

## Bishop in the Front Line

(See Cover)

*He has not made life easy for me. On the contrary, it would have been more comfortable to be without him than to live with him. He puts burdens on the soul, which one would rather let pass by unheeded. He exacts a great deal with his demands. And when one thinks that the cross is not so dread, which his children take upon themselves, then comes the moment when it grows very dread indeed...*

—Report of Jesus of Nazareth by Otto Dibelius

The Marienkirche, in the eastern sector of Berlin, is a grave, 13th century church with the mien of a sanctuary and the promise of a mighty fortress. It stands behind the Iron Curtain of Christendom's enemy, and there are signs of struggle within and around it. Some of the choir boys who will sing its 16th century chorales in this troubled Eastertide wear the bright blue shirts of the *Freie Deutsche Jugend*, East Germany's Communist youth group. Last February, one of its clergy, Pastor Reinhold George, was arrested by Red security police a few yards from its doors, and he has not been heard from. Despite such threats by a hostile state, the Marienkirche is crowded with worshippers who are giving a new and challenging witness to the 400-year-old community of the church of Martin Luther.

Their leader, who makes his cathedral headquarters in the Marienkirche, is one of the world's great churchmen: Friedrich Karl von Dibelius, 72, bishop of the Berlin-Brandenburg diocese and, as head of the united German Evangelical Church, the primate of all German Protestants. Jailed by the Nazis and now denounced and threatened by the Communists, Bishop Dibelius is the foremost Protestant champion of the rights of the church against an aggressive secular state. He mans one of the church's most exposed positions against a Communist attack, which daily grows clearer and more severe. Three-quarters of the congregations in his diocese live behind the Iron Curtain. So do 40% of the 41.6 million German Protestants he represents.

The Germans respect Dibelius as they have respected few churchmen, past or present. Standing in the Marienkirche pulpit, vested in a black, three-quarter length Luther *Rock* (coat), he preaches to them in the blunt Gospel language of a Reformation patriarch. A stiffly mannered figure with a face made more impressive by a natural tonsure, small sharp eyes and a

heavy, bristling goatee, he is also clothed in the dignity which Prussians think a *Herr Bischof* ought to have.

But he stands for more than tradition. He is one of the few Christians of his time who have successfully rethought some of his church's basic premises without infringing its Gospel.

Americans find Otto Dibelius a hard man to understand. He is one of Germany's few consistent fighters against the totalitarian state, yet he dislikes republics. He signed a formal confession of war guilt on behalf of Germany's Christians in 1945, but he has attacked the Allied trials of German war criminals as "unjustified." He has denounced Communism, but cautiously refuses to make

European and Catholic unity of the Holy Roman Empire. Catholic voters, a decisive force through history's accidents in the new Federal German Republic, have long had a tendency to look westward in their politics.

The larger of the two Germanys occupies the north and east, lies astride the Iron Curtain barrier. It is Protestant and Prussian, a culture half bourgeois and half aristocratic, a nation that looks East as well as West. This is the nationalist Germany hewn out by Martin Luther in the 16th century when he made his people's declaration of independence, political as well as spiritual, from the tottering visible unity of Rome. This is the Germany which has now been ripped in two by the war of Communism and the democracies. This is the Germany of Otto Dibelius. Once Europe's arbiter, but now politically weak, this Germany logically has as its spokesman a Lutheran bishop, for its spiritual unity, at the moment, is the only bond which may keep its severed halves alive and hopeful.

Otto Dibelius is a classic product of this Protestant Germany, and a witness to its unique spiritual and political character. "Every country," he is fond of saying, "has the religion it deserves. Every religion has the people who suit it."

