

Christ and We Christians (1947)

By Karl Barth

Our topic has the characteristic of being very simple. Christ and us Christians: we are not talking about some kind of realization, structure and design, but in any case about a *foundation* that certainly has many things in its wake, but which is very simple in itself.

What we need in today's Europe, and especially in today's Germany, are foundations. Today and here we are facing an unprecedented collapse: not only of houses, churches and cities, but also of the state, the economy, society, individual and social morality and everything that was previously called culture. And in connection with this, and perhaps first and foremost, a general collapse of *joie de vivre* and the will to live! It cannot only be explained by the external pressure and attack on the edifice of human life and coexistence. Rather, if this edifice gave in to this pressure and this attack, it was because its foundations had given way. Without a new search for the foundations, even the most important and burning questions of construction cannot be asked in a meaningful way today.

The general collapse also affects us Christians, including the Christian community or church. And for us Christians, too, it is not primarily about these or those mistakes or shortcomings, but about a crisis of foundations. Would the foundations outside in the world, in the state and in society have failed so much if they had not failed above all inside, among us Christians? We will do well not to start today by asking what this nation or other nations have lacked and still lack politically, culturally, morally and socially. And then to add the general exhortation that the world should return to "Christianity"! Rather, we will do well to ask what is lacking among *us* who seriously want to be *Christians*!

That is why I did not choose a topic that could perhaps be: "Christ and the university" or "Christ and communism" or "Christ in the age of the atomic bomb", but quite simply: "Christ and us Christians". I will now also leave Bismarck and Hitler, nationalism, National Socialism and democracy, as important as they all are, to one side for the time being. Those who have ears to hear will hear what needs to be said anyway. If the foundations are to be cleared up, as is necessary today, then everyone, including Christians, should first clean up after themselves and not after others. We know the final verse in Luther's Small Catechism: "Everyone learns his lesson, so it will be well in the house". As long as we Christians have not learned our own lesson – perhaps we do not even know it properly – everything else cannot stand well either. *Hence our theme: "Christ and us Christians".*

I. Christ is the Word of God

We Christians are people for whom this name means a promise and a pledge – in that Christ calls us to be Christians.

We Christians: How did these two words come to be put together? Ask yourself whether it is not very strange? Well, Luther once said: "A Christian does not stand in having become, but in becoming (*Ein Christ steht nicht im Gewordensein, sondern im Werden*)". Let me translate that: We are Christians because Christ calls us to be Christians. We are not Christians because we are people of the so-called Christian West. Nor are we Christians because we are members of a so-called Christian people. Nor are we Christians because we grew up in a so-called Christian family and environment. Nor are we Christians because we have a so-called religious disposition. Such a religious disposition could also lead us somewhere completely different. Religion in itself has nothing to do with Christianity, just as there are Christians

who are not particularly religious. And we are not Christians because we have a so-called Christian world view, because we have Christian morals or perhaps even because we have a Christian program in mind for church and state! You cannot be a Christian just because you are a member of a party or an association, and you are not a Christian just because you are Catholic or Lutheran or Reformed. All this is still part of being born and has nothing to do with the call of Christ.

The name Christian therefore does not refer to a certain possession of certain people, not to a program or a theory, not to a claim with which a person could dare to come before God and men, or with which he could justify himself even to himself. We Christians are necessarily poor, humble people, and this is because we are only Christians in that Christ's call is made to us and so our Christianity is always in the process of becoming and having become. We are Christians because Christ is and lives and acts in such a way that he is and lives and acts in such a way that he is also recognizable and noticeable to us. This is the becoming in which we Christians stand.

In order to understand who and what we Christians are, we must first of all ask: *Who and what is Christ?* The answer to this is: He is firstly *a human being*, Jesus of Nazareth, who as such is God's Word and lives and acts for us as God's Word. And secondly, he is *God himself*, who is alive and powerful in this word – and as this word for us.

He is God's word *for us* by speaking to us and calling us. But the content of this word of God is quite simply Himself. "I am for you and you are mine!" In this respect, the word is a salutation and a call and a vocation: "Follow me!" The power of the Christian being and name lies in this calling.

Thus the Christian name and the Christian being are a "dynamic" reality. But "dynamis" is God's dynamis in his word and not ours. What we have and are, we have and are in the promise and pledge given to us in Christ: "Without me you can do nothing." What can we do but say with Paul: "Not as though I had already grasped it ..." But now again with Paul: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me, Christ!" We become Christians when God becomes our master through his word. "He speaks, so it happens". In this happening we *are* Christians.

