatever it may cost.' The time has come to think of the messengers of godly truth as strangers and pilgrims who can give up what is taken from them without looking back.

The problem which concerns us, the question of our lives, is not what has been taken from us, nor what still can be taken from us. Instead, our concern is whether we speak to the men about us the truth from God, who has had mercy on us in Jesus Christ, and who calls us all to repentance.

And though they take our life,
Goods, honour, children, wife,
Yet is their profit small;
These things shall vanish all,
The city of God remaineth.

(Luther, *Ein' feste Burg*, trans.
Thomas Carlyle 1795-1881.)

Do we actually sing that from the heart? Or do we only declaim it, lying thereby to both God and man? Can a messenger who is sent to the front with a vital order shy clear of danger? A good messenger will of course be clever and careful, not stupidly courageous. But in all prudence he will risk his life to carry the message across. Is not the Christian in the DDR entrusted with a message? Do not life and death, salvation or destruction, redemption or disaster, God's grace or his wrath over us and our people, depend on whether this message is passed on and accepted? Let the messenger shed his blood—but let the message come through. This is the question of our lives: do we really carry God's truth as messengers of Jesus Christ? It has already been the task of a part of Christendom to praise God in dying, to implore his forgiveness and to pass on the message. God can awaken for himself children out of stones. He will also use the witness of a dying Christianity to multiply his people.

'The Way to Truth'

How should one begin then to be truthful to others, not deceiving other people or camouflaging oneself? The answer is quite simple: the way to spoken truth is love. We hear people complaining about this constantly: certainly they would like to speak the truth, but they must always hide their own convictions and opinions. They are afraid to express themselves openly and freely. All of us are inclined to join in this complaint. But then we must put up with the opposite question. Are not those others before whom we are afraid also our neighbours? Don't we live together with them even when we are fighting for our very existence against them? Do we love them with the love of Jesus? After all, we are men who think we know that Jesus loved us even to the point of self-sacrifice.

The people about us are not given to us so that we may hate them and battle with them. We should neither be in-

different to them nor be afraid of them. What I mean has nothing to do with pleasant emotions or that sentimentality which is often unfortunately confused with the word 'love'. That a man loves means that he is no more turned in on himself, that he no longer struggles for an idea, a doctrine or a world view, thereby forgetting his fellow-man. To love means that we look at and honour our actual neighbour as the man who carries God's image; that we accept and receive him as one for whom Jesus Christ gave up his life. This is the man for whom it is right to hope that the Holy Spirit will bring him to praise, confession, witness and finally to love. We must ask ourselves when face to face with this man what words and actions are demanded from us now and in response to this particular man. Before God asks us in the Last Judgment whether we have lied to our fellow-man, he will say to us: 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' Certainly our lies and those of others are heavy sins, but why do we fix our attention so exclusively on them? Instead we should ask ourselves whether we love these other people so much that we could lay down our lives for them. This love will also make us free to speak at any given time what is true. Jesus loved these godless enemies of God. Should not we love them? Do they not have a right to our honesty? The more I love a person, the more I can speak a bitter truth to him.

'Truth has Many Forms'

Whoever speaks the truth to other men in this way fights against the invisible powers of evil. A lie is just such a power. It forces people under its curse and makes them lie. The true word—arising from the praise of God, the acknowledgment of one's own guilt, the service of the message of Jesus and based on the love of God—this true word is like a bombshell. Of course when we speak only what is necessary, nothing further happens, at least nothing good and helpful. When I

merely express my thoughts or expose hidden evils of our time, I may or may not be dangerous, depending on the circumstances, to the present state or current social order—but I am still a long way from speaking the truth. Perhaps what I took to be the truth was only a wish of my murderous heart. But the power of God's truth banishes the lying spirit, and our true word stands in the service of this attack. We are not concerned here with setting what we think to be a correct view over against a possibly false view of things. Our burden is rather: God wants to bring his Truth into its own through us, and to make mankind free from the power of the lie.

In this struggle of God against the evil spirits there is a time to speak and a time to be silent. The truth which will be demanded of us at any particular hour can take different forms.

Truth that knows that the hour for speaking has not yet come or is already past, can remain in silence. Thus Jesus remained silent before Herod, and at times before Pilate.