**Throne & Altar.** Dibelius was born in Berlin, the son of a high government official in a Germany prosperous, pious and proud. It was 1880, just nine years after Count Otto von Bismarck had Wilhelm I crowned Emperor of Germany in the Hall of Mirrors of the defeated French at Versailles. The Dibeliuses were a family of civil servants and clergymen—an uncle of Otto's was court chaplain to the King of Saxony—and he was brought up, as he tells it, "in the Reich tradition." The hero of his student days at the University of Berlin was "Bismarck, of course." In 1906, following a year at the University of Edinburgh, he entered the ministry of the Lutheran Church.

A churchman, in those days, had a life as secure as an imperial bureaucrat. Ever since the 16th century, when Luther invoked the help of German princes to fight off the dominion of Rome, the union of Throne and Altar had been a cardinal tenet of German Protestantism. The Kaiser in Berlin was the church's "Supreme Bishop," pledged to govern his country as a Christian king.

The German empire, German Lutherans believed, was the God-blessed state of St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers," Paul had said, "for there is no



DIBELIUS PREACHING IN THE MARIENKIRCHE  
Resistance in the name of God.

common cause with the Western democracies in their fight against it. His logic is brilliant, but he hates organized philosophy "like sin." These seeming paradoxes, like Dibelius, are unmistakably German and Lutheran.

**Protestant & Catholic.** There were two Germanys in the world long before the Allies of 1945 divided the country into an Eastern zone and a Western. The culture of each was built and nurtured on religious traditions. The smaller of the Germanys, in the Rhineland and Bavaria, was and is largely Roman Catholic and bourgeois, the Germany of Munich, the old Rhenish bishoprics and the industrial Ruhr. This is the Germany of West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. It thinks back, with some nostalgia, to the

power but of God." Luther had explained this himself, saying: "We must firmly establish secular law and the sword, that no one may doubt that it is in the world by God's will and ordinance." This gave the state, in largely Protestant Germany, a formidable foundation.

By the 20th century, however, it was plain to see that Throne and Altar had its drawbacks. Sheltered by the umbrella of the Supreme Bishop's authority and supported by state funds, the official Lutheran Church often became a state bureaucracy and bore little active Christian witness in the life outside the church doors.

As a pious but practical young pastor, Otto Dibelius noticed these things. The professors at his seminary had taught him that a pastor should never enter the homes of his parishioners. "If you do," one instructor warned, "the mantle of Elijah will surely fall from your shoulders." In Scotland, as a student of the established church, Pastor Dibelius learned differently. Back in Germany, after months of observing the ways of his Calvinist brethren, he startled some of his colleagues by mixing freely with his parishioners and encouraging them to be active in the life of the church. Once, while he was ill, he got his congregation to run the church for themselves—"My one great achievement as a pastor."

**Romans & Revelation.** In 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last Supreme Bishop of German Lutheranism, abdicated. Throne and Altar fell apart, and the Protestant state church, after almost 400 years under the state's umbrella, was out in a misty modern world, on its own.

Otto Dibelius was one of the first to see that here was an entirely new premise for church and state relations, which Martin Luther, friend and loyal subject of Christian princes, had never bargained for. The German state no longer claimed divine sanction. Far from being the God-



THE BEAST OF "REVELATION"  
"Every country has the religion it deserves."

blessed state of St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, it might conceivably change itself into another state mentioned in the New Testament—the godless, seven-headed monster of St. John's *Revelation*.<sup>2</sup>

In 1927, Pastor Dibelius wrote a book called *The Century of the Church*, in which he offered his fellow Protestants an outline of a new church-state relationship. He advised pastors to be pastors and not just preachers, to lead the church into all the concerns of public life. And he warned bluntly that the church must raise its necessary funds from the free-will contributions of its parishioners—no longer through the tax collectors of a state that was now avowedly secular.

*The Century of the Church* pulled down a hornet's nest. It brought an especially strong buzzing from Swiss Theologian Karl Barth, who disagreed on theological grounds with Dibelius' view that the church must fill the void left by the passing of the Kaiser's "Christian state." Snapped Barth: "I have nothing against your argument, but don't call it theology." Dibelius looked on Theologian Barth's criticism as a front-line infantry commander might regard a staff officer's observations on tactics. Said he: "I think dogmatics are a mischief. A systematic theologian can change his mind every decade. A pastor cannot."