II Christ is God's mercy in his own person

We Christians are people who have only this advantage over others, that we can begin to recognize and experience God's mercy in Christ.

No one can be less inclined than we Christians to consider ourselves better, more pious, more clever than others. And no one can stand more deeply, more necessarily and more completely in solidarity with all people than we Christians. For we know that we human beings as a whole and without exception need mercy, that we can only live from mercy.

How do we know this? We do not know it on the basis of a particular theory about man and the human situation, and therefore not because we have looked particularly deeply and thoroughly into human life and are in a position to think and speak more seriously and with more concern about man: not because we Christians are professional pessimists! Rather, we know this because we know that mercy has been shown to us human beings: mercy, not pity, genuine, free and undeserved, effective mercy from God. We Christians know that we can *live* from this mercy of God and live from him *alone*. In that Jesus Christ calls us to himself, God's mercy in person is known to us, the merciful God himself is known to us: Immanuel, God

with us, i.e. God with a sinful people, the Savior of a lost world, the light that shines in the darkness, the King in the midst of his enemies and opponents. Where God is known in this way – and we Christians are allowed to know him in this way – there is an end to the pride of the strong, the rich, the mighty, but also to all the arrogance of the spiritual man, the mystic, the moralist and the pious. They are then irrelevant. For where one knows God in this way, one is at the root of one's existence together with every – without exception every – human being in his sin and need, and in such a way that this togetherness is self-evident.

What distinguishes us Christians from other people? Only the fact that we have heard the call of Christ and can therefore begin to experience the glory of divine mercy in the person of this One in our part. God's mercy is for all people and truly not just for us Christians, just as everyone needs it and we Christians truly need it the most! "God was in Christ and reconciled the *world* to himself" and: "God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten Son". Who are we Christians? We are only those whose eyes, ears and hearts are opened – not by our power, but by the power of God – so that we can notice God's mercy before others and be grateful for it. This noticing and this gratitude, this living with open eyes, ears and hearts, is what is called the Christian *faith*.

We can *begin* to recognize and experience God's mercy. All Christian faith can only be a *beginning*. It is a beginning that we have this faith in the midst of all people who do not yet believe or no longer believe, that we are allowed to assume this position of a vanguard. And faith is also a beginning in ourselves, for our noticing and recognizing the divine promise and pledge will always relate to this promise and pledge itself as one to infinity: the depth of our knowledge and experience to the depth of divine mercy as one to infinity, and our obedience to Christ's call itself as one to infinity. And so the one who believes will gladly agree with the words of the man in the Gospel: "I believe, dear Lord, help my unbelief".

So we Christians are different from the others. We are different in that we, as sinners among sinners, as the lost among the lost, make this beginning and may know better than they that we are not better. We can be ahead of others in knowing better than them that they and we can live by God's mercy *alone*.

III Christ has kindled a fire on earth

We Christians are people who owe Christ the freedom to look forward to the revelation of his kingdom as God's children.

In that we Christians are called through Christ to recognize and experience divine mercy, we are given a very specific *freedom*: the freedom by virtue of which sin, death and the devil, the material, spiritual and political powers and kingdoms of this world in their hostility to God and danger to life no longer have to be ultimate and absolute realities, but in which everything that is great, strong, significant, godless and threatening here and now in the world has become *transparent* to us. We can see and recognize that all the kingdoms of this world are limited by the mercy of God. And we can see – this is the really important thing – beyond this boundary the kingdom of God, which, because it is God's kingdom, is at the same time the world of the liberated, the redeemed and eternally living human being. We look forward to this coming, we wait for this future.

The fact that there are people who are allowed to live in this expectation is the fire that Christ, in his own words, came to light on earth. This is the revolution that has begun in Christ on earth. This is the work of the Holy Spirit that he promised to his own.

The freedom to be such people is a freedom that is completely foreign to us humans, a completely new freedom. Luther says in the Declaration on the 3rd Article: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. I believe that I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him by my own reason or strength, but that the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel ..." If we are such people who are waiting for the kingdom of God, we are what we can only be through Christ's call: his brothers, the Son of God's brothers, and thus God's children, co-heirs of his glory, moved and driven by his Spirit. But to be such people of expectation and hope becomes our own freedom in Christ. To be aware and certain of the coming kingdom through the Holy Spirit necessarily means a new ground on which we stand, a new air in which we may breathe, a certain change in our view and attitude already in this time of expectation. A change that is only a beginning: a small beginning with which we will have to start again and again, but a very real change.

