THE STUTTGART DECLARATION OF 1945: A STUDY IN GRACE, REPENTANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: *This essay explores the restoring of relations between the Protestant churches in Germany, Europe and America following World War II, with special attention to the events surrounding the Stuttgart Declaration. Questions regarding the relation between forgiveness and repentance are considered along with their connection to the political issues of collective responsibility, punishment and the eventual restoration of Germany following the Nazi era. The essay examines the ways in which the Stuttgart Declaration and its chief interpreter, Martin Niemöller, played a valuable role in helping both Germany and the Allies move towards postwar reconciliation.*

> The members of the real church are 'better' than others only in so far as they are more aware of the extent of human guilt before God, are more aware than others of the indissoluble solidarity of all men as sinners.[1]

> For our own sakes we should not refuse to be the real and sincere friends of the Germans today.[2]

> The Allied armies are in occupation of the whole of Germany and the German people have begun to atone for the terrible crimes committed under the leadership of those whom in the hour of their success they openly approved and blindly obeyed.[3]

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1 Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-war Writings, 1946-1952* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1954), 67.

2 Karl Barth, *The Only Way: How to Change the German Mind* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 99. Lecture delivered in January, 1945.

3 *The Potsdam Declaration*, August 3, 1945. From Henry Morgenthau, Jr., *Germany is Our Problem* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), Appendix C, III. Germany, paragraph one, 216.

On Oct 17-19, 1945, in Stuttgart, a Declaration of Guilt *(Stuttgarter Schuldbekenntnis)* was authored by the newly reconstituted Council of the Protestant Church in Germany. It became the most significant post war document written by the Confessing Church.[4] It was also controversial for many reasons, but one reason rarely noted is that the document witnesses to an international effort of the church that did not passively submit to the formulation of postwar policies of the Allied governments. For as the war in Europe was winding down, pressure was mounting to teach Germany a lesson that would make the Versailles treaty look generous by comparison. This was the context in which the ecumenical church determined to reset its relationship to the Protestant church in Germany along a very different trajectory. By taking this initiative, Stuttgart put a question to the Allied governments: would they pursue a victor's spirit of vengeance or pursue the irenic example of the Church?

The hurdles for attempting their meeting for reconciliation were many. How does one re-establish relations between churches whose members have spent the past five years trying to obliterate the other in a total war? The war's end raised perhaps the fundamental challenge of Christian faith, namely how to practice the difficult love of forgiving one's enemy? Moreover, how does forgiveness function within the complexity of group, national and international relations? Is it possible for governments to practice forgiveness in a way which is more than the sum of the individual actions of its citizens? Is it possible for governments to enact policies of a "victor's justice" or "collective punishment" when their churches choose the path of reconciliation?

Recent studies have claimed the gathering at Stuttgart was further complicated by a deep disagreement between the Lutheran and Reformed parts of Protestantism, with "acrimonious debates" about preconditions to forgiveness in regard to the question of German guilt.[5] But as we will see from the testimony of those closely involved, the issue for the church leaders who came to Stuttgart, Lutheran, Reformed or otherwise, was not about preconditions in a theological sense, but was simply practical: how does one actually practice forgiveness when two parties have been violently estranged? The ecumenical fellowship was well

4 Cf. Paul Oestreicher's introduction to a collection of post war essays by Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Demands of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 17.

5 Matthew Hockenos, *A Church Divided. German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 74. John Conway asserts that Hans Asmusssen delineated "in true Lutheran fashion" that the acknowledgement of guilt was a necessary prerequisite of merciful forgiveness. John S. Conway, "How Shall the Nations Repent? The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, October 1945," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38, no. 4 (October, 1987): 603.

aware of the implications of what they were attempting and what might happen should they fail. For if the church could not practice what they had been called by Jesus to preach to the nations, how could they expect their governments to do anything but double down on the punitive Versailles policies of World War I? The representatives at Stuttgart were hoping by God's mercy to shape the trajectory of post-war history along a different path. This hope led them to arrange, as soon as humanly possible, a meeting for reconciliation between themselves and representatives of the German Protestant church.

