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Dear Friends,

It has been a long time since I have sent you a survey of the situation in the DDR. I shall try to give you as clear a picture as possible of all I have heard, so that you can enter again into the life of all those who must determine their course under a Communist regime.

I am not entering into the question Berlin. The political issue is not yet clear. Berlin people on the whole are not upset, they are used to a situation of political insecurity and more or less indifferent - this also counts to a certain extent for the Zone as far as Berlin is concerned. Let us hope that it does not turn out to the worse.

Sincerely yours,
Hebe Kohlbrugge.

First it must be made clear that the DDR is making steady economic progress. Industry is growing, and manufactured goods are in general of good quality and really better than a few years ago. This progress has taken place most particularly during the past year and has extended farther than one would have thought possible a year ago. This has meant a solidification and strengthening of the regime. The DDR is capturing her own vital place in the total Soviet economic plan. Inasmuch as the DDR can offer various goods more cheaply than West Germany, the latter has become worried at this point and must put up a fight against many an East German product.

Even though the achievement has not been so high in food production as in industrial goods, there is noticeable progress even there. One can get more, and the quality is better; ration coupons are a thing of the past, so that things can be bought freely.

This economic improvement also has an influence upon the attitude of the citizens of the DDR. Many are becoming resigned and acquiescent in the face of the facts. The hope of reunification is as good as gone and people have become resigned as far as the growing social improvement is concerned, which is naturally coupled with a strengthening of the regime from beginning to end. Now that the government feels secure, it will push its program, its ideology ruthlessly. The government no longer has to pay any attention to those who still "have not understood that the course of socialism is the only true course for the future". While up till now they have tried with propaganda, and with a certain pressure too, to make people accept the Communist world-view, and while they in a way penalized those who withdrew from it but also in a way let them alone, now it appears that they want the world-view of Communism to be put into practice from beginning to end, notwithstanding some disadvantages that result even for the DDR itself, such as the great number of refugees, especially among the intellectuals - doctors and scientists. The extent of the number of refugee doctors had reached such appalling proportions that the Russians have asked for a curtailment of the ideological demands of the DDR government, so that the rate of refugees, at its highest in August 1958, has now abated slightly because of a relief in the ideological pressure.

But as has just been said, a portion of the population (and we refer here to the church population) has become resigned, considering the obvious ideology of the government. With a certain inner reluctance, people allow themselves to become involved - because there is nothing else to do, the situation is clear: a growing economic and political power, which (it is abundantly clear) is making its ideology triumph.

Another portion of the church population believes that it can make just one answer to the successful regime: "No" - and "Keep your distance", insofar as this is possible. Before either of these courses, our friends in the DDR would put a question mark.

We shall try to give some examples:

a. Shall the farmers who still own their land defend themselves by every means at hand from being absorbed into a communal farm (LPG)? Shall they because of their Christian calling repudiate any communal ownership as an accessory of Communist ideology? Or shall they become resigned and cooperate only passively as members of the LPG?... Or shall they as Christians enter the LPG willing, that is, allow themselves to become involved in the new Communist economy, but let their conduct inside the LPG be defined by their Christian faith?

b. Shall the Church, when unjustly accused in the headlines, fight (for the sake of right and truth) to see that these slanders are contradicted, or shall she let it pass?... or shall she quite consciously choose not to care about such a matter, but to pursue her course, her task in every opportunity which is still open to her?

A deep difference of opinion has been apparent between the church authorities on the one hand, who wanted to stand up for the "right", and also to make clear what is "right" as over against the government, and on the other hand a number of younger pastors, who thought that the church authorities were neglecting a much more necessary and essential work by engaging in this kind of "trifling", which according to them had nothing to do with the Biblical teaching about justice and righteousness.

c. What must the students do who must complete the following loyalty declarations?

(Quotation from a German source) "In the university newspaper of the Karl Marx University in Leipzig, dated September 18, 1958 (number 18/19) there is a report of the solemn matriculation of 2000 new students. After a paragraph concerning the official speech of the rector, we read: 'Then the new student body repeated the solemn vow: "I promise to pursue my studies at the Karl Marx University of Leipzig in the light of socialism, actively to support the policies of the government of the DDR, and on the basis of dialectical and historical materialism to gain a comprehensive education for myself..." ' "

The requirement for returning students in the academic year 1958/59 in Halle and Leipzig:

"My studies are a mark of respect in our workers' and peasants' state. Therefore I undertake the requirement of supporting the policies of the government of the DDR and on the basis of dialectical and historical materialism to gain a comprehensive education which at the conclusion of my studies I shall place at the disposal of our workers' and peasants' state for the wider building of socialism.