Just as *examples* of the many things that need to be mentioned here, let me mention two things that seem remarkable to me, especially in Germany:

1) The Holy Spirit, who gives us this freedom, is the renounced enemy of all *metaphysics*, that is, of all obfuscation of the sober and soberly observable facts and connections of human existence and its history through profound constructions, through positive or negative absolutizations of that which may no longer have absolute, but only relative and practical meaning, which is to be taken seriously, but may only be taken seriously on a lower level. The Holy Spirit sets us free by resolutely placing us on this lower level: he places us with both feet on this earth and denies us all free balloon rides to a height and all submarine rides to a depth in which only reverie and intoxication are to be had and ultimately murder and manslaughter are to be expected.

2) The Holy Spirit, who is the renounced enemy of all metaphysics, is the outspoken friend of *common sense*, who evaluates things as they are and who at the same time knows how to meet them with a quality that seems more indispensable today than ever: with humor, that is, with the ability to see oneself at a distance and thus in one's own humor. It is a bad thing and perhaps itself the sign of an even worse thing that people have so widely lost this ability. A real and especially a Christian renewal will only come about when some of us come to our senses, realize that twice two is four, and then laugh a little at ourselves again. The Holy Spirit not only allows us, but commands us to be prudent, to simply ask what is possible and reasonable today, to take everything seriously and nothing "tragically". How nice it would be if this word were to disappear completely from the Christian language! Tragedy is, after all, the source of all unreasonableness. May the Lord deliver us from tragedy! And that is exactly what he does.

All because he is the Holy Spirit, the spirit of expectation of the kingdom of God. Where he is, there is freedom.

IV. Christ is the Lord

We Christians are people whom Christ has chosen to involve as his messengers and witnesses in his own service for the glory of God and the salvation of all people.

Christ is both the reason and the *goal* of our Christian name and our Christian existence. The fact that we are Christians is *not an end in itself*, it is not the end of God's ways. When Paul talks about how he was called by Christ to be allowed to live in Christ, he did not think that this had been given to him so that he could be a great and pious Paul, but rather he emphasized again and again that his being a Christian was absolutely and inseparably linked to his

calling as a messenger and servant of Christ. Christ gives us Christians the life and the joy, the freedom and the hope to become capable workers in his vineyard and collaborators in his work between his first appearance and the revelation of his kingdom. He has honored us to participate in his Christianity.

He himself, Christ, did not come for his own glory, but he was and is the Lord "for the glory of God the Father". And he did not come to be served, but: "I have come to serve and to lay down my life for many". This, however, is what it means to be a Christian. It cannot be said any better than in question 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism: "But why are you called a Christian? Because by faith I am a member of Christ and therefore a partaker of his anointing, so that I too may confess his name, present myself to him as a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and with a clear conscience fight against sin and the devil in life, and afterward reign with him over all creatures for eternity." This is what I mean when I say that Christ has made us worthy to participate in his Christianity. What we receive as Christians, we receive as equipment to participate in the *service of Christ*. But this ministry of Christ is essentially the same as the ministry of the apostles: the *message* to be made visible through our lives, the ministry of *witness*.

Message and testimony: our ministry cannot be more than that. There must be no confusion here: Christ is the Lord, we are the servants. He is the one to whom we bear witness. Woe to us if we wanted to be little Christs ourselves! Of course, our ministry cannot be anything less than a message and testimony. Our task as Christians is to make Christ known and thus to make God's mercy visible. Not in an equation with Christ, but in the *likeness* of our human words and deeds. That is the meaning of the law and all the commandments, that we, by being and being called Christians, are called to become a parable with everything we are and do. What can be described as the task of the Church towards the world will have to follow this line: Message and witness in the form of parable. "You shall be my witnesses." "We are therefore ambassadors in Christ's stead: Be reconciled to God." – More is not required of us – and woe betide us if we wanted to trust ourselves with more! But this *is* required – and woe betide us if we wanted to refrain from doing so! For that is the telos of the Christian state under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

V. Christ is the head of his church

We Christians are people who are united by Jesus Christ into a single body living in his service.

In this sentence, the little word "we" of our topic must be honored. *We* Christians: Who are these "we"? We, i.e. undoubtedly: each one of us in our unique, unrepeatable life situation. Each individual with his experience, his sin, his need, with everything that is only his business, where it applies: "No one else stands up for him, he stands on his own."