Just weeks before the Stuttgart meeting, Karl Barth had written Martin Niemöller, to encourage his old friend that in this dark hour of defeat, Christians of many nations wanted to help Germany. But it was necessary, said Barth, for Germans to say frankly and clearly, "We Germans have erred — hence the chaos of today — and we Christians in Germany are also Germans!"[6] Barth was alarmed that Germans already seemed too concerned "with what they held against others."[7] Might the church offer a way forward? Barth knew firsthand that the hands of the Confessing Church were not clean in regards to the German infection. To present herself as untainted by the illness manifest in Nazism was not only "nonsense" but it would set Germans against one another, making their lives even more unbearable than they already were.[8] Action must be taken by the church even though any action would take place amidst chaos.

A Surprise Visit

Chaos is not too strong a word to describe Germany after its military defeat. The word *Zusammenbruch*, disastrous collapse, was frequently used to describe the shambles which was Germany at war's end.[9] Seven million Germans had perished in the war, half of them civilians. One million soldiers languished in POW camps awaiting their fate at the hands of their conquerors. At least another million were missing, scattered along the roads stretching East of Berlin as far away as Russia, deported, despised, and doomed to try to resettle within a shrinking land space while the Allies debated how much German land should be pruned and apportioned to their neighbors in the East (Poland and Czechoslovakia) and in the West (France).

6 Quoted in James Bentley, Martin Niemoller, 1892-1984. (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 175.

7 Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth. His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (London: SCM Press, Ltd 1976), 329.

8 Barth, *The Only Way,* 12,

9 Conway, 603.

Throughout the entire country, food, fuel, housing, and transport were scarce or nonexistent. Industrial machinery that had not been destroyed by bombing was being dismantled and sent away daily by the four Allied nations occupying Germany.[10] Niemöller reported that due to the shocking conditions which prevailed during the first days of the Russian occupation of Berlin, over two hundred persons had committed suicide in his former parish of Dahlem, a wealthy Berlin suburb. Moreover, such were the conditions in greater Berlin, that twenty pastors had committed suicide.[11] Niemöller reported these grim facts not to blame anyone but simply to illustrate how Germany "has reached the brink of the precipice."[12] Daily reports arrived detailing new atrocities perpetrated by the occupying armies, particularly the Russians, as they took revenge for Hitler's devastating invasion of their homeland in which more than twenty six million Soviet citizens had perished, including nearly three million Soviet POWs.[13]

An eyewitness to this chaos was Stewart Herman, the pastor of the American church in Berlin prior to the war. On behalf of the nascent World Council of Churches, Herman spent six months from August 1945, travelling the country and gathering information. His report describes scenes of countless homeless people milling around in despair, sleeping along the roadsides. How could a nation be reconciled to its neighbors while it was simultaneously being ravaged by chaos? Moreover, with the war over and Hitler dead, who was responsible for the current crisis? One could argue it was all Hitler's fault. But unlike so many things he did, this chaos was now within the power of others to change.[14] Regarding the current shambles, many Germans blamed the Russians; others blamed the Americans, the British, the French. Herman's stories of revenge visited upon German non-combatants deported and driven out of Poland make disturbing reading. Gazing at this collapse of all social order, Niemöller saw his fellow Germans both numb and full of self-pity. He wondered, could Germans move from self-pity and blaming others — Nazis, Hitler, Russians, Allies — and begin to take responsibility for their own action and inaction which had enabled this crisis?[15] He became convinced that a new start could only happen if the

10 Hockenos, 90

11 Bentley, 175.

12 Martin Niemoller, *Of Guilt and Hope* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 22.

13 According to Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 290.

14 Stewart W. Herman, *The Rebirth of the German Church* (New York: Harper, 1946), 242, 271.

15 Dietmar Schmidt, *Pastor Niemöller* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 146.

Church took the lead in self-examination. If he and other pastors led the way, perhaps others would take similar personal responsibility despite the chaos.

Already decisions about the occupation of Germany and its governance had been under way in the Allied corridors of power for some time. In England, Bonhoeffer's friend, Bishop George Bell was particularly concerned that the tone of public comments thus far, including the Potsdam agreement drafted by Truman, Stalin and the newly elected Clement Atlee, revealed a plan to "humiliate and enslave the German nation."[16] Meanwhile in America, it was not a well kept secret that President Roosevelt's secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morganthau, had prepared a thoroughgoing punitive plan of reparations, partition, and de-industrialization turning Germany back into an agrarian society.[17] Given these indicators, Bell, Visser't Hooft and other ecumenical friends of Bonhoeffer determined not to wait for their governments' intentions to simply play themselves out.