We can also express truth when we frankly admit our incompetence in a particular question. In an age which assigns great importance, on the radio and in the newspapers, to the ideas ten- to fourteen-year-olds have about the problems of life, a Christian may exercise a liberating influence when he keeps modestly and objectively to the limits of his judgment and knowledge.

In an appropriate situation truth can also take the form of a straightforward and concise confession of God, of Christ and his laws. 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.' Such a simple confession may be an answer to the demands or to the threat of hatred. We can only confess hatred as a sin of our evil hearts before God. In this connection belongs the simple act of attending church on Sunday. Whatever may come, God's praise comes first. Finally truth can also consist simply in discussing current problems with common sense, perhaps in the hope of bringing one partner to the conversation down from his dream-world of ideology on to the

solid ground of reality. Of course this presupposes that I understand the other's language, that his faith, his presuppositions, his hopes and dreams are familiar to me, and that I am prepared to submit my attempt at sober explanation of the facts to the other for testing. Unfortunately there are no human beings without all manner of prejudices. We church people have them especially! Whatever form truth may take, it will be given to us at the right time and place only when we pray without ceasing for the right word. The truth which is demanded of us is not a cheap one. It is not always in stock and at our disposal. For our true words should be as fingers, pointing the way to the crucified.

'We Need a Free Confession'

What if I come now into a situation where I can neither be silent nor declare my incompetence, where I can neither content myself with a simple confession of faith nor expect an audience for my more reasoned thoughts? It is certainly possible that my opposing partner does not expect anything further from me than my participation in an unfamiliar confession of faith and my acceptance of a strange order of existence. I would, as a Christian, deviate from my faith with my silence or with my 'yes'. With my 'no' I would show myself to be an enemy. There is no recipe for such situations. But we do have the experience of our daily decisions.

An example! When a Christian refuses perhaps to declare his adherence to views of dialectical and historical materialism, with their economic and political consequences, he does not do it as a follower of any kind of anti-Marxism. The assertion that there is only friend or enemy has no justification under the Lordship of truth. That primarily Catholic, western system of ideas which sees Marxism as a kind of hypocrisy, equates itself unjustly with Christianity as such. Among Protestants there are followers of this system too. Is it not possible that the scorn, even hatred against the person of Martin Niemöller

springs to a large degree from the misunderstanding of the glad tidings to which he testifies again and again: 'God has taken up his dwellingplace among the godless and does not want any one (Marxist or not) to be lost'? Many who oppose Niemöller seem to have forgotten that God's truth, which we confess, is something other than a system of ideology, whose followers may consider themselves better than the Communists. We are not Bolsheviks, but neither are we anti-Bolsheviks. As Jesus' messengers we are there for our neighbours. We are never their enemies.

However, God's truth is an open word. We are transparent when we speak the truth, and cannot do anything hidden and secret. The people who encounter us, our enemies too, should be able to rely on our lives and words. Whatever it may cost, we may not appear other than we are for Jesus' sake. We may not appear to speak or to listen to others confidentially and have in reality intentions and plans that are quite different. A life that is divided is not life of truth. Whoever works secretly, for whatever persons, intentions and purposes, is not free for the word of truth. And when in the world underground, silently murderous warfare becomes the rule, it is up to us to act differently. We may be cautious and retiring, avoiding anything provocative, but one thing is impossible for us—to be partisans in this hidden war.

God has promised to place the word in our mouth when a confession is demanded of us, and has commanded us not to trouble ourselves about this. But don't we Christians in the DDR today act as if the heavenly Father did not know what we needed? Don't most of us believe that one should and must use speech to care for ourselves first of all? But our words should serve God's truth which saves us. God waits for us to trust him, for it is he, not Satan, who rules over this 'faithless and perverse generation' of our days. That is the truth. Do we want to pervert this truth into falsehood by our ungodly concern for ourselves?

the story with his final words, but draws an emphatic line under the whole story, establishing in conclusion both the positive and negative aspects: 'I tell you.' What follows now is God's judgment on these two men, God's new and unheard-of judgment. Jesus' listeners rebelled against this judgment. They rebelled so much that they finally killed the man who spoke the words of judgment. 'This man went down to his house justified rather than the other.' Both stood before the seat of the final judgment. One man saw quite clearly that he had God to thank that he did not belong to those without hope, to the damned. The other, the condemned man, had only one hope left, the dreadful, desperate appeal for mercy. But the answer of the judge, put in Jesus' mouth and proclaimed by Jesus alone, sounded. The already condemned man was permitted to go down to his house justified: the first, however, went empty away. God passed by him in silence. He had drawn the second to his heart contrary to all expectation. He had accepted his helpless groans, but had said nothing to the gratitude of the first. He cleansed the man with the unclean hands on the basis of his desperate and hopeless pleading, but the 'pure' man God left standing with his prayer of nothing but thanksgiving.

