

About the Question of Guilt

By Martin Niemöller

You are concerned with the question of guilt and about this I have much to say. First of all: I have never suggested that the German people as a whole are responsible for and guilty of the Nazi crimes, but again and again I have said that we have no right to throw all the guilt onto the shoulders of the bad Nazis and to pretend that we are innocent. Again and again I have stressed: We are probably not all murderers, thieves and sadists, but we have done little or nothing to stop the evil, and beyond all, we, that is the Church, have failed for we knew the wrong and the right path, but we did not warn the people and allowed them to rush forward to their doom. I do not exclude myself from this guilt; on the contrary, I stress at every opportunity that I too have failed, for I too have been silent when I should have spoken!

It is just those who have done nothing and who have risked nothing and who have confessed nothing who now do not want to hear any guilt mentioned, whilst I found among my co-prisoners much real repentance and know from my own bitter and spiritual experiences: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!* And this I know in view of the crimes which our fellow Germans have committed against the members of their own and those of other nations. First of all we have to be conscious of this; and if we do not appreciate this, and if we do not [6] turn away to confess to ourselves and to God that we had taken the wrong path out of our fear and our disbelief, then we shall remain banned from the society of men and no prophet will arise to bring us the comfort of the word of God into our darkness. And if we now begin to talk of the sins of the others, after we have filled the world with torture, blood and corpses, with ruins and desolation, then I can only reply: All this is only an ounce compared with the terrible weight with which we have burdened *our* conscience, and I say this after having been in Berlin for twelve days; in Berlin where there is hardly a woman who has not been dishonored and where death stalks as nowhere in the world, except not so long ago in Poland and Czechoslovakia and in Western Russia! How did it happen that there were only forty-five Protestant clergy in Dachau as compared with 450 Roman Catholic priests? Probably you have never seen the inside of a gas chamber; you have probably never stood outside the crematorium in Dachau in which a quarter million human beings have been burned: to see this means losing one's senses.

No, the Church has not been victorious, she has betrayed her Lord and her Saviour by saying again and again: I do not know this Man; she knew what was happening, but pretended that these victims did not concern her. How are we going to be able to hear the words of grace if we do not recognize our sin?

Everywhere I find people who justify themselves saying: I might have lost my life; I risked perhaps my position and occupation. There are still countless people today who ask: "Was it really as bad as the newspapers tell us?" and I always answer them: "No, it was not as bad, it was infinitely worse!" There are many excuses which people can find, but they all follow the strain: "Am I my brother's keeper?" You should have seen that self-satisfied clergy at Treysa! "We led the people along the right path; the Church has not failed, we taught the pure doctrine and did not wander into the maze of Arian Christianity."¹

Please consider the matter in this light; if one does this, one ceases to enquire about the sins of others. One becomes quite small and then one experiences the great revelation that the Son of God died to save men such as we, then a hidden abyss opens in front of us into which we

¹ Arius, who lived in the fourth century, taught that our Lord was not God Himself, but created by God.

throw ourselves to fall into the arms of our Redeemer. But the self-satisfied who walk on the surface, who have ten times as much to eat as the poor people of Berlin and hundred times as much as those thousands who wander along the roads in the East, who still close their eyes to the fact that the judgment has begun with the House of God, they will not experience this. The sweetest words of comfort will be lost, because when the truth appears, the earth opens itself to swallow up Korah and his company, who took it upon themselves to become priests without the call of God.

No, the Church has not been victorious, she has failed and is failing still because she assumes that the judgment that is passed around her, applies to the world but not to herself. You must understand that this is my concern, which for the sake of the Church and for the sake of my people, I shall not abandon, that no one should lose the chance for forgiveness which is being offered to us still, perhaps for the last time in the history of our people. And yet the people talk of relief work and pacify their conscience when they have sprinkled another drop of water onto a hot stone; they talk of the only true doctrine of the Lutheran Church and of the necessity to hold oneself apart from the Calvinists, and other such blasphemies, and yet the knife of God is at their throat and they refuse to believe it. Look, I only preach of forgiveness and comfort, but comfort and forgiveness for the men who bend their head before God and His judgment, as the publican did in the parable, and as the Church should do it today. I know what joyful songs of praise the hungry and starving parishes in the East sing today; I have stood among them and my eyes have filled with tears, which does not happen easily, and I want to return to these people who do not accuse anyone because they may suffer injustice, but to praise God that He has shown them His mercy in the midst of His judgment. No, we are not criminals, we have murdered no one, we have robbed no one, we have not lustfully and intentionally tortured; but also, we no longer think ourselves superior to those people who have done such things, because we know of our own guilt, and, in the midst of this guilt, we know of the one great wonder, the mercy of God in giving us His only-begotten Son.

This seems a strange letter and I do not know whether it has at all convinced you. He who has seen and experienced what I have seen and experienced, no longer approaches these things with cold reasoning, he ceases to compare and weigh the sins of men, but he also no longer asks how his enemies may react: that counts no longer, or it counts only in as far as these very enemies will also one day be suddenly terrified, and many are so already, and if God will listen to our prayers, then the eyes, ears and hearts of these enemies will be opened to receive the one redeeming message which can vanquish all the ghastly machinations of men and the devil on this earth. The Lord protect you, and believe me: I love my people as much as any one, just now in its guilt I love it with the love with which Christ has loved me, and I will not owe Him this love for one day of my life. Therefore I speak as I do.

From a Letter addressed to one of his critics, November, 1945.

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