Willam Visser't Hooft was the *de facto* leader of what was to become the World Council of Churches. In his autobiography, he has left a detailed description of the actions which now transpired. Through contacts he learned that the Council of the Evangelical church of Germany (renamed and reconstituted after the war) would meet in Stuttgart on October 17. He knew the new council had been chosen for their faithful witness during the Church conflict. He wondered: would it be possible to gather a team of Church leaders from the Allied nations to visit the council to create a presence and a pressure for reconciliation, one which reflected the ecumenical vision of Bonhoeffer and his friends: "that they might be one, Father, just as you and I are one." (John 17:21) Could they find a way to avoid the poisonous debates about guilt and blame which made ecumenical relations languish for seven long years after WWI; years, which helped Hitler get his start.[18]

As early as 1942 Visser't Hooft had received a powerful letter from the Lutheran Pastor Hans Asmussen, stating that he hoped the questions of war guilt would be dealt with spiritually and not politically, in a way that Christians would come together and confess their sins before God and each other. Earlier, with Bishop Bell in Stockholm, Bonhoeffer had spoken plainly that "the only road

16 Conway is especially helpful in setting the political context. Conway, 610.

17 Morgenthau, 16, 79-80. Morganthau, writes Beschloss, was a firm believer in collective guilt for German war crimes. Michael Beschloss, *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1941-1945* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 52.

18 Herman, 21.

open to the Christians of Germany was the road of repentance."[19] In July 1945, Visser't Hooft had written to Otto Dibelius, Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, to say that future conversations should include frank discussions about both Nazi crimes *as well as* the sins of omission of the German people. But there was no wish to be Pharisaic or legalistic![20] Visser't Hooft's wish was to help Germany move in the direction already spoken by Bonhoeffer as the only way forward for the Church's rebirth after the Nazi era had ended.

Through something of a miracle, it came to pass that a group of eight ecumenical visitors arranged the various permits from military authorities for visitation and travel to Stuttgart, Germany on October 17, 1945. Due to shortness of time and woeful communications, it had not even been possible to let the council know they were coming. "So our arrival caused considerable surprise and also much joy."[21]

In his Memoir, Visser't Hooft makes it clear there was no question of seeking to extract a confession of guilt as some kind of precondition. Indeed, only as a spontaneous gesture would such a confession have any worth.[22] On the other hand (as Barth had put it to Niemöller), it seemed necessary somehow for Germans, *including the German Church*, to acknowledge their failure. How might this acknowledgement take place without it becoming a kind of precondition?

Here let us recall Bonhoeffer's 1937 diagnosis at the height of the Nazi era: the German Church had been living in a false dream of cheap grace, that is, grace without discipleship, grace as a presumption due to its privileged Lutheran inheritance. As a nation, the people had presumed upon grace as a principle entrusted to the Church. There could be only one deliverance from such a distorted vision: repentance. But in the exigency of the postwar environment, was it appropriate to make repentance a prerequisite for restoration to fellowship?

Evangelical or Legal Repentance?

As one of his signal contributions to the study of historical theology, James Torrance has described how theology in the West frequently confused the relation between repentance and forgiveness and how this has been profoundly detrimental to the life of the Church. In Church history, nowhere was this confusion more virulent than in the Medieval penitential scheme where forgiveness was framed within a

19 W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1973), 189.

20 Ibid., 190.

21 Ibid., 191.

22 Ibid.

schema of meritorious transaction, conditional upon confession, contrition and satisfaction.[23] Regarding the ecumenical meeting at Stuttgart, it is important to be clear that both Luther and Calvin had broken decisively with the conditionality of the Medieval scheme on the grounds that it had turned the personal relation of forgiveness into a legal transaction. As Luther himself had written:

> Rome maintains that justification and forgiveness depend on the conditions of penance. Therefore we are not justified by faith alone. We maintain that contrition does not merit the forgiveness of sins. *It is indeed necessary but not the cause.* The cause is the Holy Spirit.[24]