Why did Jesus let this judgment fall in God's name? Let us avoid a false path which we often take when we hear this well-known story. We think wrongly if we answer, 'Because the tax-collector prayed better than the pharisee.' How should we prove that? No, God's judgment is so revolutionary because Jesus came among unbelievers in order to love them out of their godlessness. Jesus breaks through all the walls that men erect against God. Jesus, God's ambassador, alone atones for those unreconciled to God. He establishes God's peace with God's enemies. This happens wherever Jesus encounters those who hate God and bestows upon them the return to God. This is why he came as a physician comes to the sick, to heal them. Because Jesus, God's only son, is him-

self God's reconciliation with his enemies, the groan of that second man, 'God be merciful to me', is no meaningless cry into the void, but is heard and heeded. Because God, in the person of Jesus, entered this dark world with its filth, the unclean man finds the way to his Father in Heaven, to our Father. Because God loves those who are far from him, that stranger to God in Jesus' story is absolved.

We are not told what the pious listener of this story thought at that moment, nor what he did. More important is the question of how we take Jesus' story and how we act upon it. It would be a terrible thing for us to go on seeing the wicked and godless as hopeless, judged and condemned by God. The pious man in our story did this: he had to because he had not encountered Jesus who calls the godless to repentance. God, who hears and heeds the cry of the broken heart, goes silently by a Christendom which looks at the dark figures surrounding it as hopeless cases. In reality there are many such figures, truly evil figures. God knew his people in the houses of tax-collectors in those days; he knows them in the houses of the atheists, of the indifferent and inhuman people of today. Jesus does his work among them, so unexpectedly, so overwhelmingly that our only concern need be lest we stand in the way of his work of salvation. Let me close with an experience which at the time opened my eyes to our story.

It was the 14th of November 1944, in Italy. Our company was travelling in lorries on the evening of this day in complete darkness and through streaming rain along a small mountain road towards the front. Eighteen of us sat in the first lorry. In my company we had a man called Roller as machine-gunner, an unpleasant character. He had had three wives, each of whom he had left with a child. Now he wanted to marry a fourth girl (for whom he had deserted the third) because she was a rich farmer's daughter and heiress. The wedding was to take place in a week, and in two days' time he was to

love, ready to support and offer ourselves to one another. As younger people we are asking that we may get along with our parents and our parents-in-law so that they are glad to be with us. We are asking that we be friends with the neighbour on our floor instead of being at daggers drawn with him; that sincerity, clear speaking, daily helpfulness and loyalty may prevail in office or business—and in church office or pastoral business as well; so that colleagues do not denounce one another; that the women among them do not gossip and tear one another apart; that the employees of the business office of the church do not begin to mock in a godless fashion all those whom they meet. As pastors we are asking inwardly each day that we may live with one another in such a way that both Christians and non-Christians may say, 'How they love one another!' We are asking, moreover, when we ask for peace, that class competition not become bloody in a nation; that party rivalry not destroy the people, and that the party which is in power not liquidate the others; that the majority heed the rights of the minority; that official authority not tolerate insults and persecution against those who cannot defend themselves; and, finally, that we ourselves, the small band gathered for the sake of God's word, forgive those whom we meet, speaking only good of them and turning everything to the best. And certainly from our hearts we ask one final thing when we pray for peace in the context of asking for our daily bread: we ask that people and government be reconciled by means of discussion, compromise and treaty instead of distrusting each other, first slandering and raging at one another, then taking up arms and threatening each other with weapons, and finally one day, suddenly annihilating one another in a hot war fought in a sea of tears, blood and atomic dust. For all this we ask with the words, 'pious and faithful rulers, good government, and peace.'