But this call of Christ, which goes out to each individual, is the *one* call which as such is addressed to many, so that we are all called by him and through him are placed in the fellowship of the unfathomable, divine mercy and in the hope of his kingdom and made partakers of the freedom of the Spirit. In that the multitude of individuals as individuals are at the same time the many, and in that we realize that we are not alone, but together with others these many, each of whom is called by Christ, we discover the reality of the *community*, one may also say: of the *church*, if by church we do not understand some roof floating in the air with a cross or a rooster, an institution with a dogma, a liturgy and a church constitution, represented by gentlemen with black robes and white buffalo, but if by church we finally understand again the event of the *gathering of the many* on the basis of the one call of Christ. So if the church is not understood to be the static nature of an institution, nor the dynamic of human

enthusiasm or human piety, but the static and dynamic nature of Jesus Christ, his call, which does not leave us standing in our corner as individuals, but which makes us members of his body and brings us out into the reality of his church – then the thing may also be called the church and honored under this name, then we may and will join in the confession: *credo ecclesiam!*

The Christian congregation *is not an end in itself* either. The body of Christ, like its head Jesus Christ, does not live for itself, but first and foremost for this head and, for the sake of this head, in his service. From this head, the Christian community is necessarily oriented towards the salvation of *all* people. At the point in the New Testament where the name "Christians" appears for the first time, it says: "And it came to pass, when they *came together* as one body, *and taught much people*, that they were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). The Christian state is inherently under the word: "You are the light of the world." This being the light of the church in the world includes both: worship and proclamation, the coming together of Christians among themselves and their turning outwards to teach many people. The service of God and the service of men are therefore not to be separated from each other, but the one necessarily forms the meaning and power of the other. Worship – liturgy! – that does not lead directly to proclamation would be a lazy thing, and conversely, proclamation that is not based on worship and does not always lead to it would be a hollow thing. In the Christian community, we must not rush back and forth between these two poles, so that perhaps, when we no longer understand what worship is, we throw ourselves all the more eagerly into proclamation, or that, when we are no longer faithful to the message, we take refuge in the beautiful world of the liturgy. Neither the liturgy nor the proclamation should become a movement of flight, in which one thing would necessarily have to be neglected. The Church is the Church for God and thus the Church for the world, the Church for the world and thus the Church for God. There is no such thing as a "church for itself". The church can never be an end in itself; by its very nature it is at the service of God and mankind.

And all Christians are equally committed to and responsible for this ministry. The word "ministry" would perhaps also be best to disappear from Christian usage for a while. There are not Christians of different rank and position. That would be a cheeky attack on the basic Christian truth. There are no "clergy" who are not also "church people", and no "church people" who are not also "spiritual"! If there are special features, they can only exist in a diversity of ministry. But all ministry is charismatic ministry. It is the memory of the charism and thus of the Holy Spirit that must be revived in our church if there is to be a living church again. Outside the unity of this ministry, which is entrusted to all and for which all are responsible, there is no Christian state. In this sense: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus!* Anyone who does not want to serve has not understood what it means to be a Christian. The church is the brotherhood and sisterhood in which the praise of God, the worship of the angels, the "Glory to God in the highest" from the Christmas story and – and this cannot be separated from the first – the "peace on earth among men of good will" are represented. To be a Christian means to be united with others in this brotherhood for the praise of God and the proclamation of peace on earth.

VI Christ is the Comforter

We Christians are people who have been given by God not to despair of the world, of the church, of ourselves, but to be of good cheer in the face of adversity.

We Christians live in the world, but that means in an environment that does not yet or no longer knows Christ and which can therefore mean temptation and trial. However, there is one temptation and temptation that tempts the Christian more than the world, and that is the one

that comes from the church itself. The pagans and the ungodly would have to go to great lengths if they wanted to shake us in our faith. But one might well go astray when one sees what is possible in the church! And how the church can fail in its ministry! But the greatest temptation and challenge comes from ourselves. We Christians are human beings, and that means creatures whose ingratitude and stubbornness cries out to heaven. We are therefore full of inadequacy and adversity all along the line: in the world, in the church and above all in ourselves in a world that has not yet been redeemed and is only approaching the revelation of the kingdom.

Here, in this world, we have our status and our task as Christians. This is where our service should take place for the glory of God and the salvation of people. Here, behind this barbed wire, we can spread the good news and then be a little happy ourselves. This joy cannot be achieved by consoling ourselves with some Christian worldview in which perhaps "everything doesn't seem so bad". But we don't have to comfort ourselves. We are not supposed to.