Regarding this same topic, John Calvin left no space between his view and Luther's. He wrote:

> But we added that repentance is not the cause of forgiveness of sins. Moreover we have done away with those torments of souls which they would have us perform as a duty. We have taught that the sinner does not dwell upon his own compunction or tears, but fixes both eyes upon the Lord's mercy alone . . . Over against these lies I put freely given remission of sins . . . what is forgiveness but a gift of sheer liberality! When can he at length be certain of the measure of that satisfaction? Then he will always doubt whether he has a merciful God; he will always be troubled, and always tremble.[25]

In this moment of crisis with the Protestant Churches of Europe seeking to model for their nations the way of reconciliation, it is unlikely that the heirs of the Reformers engaged in "acrimonious debates" about confession as a precondition of reconciliation. To have done so would mean the Protestant tradition had chosen to repudiate a primary confession at the heart of the Reformation. Much of the confusion comes down to the word 'necessary.' Four centuries earlier Luther had written that repentance "is indeed necessary but not the cause." Only a few weeks earlier, Barth had written Niemöller that it was "necessary" for the German church to say "we have erred." But as we have been reminded by the words of Luther and Calvin, both traditions were united in the hope that God's mercy was not framed within preconditions. The kind of necessity Barth, Luther and Calvin all acknowledged was a response to grace, but not as a

23 J. B. Torrance. "Covenant and Contract, a Study of the Theological Background of Worship in seventeenth-century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 51-76.

24 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, volume 34, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 171. Italics mine.

25 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.4.3. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 134.

pre-condition or cause. The necessity of repentance had to do with the creative, life-giving power of God's grace that released in the sinner the freedom to confess, to cease making excuses and covering up. This was the same logic of grace which had freed Augustine to write his famous "Confession," not in order to effect God's pardon, but as a result of having been gripped by God's sheer mercy. As grace had released in Augustine an extraordinary autobiographical honesty, so in Niemöller's mind, grace was the sole grounds upon which the German Church must confess its guilt after its mingled tale of compromise, collusion and resistance.

Torrance has also reminded us that those who require repentance as a pre-condition of forgiveness sever repentance from gratitude. For when repentance springs from fear of punishment, the notions of bargain, merit, and cunning rush in to distort the true necessity of repentance into what the legal mind of Tertullian unfortunately described as the price of which the Lord awards pardon.[26] But this way distorts repentance, turning it from being the only proper response to grace into a causally necessary act of merit.

As the heirs of the Reformers gathered at Stuttgart in the chaos of *Zusammenbruch,* how did they rededicate themselves to their shared commitment to the tradition of unmerited grace? Visser't Hooft has described their preparations thus:

> On the one hand, we could not make a confession of guilt the condition for a restoration of fellowship for such a confession could only have value as a spontaneous gesture; on the other hand, the obstacles to fellowship could only be removed if a clear word were spoken. Pierre Maury gave us the right phrase. He suggested that we should say: 'We have come to ask you to help us to help you.'[27]

Of Guilt and Hope

On the evening of their arrival the visitors joined in a public service of worship at which Niemöller, Dibelius and chair of the Protestant Church Council, Theophil Wurm, all spoke. Niemöller preached on Jeremiah 14:7-11. "Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for Thy name's sake." In an unforgettable message, Niemöller said it was not enough to blame the Nazis. The church must face its own guilt. "Would the Nazis have been able to do what they had done if Church members had been truly faithful Christians?"[28] Hearing

26 Tertullian, "On Repentance," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3, 661.

27 Visser't Hooft., 191-192.

28 Quoted in Ibid., 191.

Niemöller's message, Visser't Hooft was hopeful that sterile debates and mutual recriminations concerning guilt (such as those which followed the first world war) would not be repeated.

