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THE GERMAN CHURCH

July 14.8

POLITICS AND THE PULPIT
TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—When in Berlin I read a letter in your columns from the Bishop of Durham on Germany and England which seemed to me to represent the situation somewhat inaccurately. May I therefore make a few observations on it?

(1) It is not true that the Christian churches are "treated with insult and injustice." I have in the past 10 days talked with many German pastors of very different schools of thought, and as far as I can judge they are all alike free to carry on their work and to teach the Christian faith. No doubt in a totalitarian State there is a tendency to excessive Government interference, and there are tiresome and, one might think, futile regulations; but nothing is done to prevent them from doing their work, provided they obey the law and do not use their pulpits for political purposes.

(2) Pastor Niemöller is in confinement because he has stubbornly and determinedly defied this law. He was a man whose record of service to the German nation commended him to the authorities, and his resistance was for some time passed over. He might, I am told, be released at once if he would undertake to avoid using his pulpit for political purposes. Even in this country we do not like political sermons, and are doubtful whether they benefit the Christian Church. In Germany politics in the pulpit are forbidden by law, and Pastor Niemöller is confined to prevent him from disobeying the law and exposing himself to serious penalties. It is not so long since we in England tried the experiment of confining troublesome clergymen at the pleasure of the Court. We have found that method mistaken; we believe that in Germany they will also find that it is not a good way to deal with the situation. They should remember that ecclesiastical movements only become dangerous if you try to repress them. In any case, I cannot see that "justice, toleration, freedom, and good faith" are set at nought.

(3) I think that great harm is done by the habit certain English divines have of confusing the Confessional Church with the whole Evangelical Church. It is much the same as if a foreign ecclesiastic should think the Church Association or the Church Union represented the English Church. I cannot give statistics, and I do not think that it is possible to obtain them, but the great majority of German pastors are either neutral in their outlook or moderate German Christians: that is, evangelical Christians who accept the National Socialist régime. They carry on their work with more, or less success as our own clergy do, and, provided they confine themselves to preaching the Gospel, without any interruption by the State. There are dangerous and non-Christian tendencies, but they believe that they are best met by doing their work properly. One of my informants, a well-known theologian, who, although not of the Confessional Church is respected by them, said that he thought our English clergy made a great mistake in identifying themselves as they do with one section of the Church, and that they did not help them. What we ought to do was to do all in our power to promote the unity of the German Church. We might respect the Confessionals, but in rejecting the opportunities Dr. Zöllner's committee offered we made a great mistake. There are some signs at present of a tendency towards unity, and instead of encouraging the isolation of the Confessional Church we should urge them to help to create for Germany a Church united and therefore strong.

(4) Germany at present has a form of government of which many people do not approve, but the great majority of the German people believe that it has brought them order and self-respect and good government. It has done things of which we do not approve, but, then, we have done, and are doing, many things of which the Germans do not approve, and I am not quite certain whether we are always righteous. The German people almost universally desire our friendship: the German Church in particular desires to be friendly with our Church. I doubt whether letters like that of the Bishop of Durham do any good to those on whose behalf they claim to be written. They certainly do not help the cause of peace or of friendliness between nations. They do not, I believe, help the influence of Christianity in Germany. Would it not be better to abstain from the pleasing task of continuously scolding other nations and attempt to understand