Do we really ask for all that in praying for our daily bread? I have repeated the words—'we ask for'—so often. But is that

way—bad for us, bad for the politician, bad for our people, and injurious to peace among all the peoples. For whoever does not pray and offer his petitions has reached damnation and is among the damned before he knows it. Blood and tears are the fruits of anxiety, hatred and bitterness. But perhaps you go on to ask a further question: 'What are we to do in that case? What should our relationship be today towards the politicians who rule over us?' In this need which is both an inward and an outward one, let us attempt to listen to an answer from the New Testament, an answer which comes from the Gospels by the commission and command of our Lord. It will give us the courage to act in a quite definite way towards our politicians, even though this answer may frequently be bitter and uncomfortable for us. Let us look for the answer in four passages from the Scriptures.

II

We begin with the actual fact that our politicians, with few exceptions, do not belong to the band of those who gather together with us on the Lord's Day for the sake of God's word, who are the Lord's guests at the communion table, and for whom the Bible and prayer belong quite naturally to life. On the contrary, the large majority of our leading politicians want nothing to do with the Christian faith, going even so far as to characterize it directly as superstition and a hindrance to progress. This is such common knowledge that it is hardly necessary to mention it. It is equally obvious that God's ten commandments play no *theoretical* part in the laws these politicians decree. They do not consciously base and direct their actions by reference to God's law. Again, we need not expound at length the fact that our political life is quite different from the life that Christians may picture or desire. What is our primary obligation to *these* politicians? In answer we read in I Timothy, 'First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings

and all who are in high positions . . . ' God gave us our fellow-man as a good gift, for whom we should thank him. My wife and children, my parents and relatives, my teacher and master, my colleague and neighbour, friend and acquaintance—they are all the good gift of our Lord. God in his boundless grace has ordained that I should not live alone nor among wild animals, and that the men around me should speak a language that I understand or can learn if need be. Therefore I give thanks for the men who are around me. Prayer for these people stands beside my thanksgiving. Everything that I ask for myself from God, I should obtain by entreaty for everyone else: a heart which is obedient and pure, strength and health, protection from wicked temptation and distress, peaceable fellowship and a joyful end. We should make no distinction in this. We should give thanks for all men, and intercede for all. But, we may go on to ask thoughtfully or uneasily: should we apply this to the politicians as well? Does this passage really mean to say that we should thank God today for politicians and should beseech God for those who administer power in our government? Let us put the question quite clearly and incisively. Should our primary duty as Christians in the DDR really be to pray and give thanks for *all* mankind, including our President Pieck, Prime Minister Grotewohl, and all the other members of the Cabinet Council, the *Volkskammer*, the Board of Finance, the District Administrations, etc.? 'Pastor,' you may say, 'surely you can't really mean that? It is quite impossible to follow you to this conclusion. It is impossible to believe that the Bible really intends to say this. Here you are entering politics and are no longer preaching the gospel!'

Let me refer to two passages. Surely in his day the writer of I Timothy must also have expected a similar protest. For these were the times of the wicked despots who ruled as emperor in Rome, Caligula and Tiberius before him, Nero and Domitian, men who ruled with such tyranny, violence, crime

and presumption that to this day we still speak of 'Caesar's madness', referring primarily to these four emperors. It is with these dismal presences among mankind in mind that the letter adds that prayers be made for all kings, meaning the Emperor and all those in high positions. It means your government minister and his functionaries! For God's sake do not forget these figures in your prayers; neither forget to thank God for them. They too are God's good gift, even when this knowledge goes beyond our understanding, and even when you would rather curse than give thanks. Let us go on to ask what the biblical background is to this bitter commandment, so contrary to our natural inclinations. Were not these emperors, who ran such an evil government, and who surely were the opposite of what Luther called 'pious and faithful rulers', evil power-holders in the eyes of the Bible? Our answer: 'This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (I Tim. 2.3,4). The memory of our Saviour and Redeemer throws a friendly and comforting light on all men, and without a doubt on all those dark figures who hold power in their hands. God wants to save these men too from their sins, from death and from Satan's power. Jesus came to them too and his call to repentance and to faith is for them as well as for us. We dare not overlook the fact that these men too belong to the prodigal sons and that God may rejoice more in one of them some day than he does in us. Our Lord did not conceal the message of good tidings even before a man like Pilate, and the Book of Acts preserves this pledge: 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar' (Acts 27.24a); 'Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome' (Acts 23.11). Whether to Jewish king, to Roman governor, or to a leader of Judaism, the Apostle brought the message of salvation and the call to repentance, a call given with entreating love and joyful fearlessness, for God's love has sent his Son into the world in

order to save each and every man, whether uneducated labourer, president or minister. To the question of how we should conduct ourselves towards our politicians today, our first answer should be to offer our thanksgiving and intercession, remembering our Saviour who so loved the godless that he sacrificed his life for our sakes. For his sake we should give thanks and intercede for those in the DDR who hold power, instead of keeping bitter silence, complaining, cursing, or hating secretly. We shall lose our own salvation before God and play wilfully with fire here on earth if, for the sake of Jesus Christ, we do not learn to offer this thanksgiving and intercession!