During the time of my study I shall cooperate actively in the building of socialism in industry and agriculture.

I shall follow the constitution, laws and regulations of our state, the articles of my university, and the regulations for study, and shall faithfully fulfill my duties proceeding therefrom.

I bind myself after study in accordance with the legal stipulations, to join the pool of university graduates for three years, to work at the place where the organs of our workers' and peasants' state appoint me, according to the exigencies of the building of socialism."

Every student has signed this form, even those who belong to the students' congregation. Is this wrong? Is this a renunciation of the "good confession"?

Looking to East Germany, must we come with them to a new and different interpretation of the way we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord? This is one of the questions about which we shall have to think together with our brethren from the East.

The theological students of Humboldt University (in East Berlin) have had to sign a similar declaration, and following the suggestion of their professors they have added that they are first and foremost bound to the gospel and consequently refuse to subscribe to atheism. Several theological students have felt that their separation at this point from the fellow Christians who are students in other departments is unjust.

In answer to questions that have been posed to Karl Barth from the DDR, he has written a little book, "An einen Pfarrer in der DDR" (to a Pastor in the DDR) - an enlightening book in which many burning questions are dealt with. He writes, for example:

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"You ask about the possibility of a loyalty declaration... I do not know the text of this loyalty declaration, but I assume that the signer does not have to buy a pig in a poke, as was the case with the Hitler oath ('I swear fidelity and obedience to the Führer...'), but that as regards the explanation required of him, it is a matter rather of a description of the established and existing political system there, about the existence of which he has been instructed through the constitution of the DDR. "Loyalty" as concerns this system means honest willingness to acknowledge its permanence and to present oneself for her disposition, perhaps with reservations, but, practically speaking, with a rejection of calm deliberation (in the face of the "dangers inherent" in it). "Loyalty" does not mean consent to the ideology underlying this system. And "loyalty" does not mean consent to each and every measure of the de facto bearers and representatives of this system. "Loyalty" involves the right of freedom of thought in respect to the ideology, but also the right of disagreement, if necessary of resistance against the definite explanations and applications of a given political system. There is also such a thing as a loyal opposition. A man is loyal in heart and deed in respect to a given political system if he recognizes its validity and authority for himself, to hold himself to them within the boundaries of what is possible, both inwardly and outwardly. In your situation I would see no difficulty in pledging loyalty to the DDR in this sense, and therefore in signing the declaration required of you without reservation."

Would Karl Barth want to apply this passage to the student declaration himself? Is he right?

d. Again there has been an election, just as there was a year ago. Again there was one list of candidates, again the same game of yes or no, by which the government hoped for a public yes, so that people would not make use of the one voting booth which was present. If one goes to vote, is this only the "loyalty" just cited, or is this election a "vote of confidence"? This is the question that was posed. Some were of the opinion that these elections are a mere formality, so that the only thing one can do is go. Others saw here a "loyalty" that was just barely possible ("did Barth mean this?" people asked). Still others saw here a vote of confidence that must be refused absolutely (and were convinced that Barth did not have this in mind). And some thought that after the church had decided what it thought about these elections even the pastors should participate: the population as a whole goes, even the greatest proportion of church members, and it would be hard for anyone to accept the idea any more that the pastors should abstain from the election as a symbolic act. They are still largely an isolated group who are financially independent from the state and who can allow themselves to boycott the election - and they doubt whether this could be looked upon as of any value.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it must be said that the little book of Barth's was received with great joy and thankfulness and that people on every hand were very happy with it; the only small hesitation was in fact in regard to the point discussed here of loyalty and the question of where Barth would draw the line.

e. The old question of the Jugendweihe (youth dedication) also belongs among these examples; it is still the central question. The pressure and threats of the past have given way to one simple approach: if you have not undergone the Jugendweihe, then you can't be a part of our state, and there is no place for you in an academic secondary school, and there is even a question as to whether you will get any chance at a trade or some other vocation. More than 60% of the youth underwent the Jugendweihe in 1958 and it is expected that this percentage will increase to 80% and 90% in 1959.