**Open Warfare.** In 1933, the monster state of St. John's *Revelation* appeared: the Nazis took over Germany. Dibelius was at first cautious. In Potsdam's Nikolai Church he preached a guarded but firm sermon to Reichstag members, including President von Hindenburg and many of

the Nazi Party leaders, "We do not resist authority," he said, "since to do so is anarchy and thus irreligious. . . . But as soon as the state demands to be the church, and strives to assume power to rule the souls of men . . . then we are asked by Luther's words to exercise resistance in the name of God."

It was not long before the Nazis began open warfare against religion. In rigged elections, they pushed pro-Nazi clergymen into positions of authority in the provincial Lutheran churches. Pastor Martin Niemöller was arrested when he spoke out against their anti-Semitism from his pulpit. Dibelius preached from Niemöller's church in Dahlem the following Sunday, and was soon on trial himself. Although acquitted by an old-fashioned judge, he was suspended from his position as general superintendent of the Kurmark church district. Still, he kept up a stouthearted resistance. Once Albert Kerrl, Nazi Minister for Church Affairs, asked him: "Why do you keep on fighting when it is no longer your duty?" Answered Dibelius: "A Christian is never off duty."

In Stuttgart, at war's end, Dibelius and Niemöller, released from a Nazi jail, signed the "confession of guilt" on behalf of the German churches. Neither this, however, nor their anti-Nazi activities during the war meant that they were secret adherents of the democracies all along. Two of Dibelius' sons, Franz and Wolfgang, had been killed in action. A hymn Dibelius wrote while they were at the front sounds like a companion piece to *Deutschland über Alles* (beginning: "Surrounded by the power of the foe, arise, thou German land . . ."). Dibelius' essential objection to Nazism, like Niemöller's, was not that it was authoritarian, but that it tried to subvert the Christian church.

**Against Crusades.** When the Nazis were destroyed, Dibelius might have felt that the monster of *Revelation* was finally laid



John G. Johnson Art Collection, Philadelphia  
MARTIN LUTHER  
His umbrella disappeared.

<sup>2</sup> *Revelation* 13:1, 4: "And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy . . . and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?"

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to rest. But, with most of his flock under a Communist government, he quickly found that the beast had reappeared, and in even more threatening form.

In 1945, the Church Council of the Berlin-Brandenburg diocese named Otto Dibelius as its bishop. With all the prestige of his new title, he began a continuing effort toward two goals: 1) preserving the church's ministry in East Germany; 2) trying to do what he could for German unification, so that the two halves of the Protestant Germany might be brought together.

Since Dibelius championed German unification, the Reds were anxious to use him for propaganda purposes—as they have successfully used Niemöller, a man of integrity and bad judgment who is now Germany's leading "neutralist." Dibelius, though much courted, turned courteously from the Red blandishments. Eight years ago he quietly joined Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's Christian Democratic Party.

Since then, from his church in Berlin, in the monster's jaws, he has fought the new state of *Revelation*. He has fearlessly protested against Communist harassment of pastors and church youth groups, publicly attacked the spread of "materialist ideology." When the Russians, in the gesture of appeasement, asked him to visit Moscow last September, he accepted only after he made clear that he wanted to discuss 1) freedom of religion in East Germany, and 2) German prisoners of war still in Russian hands. The Red invitation was withdrawn.

But, although the Communist press calls him "an agent of the American imperialists," Dibelius refuses to preach a "crusade" against the Communists. As a Christian, he holds that his first duty, now as under the Nazis, is to "preserve the unity of the church of Jesus Christ," not to wage political warfare. As a German, he knows that his continued ministry to East as well as West helps keep alive some feeling of community in a divided country.