And above all, it is simply not necessary for us to comfort ourselves. After all, the point for Christians is to bear witness to the joy that is "in heaven". We may live in this joy, i.e. in Jesus Christ we are people who are already comforted and who, even if they have a hard time, do not have to despair, but who are held firmly enough by Christ to be able to survive one evening and one morning against the deceit of the world, against the nonsense of the church and against their own perversity. The little bit of manna that the Israelites received in the desert for just one day at a time, so that they could say a hearty yes to that day, will not be lacking for us either, if only we run to gather it up where it has fallen from heaven. That's how it is with life under Christian consolation. You can't save it up, you can let it be given to you again and again. But it is also given to you. And by receiving it, you do not have to despair, but you are comforted by Christ, comforted in the world and in the Church, comforted also in your own heart and conscience.

As such comforted ones, we get what we need: a little *patience* (in Greek *hypomone*: perseverance) and a little *confidence* (*parrhesia*: joyfulness) and a little *decisiveness* (*hypakoe*: obedience) to take the necessary steps: that we may be of good courage in all adversity. This "good courage" is guaranteed to us in Christ and is therefore not a life program, but the possibility of a narrow and clear line of life on which we can go upwards and forwards (over mountains and through valleys), "that the longer the more we are renewed into the image of God, until we reach the goal of perfection after this life" (HC Fr. 115).

VII Christ is the victor

We Christians are people for whom Christ is the only hope, but the certain hope for everyone and everything.

Christ is the victor. Victory is more than consolation. And hope is more than good courage. Perhaps traditional Christianity suffers above all from the fact that we understand Christ at best as a comforter and his gift at best as good courage, as the gift of patience and confidence and decisiveness. That is nothing small, but there is another horizon. As the church of Jesus Christ, we would not only owe ourselves, but also God and mankind a decisive debt if we did not want to realize that Christianity not only has a Good Friday side, but also an Easter side. Rightly understood, the cross is not a sign of paradox and dark mystery, but a sign of *victory*. *In hoc signo vinces!* What we need is a Christianity that believes in the message of Easter. If we stop at the mystery of the cross as such and let "consolation" be the last word, then there is a danger that the gospel, the good news, will once again be understood as an unhappy message, as the proclamation of a new and very difficult, very high, very holy, very binding law,

in which Christ, as the archetype and model of its fulfillment, is then only a kind of penultimate helper. But the real Christ is the *victor*. He has risen from the dead, and all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. And so his gift is not only consolation, but also an overcoming, that is, a hope that already participates in his victory over death and all powers and authorities and is therefore alive. The good news is: It is finished! Everything has been accomplished that is necessary for the glory of God and for our salvation. We just don't see it yet. We do it like an army that continues to shoot for a few more days because the news has not yet reached them that the battle has been fought and the victory won. The reckoning for our benefit – for the benefit of *all*! – has already happened in Christ's death and resurrection. And Christian hope sees what has happened there. All resistance and opposition that we may find in the world, in the Church and in ourselves has basically already been overcome. We Christians, who can look back on what happened on Golgotha, on the peace that was made there, cannot help but look to the future with hope in the coming of the One who has already come. We can live in this hope and count on the fact that victory has been won not only for us, but for all. In this way we may live as people who have confidence and who therefore do not have to wither away in mistrust. We may be such trusting people for the sake of Christ, who has won the victory, and for the sake of the hope in him that will not be put to shame. We will then certainly not encounter people as those who have to hurl Christ's "claim to totality" at them. That is another word from the Hitler era that we would rather not apply to Christ! After all, this is a total offer from Christ. We may live under this total offer and may therefore also show others the way to a life under the rule of this total offer.

Living in this hope, we Christians will not be "optimists" from afar, but we will always stand up for the cause of *hope* – especially in individual and small ways – and not for despair, but be grateful even for the small lights. We will not pass them by carelessly, but will recognize the reflection of the great hope in every little one. We will take the small things seriously and not avoid the great difficulties, but live a little bravely and be comforted not only by, but in the hope of the One who is victorious. We will make sure that we Christians, too, are always lonely in the world, because we know that it is all about this One and Him alone. It will be ensured that we give offense again and again, but hopefully useful offense, of which we need not be ashamed.

This is the *Christian* foundation. However, we Christians are of the opinion that its renewal is more urgent than any other and that only from it can all other foundations become truly urgent and promising. It must precede all others. But hopefully we are also aware that in this renewal we must begin with ourselves: that a new *Christianity*, a new *Church*, is what is needed above all today. We have heard what *our* "lesson" is. Have we learned it yet?

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