What shall the church do? She is holding fast to the incompatibility of the Jugendweihe and confirmation, but she will not cut off contact with all those who go to the Jugendweihe. In many districts therefore the whole procedure has been changed: instruct all the children, and then at Christmastime send away those who go to the Jugendweihe and bring together the small number of those who do not go, for a "Sacramentsunterricht" (instruction in the sacrament). A very unsatisfactory solution, which is certainly unrealistic too, inasmuch as most children will not want to continue in instruction if they are not acceptable anyway.

A study commission from one of the East German churches, which has been set

up to look at the question of confirmation, writes as follows:

"Is confirmation necessary and essential in the Evangelical Church?

'Confirmation' (in the New Testament sense) as a constant strengthening, steadying, comforting, is necessary because of the threats and attacks to which the children of God are exposed in the world. But 'confirmation' (in the sense of a church rite) as a single special act has no Biblical (and therefore no theological) basis; indeed it is in conflict (as ordinarily understood) with true 'confirmation' (in the New Testament sense), which is constantly operative through teaching, preaching, pastoral care and communion.

A sacramental understanding (of the kind found in Roman Catholic theology) is in the background - secretly or openly - in the Evangelical Church as well, wherever the constitutive act for becoming a Christian or for membership in the congregation is a consecration, which latter therefore serves as a necessary presupposition for confirmation (in the sense of a church rite). Our evangelical faith leads us by necessity to oppose this notion.

The church knows only one act of reception into membership, and that is baptism. In it Christ declares the congregation to be the one acceptable basis for membership in his body. Through preaching and the Lord's Supper the church declares that both the ordinary lay members and the leadership can be and shall be members of each other. Not, however, because of any single act of having been received into membership. Because reception into membership comes through the Holy Spirit, that is, through faith, and so likewise continuing in membership; therefore there can be no other special act aside from what the church does, as it has been commanded (and accompanied by promise as well).

If the Church should wish to distinguish between congregation in the broader sense and responsible congregation, by such a special act of reception into membership, then she would be perverting the freedom of the Spirit by her own disposition of this matter and she would therewith have exchanged the Evangelical Church concept with the Roman. Whether the Church is open and ready to change its regulations or whether she holds fast to her regulations in fixed immutability as to a divine right, this question is synonymous with the utterly critical question of whether she is to let the Lord and his will be the authority and lawgiver for the gospel's sake, or whether she is to make herself into a lawgiver.

The question of new Church regulations is primarily the question of whether we are to let ourselves be led in trust by the viva vox evangelii (living voice of the gospel) and in trust in this Word, which is the Lord himself; whether we examine the traditional practices from a folk-church past, neither scorning them and shaking them off nor holding fast to them, as if they were the very foundation of the Church. Each case must be tested and decided on its own: where changes must be made, and where a sharper cutting edge is required, so that the gospel is not obscured and hindered. We must ask whether we had not been involved in a certain error when we drew up church regulations so eagerly and confidently in 1945, and whether we did not miss hearing that God wanted to show us other ways than the restoration of a church order which took so many long-questionable traditions to be valid and beyond question.

As to the question of the continuance or abolition of the act of confirmation considered apart from the problem of the Jugendweihe, it must be said that children, in the crisis period of adolescence (which lasts longer today than formerly), are being asked for too much in the matter of confirmation. It would be no help to postpone confirmation until a later age, as we cannot make clear why a special act of confirmation would still be necessary besides admission to communion.

As to the question of the continuance or abolition of the act of confirmation considered in connection with the problem of the Jugendweihe, some say that confirmation answers the requirement of a church people resolved to fidelity in faith; namely, the requirement of giving unmistakable expression to a confession to the triune God, to the will to resist in his congregation, to thankful participation in the fellowship of Christ's table by a manifest act with significance to the whole world; the practicing of an either-or of confirmation and Jugendweihe would be able to place parents and children in a genuine crisis which God is suggesting to us at this point today.

The abolition, however, of confirmation together with a stronger emphasis on communion, would evoke much earlier the result which the defenders of its continuance have in mind. It is questionable if children are held in Christian teaching on a false basis; besides, the experience, seen as a whole, shows the worth-lessness of the vow. After carefully weighing all of the arguments and counterarguments, we have therefore determined to propose the abolition of confirmation, especially in consideration of the unusual situation in the churches of the DDR; and instead of it, the gathering of parents and children in a new way."

You see from all the examples that a portion of Christendom in the DDR does not find its course in the choice between "resignation" and an "absolute no", but by seeking for an attitude which Christians must adopt in this society.