**The Prison Chaplain.** Dibelius has his philosophic reservations, too, about the West. "It is a self-deceit," he has written, "if one thinks of the totalitarian states of the East as intrinsically different from the democracies of the West." To Dibelius' mind, the democracies are at root the same "power states" as the dictatorships, because, he thinks, they do not base their authority on God.

He judges democracies, American and European, by the standards of a nostalgic monarchist, and thereby misses a major point, *i.e.*, that the philosophic basis of U.S. democracy is the equality of all men before God. But his warnings on the dangers of the secular state are nonetheless sound and sober.

The new state, Dibelius charges, whether capitalist or socialist, has come to hold unprecedented power over the individual. And, unlike the old Christian monarchies, this "power state" has no goal other than its own projection and preservation. "Power," he says, "is like sea water. The more one drinks of it, the thirstier one gets."



LAYMAN VON THADDEN  
An iron spirit.

The only hope for the state is to give it "a content, a goal, a soul," *i.e.*, to make it the state of *Romans* before it becomes the monster of *Revelation*. This the church can and must do, by projecting its influence into the schools, the factories, every walk of life. Even this effort may not succeed. "It may be," writes Dibelius, "that the church of Jesus Christ has but the same task as the chaplain in a prison where those condemned to death are kept: to prepare mankind for its end."

**A Moving Mountain.** It is a sharp break with Luther's 16th century political theories to contemplate a church virtually in continual tension with the state. But in 1953 Martin Luther's church is stronger, better equipped for this task, and more



Illustrations & Photopress A. G.  
THEOLOGIAN BARTH  
A strong buzzing.

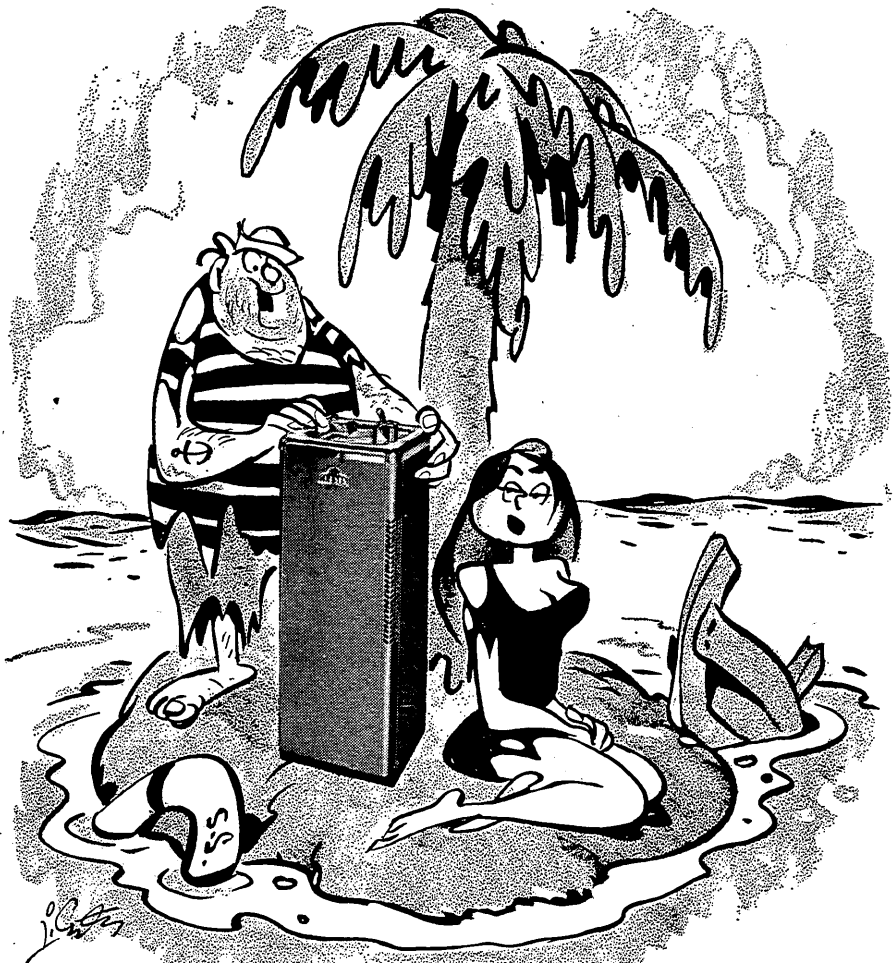
aware of it than ever before. Of the world's 68.5 million Lutherans, 41.6 million of them are in Germany, the rest principally in the U.S. and the Scandinavian countries. U.S. Lutherans, especially since 1945, have made a good deal of contact with their German brethren. Besides contributing some \$24 million to German church welfare funds, they have perhaps shown the Germans how a church independent of the state can function.

