

Preface to the German Edition

“God alone matters”: this is the one question which concerns humanity supremely. For it is this which gives meaning and significance to all other questions. For every human being, yesterday, to-day and for ever, this is the decisive question. It is of course true that if “religion” means the desire for God, and the feeling for and “awareness” of something divine and Eternal, then, in spite of much that seems superficial in the modern world, there is more religion to-day than there has been at other periods of world history. But the thing that matters supremely is not whether man is “aware” of, or has a “feeling” for “something divine,” but whether he knows God as the One who challenges him to decision. The question of God—in the form of decision—is the question of Christ. Religion, and an incipient “awareness” of the Divine, exists indeed in every part of the world, but there is only one “place” at which God challenges man to decision, because He Himself confronts man: Jesus Christ.

Possibly to-day few are willing to listen to this truth; perhaps, however, there are more than we in our desponding moods are inclined to believe. But it may be that the majority have never yet heard of *this* Christ at all. In any case, one who knows this truth has no right to hold his peace because he feels unworthy to speak.

It is the one task of the Church to proclaim this Name aloud to the world. The Church exists, through Christ, for this end. Whenever she forgets this, and forgets it to such an extent that instead of summoning men to decision (through this Name) she simply argues about Him, then she has ceased to be the Church; she has become like salt which has lost its savour and is only fit to be thrown away and trodden under foot of men. It is of course possible for a Church in this condition to accomplish an amazing amount of activity; but it *achieves* nothing; nothing *happens*. The Church is the salt of the earth wherever, and to the extent in which, she really knows this Name and makes it known to the world.

Without this Name, inevitably the world will rot, and no social reform, no Church activity, however well-intentioned, can arrest the process of disintegration. There is only *one* element which can unconditionally oppose and arrest this process of corruption and preserve the Church from it: the divine seriousness of faith in Christ.

It is one thing to proclaim Christ to the world as this decisive factor; it is quite another thing to remind the Church of the paramount importance of this duty and to urge her to fulfil it. Whatever else may be the task of theology, this is certainly its primary duty. Hence, in spite of a sense of inadequacy, it is this which I am trying to express in the present work. I would have had no right to venture on this task were it not a mere restatement of old and well-known truth. I have nothing new to say; on the contrary, my main concern is to make clear that what is said here has been the faith of the Christian Church from the very earliest days. But I would not have had the courage to undertake this work did I not clearly perceive that this reminder is urgently necessary. Not only among the rank and file of the Christian Church, but also among the ecclesiastical leaders, this ancient and familiar truth is in danger either of sinking into oblivion, or of being weakened to such an extent that it is impossible to distinguish it from something different and wholly impotent. The fundamental reason for the impotence of the Church is her ignorance of the power of Christ. For she possesses and needs no other power than this knowledge. But the intellectual reminder, theological reflection on what the Gospel means and what it does *not* mean, is not itself this power. It is just as dangerous to underestimate the importance of this reminder as it is to attach to it extravagant expectations. The present work is predominantly intellectual; it is not intended to produce faith, but to make faith conscious, and to help it to steer clear of error. The work of theology is like that of those whose business it is to test food-values. It is the duty of the theologian to examine the spiritual “food-values” of the faith which the Church offers to the world in her proclamation of the truth—to distinguish the true from the false. The theologian is unable to do this if he does not know the taste of the genuine spiritual food; theology without faith is impossible. But the function of theology is to criticize and eliminate; it is not positively creative. It therefore requires a mass of intellectual activity

which, when its subject matter is taken into account, may often seem like the profanation of a holy thing. Yet the reproach of profanation should be levelled not at the theologians but at those who make this work necessary, because they confuse the language of faith; those who—more or less deliberately—offer other “substances” in the guise of scriptural truth. Theological critical work is therefore not intended for edification, but, if it is done in the right way, it is most necessary and valuable. The Church needs to use theology as a check, in order to protect herself against “food-poisoning,” and against the acceptance of worthless and deceptive “food substitutes.” Theology cannot herself create the Divine Food of Life, but she can render yeoman service to the Church, and to the cause of God on earth, by exposing the poverty-stricken condition of Christendom.

The whole purpose of a reminder is to render itself superfluous. It is my sincere desire that as soon as possible this book will no longer be necessary; indeed, that people will hardly be able to understand why it was necessary to take so much trouble to say what every Christian knows; that the Church, as she proclaims the Name of Christ to the world, will do so with such mighty fervour, clarity, and conviction that she will convince the world. This clear reverberating sound, as of a trumpet call, does not echo through this book, but this should not be expected in a work of this character. For it is not itself a proclamation of the truth; it simply deals intellectually with the question of the content of the true message. This book does not set out to be “prophetic.” I would feel amply rewarded if it could be said that this is an honest theological book. This is, however, almost more than I dare to expect. For though there may be many honest books to-day, written by those who bear the name of theologians, can it be said that their works are really theological books?

Nor does this book claim to be a “doctrine of Christ.” In my opinion, the time is not yet ripe for this; in any case, I am not equal to such a task. I do not venture to offer more than an introduction to the subject. My friend Barth was certainly right when in his criticism of my book on Schleiermacher he reminded me that it is easier to see the mistakes of others than it is to lead forward oneself along the right path. And yet I believe that destructive work is not unnecessary, all the more because it would itself be impossible without at least some—however inadequate—knowledge of the new truth. So far as

that particular book is concerned I retract none of my criticism of modern theology, although I admit that I regret a certain asperity of tone which often arises when a conviction is being gradually formed. Meanwhile the opposition has become so much deeper that this external asperity falls away of itself. The present book has grown out of that conflict with modern theology, and still more out of reflection on the message of the Bible, which is just as much the life-work of the preacher as it is of the academic teacher of theology. This book has come into being at the same time as another,¹ which for external reasons was published first. The observation that “prolegomena”—with which the other work deals—cannot be rightly understood without at least some specimen of actual theological work, has induced me to bring out this second book on the heels of the first, although a delay of several years for further study and reflection would have been of great advantage to the present work.

This book is not intended to be a scholarly work in the actual sense of the word, and I would beg my readers to regard the few notes and quotations merely as elucidations and suggestions of the connection of the subject-matter of this book with the doctrines of the Early Church and of the Reformers; even in this sketchy form this work has grown much larger than I intended it to be. On the other hand, I hope that the intelligent reader will realize that what may strike him at first as constant repetition is the necessary spiral movement by which true theological work is carried out, since it has to show that there are not many “articles of faith,” but only *one*.

In conclusion there remains only the pleasant duty of thanking my fellow workers, above all my honoured friend and colleague, Gottlob Schrenk, for the unselfish and obliging manner in which he has always placed at my disposal his stores of knowledge and his valuable counsel; I would also express my gratitude to the faithful friends who once again have shared in the toilsome labour of correcting the proofs.

E.B.
Zürich

1. *Religionsphilosophie* (Oldenbourg, Munich).

Preface to the English Edition

Positively I have only one thing to add to the Preface to the German Edition which was written seven years ago: that to-day I am more convinced than ever that the world needs nothing so much as the message of the Christ, and that the Church needs nothing so urgently as meditation upon this message. This translation is based upon the unaltered text of the first German edition; hence it contains no allusions to publications which have appeared since 1927. My last word must be one of grateful thanks to the translator, Miss Olive Wyon, whose skill and devotion I sincerely admire.

E. B.
Zürich