The light of the "viva vox evangelii" has no more chance of shining forth when resigned and sulking in silence than when fanatically calling "no".

It is plain from all that has been said, that the state wants a complete monopoly on the population. A new ministerial decree declares ("Lange-Erlass") that only the state has responsibility for the youth as they grow up - neither the parents nor the Church. All the free time of the child also falls eventually under the auspices of the state, according to this decree.

Free formation of groups has been impossible for a long time - but by this means there is an encroachment on church instruction, with attention on the contents, the locality, and the teacher. For church instruction stands herewith under licensure of the school, and the school inspector must furnish to the pastor or catechist a license to give Christian instruction or catechism, and indeed he must keep an eye on the contents of the lessons to be given. Likewise the localities where instruction is being given are under the eye of the inspector, as well as every new locality for church instruction (whether a new building is involved or not).

The inspector has in fact the right to examine the pastor or the catechist for his ideological attitude in order thereupon to determine whether he can be deemed fit. This last, however, is not being put into practice, after a long discussion between Church and government. The inspector gives only an interpretation, without examination. This license must be renewed at regular intervals.

Here again you get the question: shall the pastor or catechist submit passively - shall he (as many think) reject this and thereby be forced to give up all church instruction for children, or is there also a way in this case to try to obtain a license and to give the lesson without passivity, as a free Christian man must do?

The instruction to the children at school is given in the light of a sharp atheistic propaganda. The doctrine of evolution in natural science is put into the sharpest contrast to a fundamentalistic Bible faith. This means that the Church must be seriously concerned with questions of natural science with respect to the Bible, especially Gen. 1-3. It is terribly sad that many in the Church are still a hundred years behind the times with these questions. So a good, enlightening lecture about these matters by one of the church leaders has caused deep horror among those of a different outlook who felt that their Bible faith was being sold and betrayed by this church leader. "On the Origin of Man" was the title of the lecture and the discussion about it is being carried on with vehemence within the Church and followed with interest from the Party side.

"Why wouldn't it be right to have a militant atheism over against a missionary church?" asked one of the Communist Party officials. The Church is not being spared an explanation of its position regarding atheism, Darwinism and modern natural science, and this explanation is certainly a challenge, in which pastors and congregations must define their course over again this militant atheism. The meaning of the authority of Scripture and the exegesis of Biblical stories will have to be understood clearly again. This challenge could be genuine and a source of relection for the Church if the militant atheism were not supported by the state, which is trying with every means at hand to impose this atheism on the population.

I would like to close this letter with a few sentences from East Germany itself.

"A dialectical materialism which to the nth degree has every single person completely within its grasp would in any case leave for the individual Christian, the local congregation, and the total Church absolutely no bit of room to exist, not even a small, modest bit. For our part, however, we would be demonizing our state and its society if we set forth the equation ideology = social reality. Such a demonizing, which is very frequently encountered in Christian and anti-Bolshevik circles, supposes a claim on God, that social realities are to be determined from the gospel - or - in a more moderate form: that in the compass of a wide-ranging freedom of the individual the Church also would have to have freedom of movement for all the activities which she presumes to be necessary. Whoever posits this claim on God cannot really any longer live in a state which is so differently conceived by the ruling group, but must walk out. We ought rather to put our trust in the God of the gospel, that He leaves and creates anew (even in the midst of an atheistic state ideology) just as many free placed; that His own children breathe and live, act, and - when necessary - suffer for His name's sake and are able to praise the Lord in their suffering. That the world has been renounced by God, we do not learn from atheism, but from the Bible, and that over and over again the congregation has to seek and to find a very, very narrow way; the apostles constantly urged it on the congregation. The congregation will therefore be on its guard not to declare the regime unbearable through and through, nor to refuse every act or measure at a particular point simply because everyone is ideologically grounded. It will have to seek and find its Yes and its No at any given time in the concrete instance, and will have to grant to its members a broad measure of elbow-room of personal decision, perhaps even at the risk of contradiction. To sum up, we shall get there, assuming the ideologized state in which we live, not with ideological counterclaims from beginning to end, as if we had reorganized this world according to a churchly or Christian-humanist or Roman Catholic program, but rather we shall be forced, on the basis of the recognition of and respect for the present situation as well as for the "ordination of God" at any given time, from one step to the next, to ask at what point, now, we are called upon to speak up and to put into practice a "no", if necessary, with our backs to the wall and thus in statu confessionis (in the state of confessions), cost what it will."

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