In 1948, at Eisenach, near Luther's old refuge in the castle of the Wartburg, the representatives of Germany's Protestants—seven-eighths Lutheran and the rest Calvinists of the Reformed faith—met to consider a church union. At a crucial moment in a long and stalemated discussion, Dibelius got up to preach. His text was *Ezekiel 37:22*: "And I will make them one nation." And, as he puts it, it was the one sermon of his life that "moved a mountain." The delegates went on to push through the constitution of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (E.K.D.)—the Evangelical Church of Germany. Dibelius, as the leading representative of the Protestant Germany, was elected chairman of its executive council.

The great advantage of the E.K.D. is that it enables German Protestants to speak with a single voice. The E.K.D., for instance, now has an official representative in Bonn, to keep an eye on legislation. *e.g.*, the Protestants are as firm as German Catholics in defending religious instruction in German schools. Instead of forming a political party of their own, Protestants have been flocking to join Chancellor Adenauer's Christian Democrats, originally a Catholic party, and its strength is now more than 30% Protestant. Two religious persecutions within 20 years have done much to heal old sores between the Protestant Germany and the Catholic.

The Protestants, concentrated in the East, must bear the brunt of the Communist persecution. So far, much of the persecution has been indirect. It takes the form of noisy Sunday youth meetings, or local Red leaders scheduling "potato-bug Sundays," where farmers are ordered into the fields to pick bugs at exactly the time of church services. The Communists have also banned religious instruction in the schools, and snipped away at the pastors' stipends, still supplied under the law by German local governments. But their open hostility is increasing. Forty-six pastors, like the Marienkirche's Reinhold George, have already disappeared in police vans. Says Dibelius, thinking of his harried flock in the East: "It is not easy to live as a Christian."

**A Real Cigar.** As the leader of German Protestantism, Dibelius lives in a spacious, old-fashioned house on Faradayweg (Faraday Lane) in the correct Dahlem suburb of West Berlin. A copy of Matthias Grünewald's great 16th century altarpiece hangs on his study wall, and his conference room is decorated with statues of German saints. Since his wife Armgard died four months ago, his 42-year-old daughter Christel has kept house for him,



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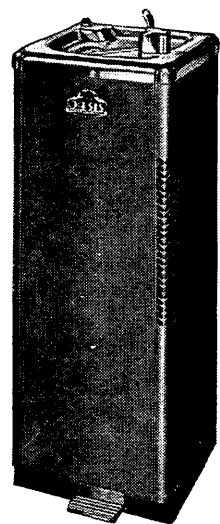
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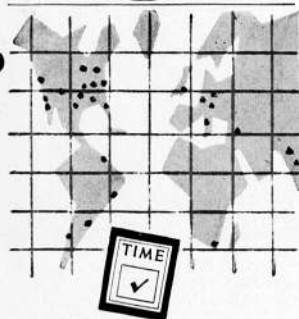
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and she is the hostess at his frequent official dinners.