III

But now we must go on and ask what action follows this prayer if for our Saviour's sake we offer our praise and thanksgiving daily for our President and his Ministers? What is there in our behaviour that is inappropriate to this prayer? What is suitable to the spirit of the prayer? We read in the second chapter of I Peter: 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.' 'Be subject': a bad word with an unfortunate sound, not only in our day. We think of a man who does everything that is demanded of him from above with subservient cowardliness, who crawls and cringes servilely because of his fear of those above him and of those who are powerful; who suppresses his criticism of governmental measures, publicly finding everything good that those with power find good, and believing everything that is given to him to read in the daily papers. Are we to be encouraged in this? That is hard to believe. The first Christians were anything but this kind of 'subject'. They conducted themselves according to the basic commandment of Acts 5.29: 'We must obey God rather than men.' If there

you are led into prison or even to execution, go in faith and patience, go in faith and patience, walking the hard way willingly.' For later Christians this often seemed too difficult. It is understandable that minor changes in the manuscript made out of this call to patience a threatening word to persecutors: the wrath of God would fall upon them if they should lead Christians into prison and to death. But the genuine tradition of our text conforms to the whole of the New Testament. Early Christians, true to the life and word of their Lord, separated themselves quite deliberately in the name of God from each revolt and revolution. When Jesus, anticipating his arrest, warned his disciples of the terrible days which with his capture would be coming for them, he told them, in this context, that the time would be so terrible that he who had nothing would sell his suit only to buy a sword—or rather, that it would be a murderous time in which the lives of Jesus and his disciples would be at stake. The disciples answered enthusiastically, 'Here are two swords already!', meaning that they were ready to fight in God's name. Jesus gently restrained them, saying, 'It is enough.' That is, 'I have borne your unbelief and your blindness enough, and now I am going of my own free will to death for your sakes.' Again Peter drew his sword at the time of the capture, convinced that the hour was now there when the non-believers should be opposed by the sword in God's name. But Jesus restrained him, saying, 'Put your sword into its sheath.' And what did Peter achieve with his first and only blow? He cut off one soldier's ear, nothing more. Certainly when the evangelist John tells this story he is thinking that when Christians, untrue to their Lord's word, stand against the godless with the sword in God's name, they will never achieve anything more than to make it impossible for those unbelievers to hear the message of joy and the call to return. Christianity thus robs them only of the ear which should hear God's word. But our Lord goes willingly into suffering and remains to the end

the question, 'How should we conduct ourselves towards our politicians?' We first heard from the Small Catechism, 'Pray for pious and faithful rulers.' Whosoever asks here will receive. You will not receive because you do not ask. I Timothy calls to us, 'Give thanksgiving for all men, and for the politicians too, for God performs his acts to you through them. Pray then for all men, the politician included, because God wants to have all men (the politician as well) saved.' We took the command from I Peter, 'Draw the power-holder into the circle of mankind, for he belongs to God's creation and you should think more highly of every other human being than of yourselves. Respect too the powerful as God's creation in that you speak the bitter word of truth to them here and there, no matter what it may cost.' Then Paul warns us in Romans, 'Every man of power is installed by God and must—even against his will—serve God's order. You can certainly count on that until the Day of Judgment. God keeps his faith with his created world by the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Co-operate actively and willingly to the extent that your faith and obedience permit. For those who hold power are in God's service.' And finally, Christians going forward to meet the last and ultimate unveiling of evil receive for now, as at all times in the past where the spirit of wickedness has ruled, the comfort and the commission to testify to the Lord and to praise him as a congregation which suffers willingly, even unto death when it must be so, rather than drawing swords in God's name against the anti-Christians.

A Christendom which heeds these five answers in the temptations of our time, dealing according to this commission, receives the promise, 'The gates of Hell shall not prevail against you.' But should we refuse to follow our Lord and his word, we fall under his threat: God throws out the dull salt which has lost its savour, that it may be trodden under foot.

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