Dibelius manages to perform an amazing amount of administrative church work, on split-second schedules. If a visitor exceeds the time allotted for an interview, the bishop is apt to consult his old-fashioned pocket watch, arise and politely excuse himself. He opens the watch each morning at 7 to start his day (with a hymn and prayers with his small staff), and it ticks tirelessly through his appointments until 10 at night, when he goes to his study to write. His books, both on devotional and historical subjects, are written in a conversational style which has made some of them close to bestsellers.

Inside the bones of a disciplined character, Dibelius has circulating a lively and urbane wit, a shrewd judgment of character, and a sense of realism that generally gets the better of his Prussian stubbornness. He gives his young pastors one cardinal maxim: "You must love men as they are, and not wait until they change into what you want them to be." But, as a man who has used the same tailor in Berlin's *Leipziger Strasse* for the last 50 years, he shows spurts of impatience with people whose habits clash with his. When a clergyman once pulled out a dwarf cigar at a church meeting, Dibelius' goatee shook. "Nein, Bruder, nein," he said, proffering a cigar of his own, "if you must smoke a cigar, smoke a real one."

**The Visible Church.** When Dibelius became general superintendent of the Kurmark district in 1925, he was virtually the first German clergyman to drive his own car. Using the car, to the bewilderment of the pastors under him, he was able to visit his 35 church districts in 42 days. "I told my pastors," he recalls, "that I wanted to be the bishop of the visible church, not the invisible one."

In fact, if not in title, Otto Dibelius has been a bishop of the visible church for most of his life. He believes in the visible church, believes that it must be maintained, at all costs, to succor the faithful, to make believers of the ignorant, and to lead men to God.

The church in Germany has caught some of Dibelius' iron spirit. If there is not yet a full-scale religious revival, the groundwork is being laid for one. "Evangelical academies" for acquainting clergy and laymen with each other's problems have sprung up in most of the German provincial churches. Following Dibelius' advice of long ago, Protestants are making a strong effort to bring religion to German workers. Using an idea borrowed from the "worker priests" of Catholic France, pastors now spend some time in fields and factories, trying to come to grips with their people's problems.

Probably less than 10% of Germany's nominal Protestants go to church regularly. Now, however, the churches are beginning to fill up. The *Kirchentag* (Church Day) rallies organized by Reinold von Thadden, a Prussian layman, with Germans from both East and West participating, have aroused more mass enthusiasm for their religion than Protes-



Carl Tietz

UNDERGRADUATE DIBELIUS  
 "A Christian is never off duty."

tants have seen for the last century. Last year's rally, held in Stuttgart, drew a crowd of 300,000.

**Confident Faith.** The great lesson which German Protestants have learned, under Otto Dibelius' pastorship, is that they can no longer take their church and their faith for granted. The Lutheran fortress is under sharp attack. As Otto Dibelius prepares to mount the pulpit in the Marienkirche for his Easter-Sunday service, he can ponder the latest news of the Red assault on religion in East Germany. In Chemnitz last week, Pastor Werner Gestrich was sentenced by a people's court to twelve years at hard labor for anti-state "utterances." In Martin Luther's Saxony, Communist papers have accused Bishop Hermann Müller of preventing youngsters in a church home for crippled children from joining a Red youth group—and have demanded that the church home be "placed in the hands of the state." Just so, in the recent past, did the Communists launch their campaigns against the churches of Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia.

Against these signs, on Easter Day, Otto Dibelius will preach an old gospel with the firmness of a man who has always known where his duty lies. He once described his confident faith thus:

"Christ saw on the cross that man, as he is, is always in revolt against God... But, while man's nature rages, God's Plan and God's Truth stand secure—as the stars in heaven stand above the earth. The notion that the age of Jesus of Nazareth has come to an end, and that now new truths will prevail, is a delusion. Truth is not tied to time. Jesus is the truth for all time."