At their meeting the next day, the conversation between the Council of Brethren and the ecumenical visitors had nothing to do with negotiations. Visser't Hooft began by expressing the delegation's desire to re-establish fraternal relations, and to express gratitude for the Confessing Church's witness. He spoke in particular of the sacrifice rendered by Bonhoeffer. He then picked up Maury's phrase: the delegation had come to help the German Church. Hans Asmussen spoke decisively in reply. He said he determined years ago that at the first opportunity he would say to brothers from other Churches, "I have sinned against you as a member of my nation, because I have not shown more courage." Niemöller spoke plainly as always: as a Church we share in the guilt of our nation and pray that God may forgive that guilt. From the Netherlands, Dr. Hendrik Kraemer responded to these remarks with deep emotion. These words, he said, contained within them a call to his own Church as well, that it could only live by the forgiveness of sins. "It could not be a matter of bartering."[29] As the session came to a close, Asmussen proposed the Germans meet alone in council to decide about a public declaration in light of their conversation. The following day, Bishop Wurm read aloud the text the Council had agreed upon.[30] Below is the crucial passage:

> We are all the more grateful for this [ecumenical] visit, as we not only know that we are with our people in a large community of suffering, but also in a solidarity of guilt. With great pain we say: By us infinite wrong was brought over many peoples and countries. That which we often testified to in our communities, we express now in the name of the whole Church: We did fight for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the mentality that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence; but we accuse ourselves for not standing to our beliefs more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently.

Stuttgart was a *personal* confession of guilt—offered by the representatives of the Confessing Church. Though many of the council had shown great courage in resisting the Nazis, yet, as Niemöller made clear, there was here as well an acknowledgment that his own hands were not clean.[31] In the coming months,

29 Ibid., 192.

30 See Appendix I. The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt.

31 Hockenos contrasts Niemöller's reflections on Stuttgart with that of Asmussen's. Whereas Niemöller spoke of his own shortcomings, Asmussen spoke of pastors' taking the guilt of their people on their shoulders. Hockenos, 96

Niemöller's sermons would regularly describe the visit he made with his wife, Else, to the concentration camp at Dachau shortly after the war's end. There he read a notice fixed to a tree: "Here between the years 1933 and 1945, 238,756 human beings were incinerated." He sensed God asking him, "Martin, where were you when these people were being slaughtered?"[32] Of course being incarcerated in a concentration camp was an undisputable alibi from 1937 to 1945. But what about 1933-37*?* Through the text of Matthew twenty-five, Niemöller sensed God personally speaking to him. To congregation after congregation he declared that when the Communists, and the trade unionists and then the Jews were thrown into concentration camps, he did not recognize Christ in them, suffering and persecuted. He was silent.

> Here the question of guilt reveals for us Christians in Germany its horrible face. The Lord Jesus Christ asks his disciples, his Church, he asks you and me, whether we are really without guilt in regard to the horrors which came to pass in our midst. I cannot reply with a clear conscience: "Yea, Lord, I am without guilt. Thou wast in prison and I came unto Thee." Indeed I have said: "I do not know this man."[33]

In another sermon, Niemöller asked his listeners: when the Communists were thrown in the concentration camps or murdered, who cared about them? "We knew about it; it was in all the papers." It happened again later with the Jews and also with "the incurables. Can we say it was not our fault? We preferred to keep quiet."[34] Niemöller's self-questioning was devastating. What might have happened, he asked, if fourteen thousand evangelical ministers had defended the truth with their lives in 1933? Perhaps they would have died, but such an act might have kept alive thirty or forty million people.[35]

Thus Niemöller in his sermons called his listeners to make a personal response to the Stuttgart Declaration. Perhaps the Christians of Germany carried a greater responsibility before God than the Nazis — "because we ought to have recognized the Lord Jesus in the brother who suffered and was persecuted, regardless of whether he was a Communist or a Jew. And we did not recognize him!"[36] It was a devastating indictment. What was to be done now amidst the *Zusammenbruch* of

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32 Schmidt, 150-151.

33 Martin Niemöller, "The Need and the Task of the Church in Germany," preached in 1946 and included in *Best Sermons, 1947-48 Edition*, edited by G. P. Butler (New York: Harper and Brothers), 210.

34 *Of Guilt and Hope*, 14.

35 Ibid. p. 16.

36 Ibid.

postwar Germany, with multitudes sick, underfed, and in real danger of collapse? He urged every believer in this time not to wait for a pastor to come along to aid those in need, but to go oneself, and not pass by Christ yet again as they had done in 1933. "During these days let us keep our eyes wide open for the misery of our neighbor. If this can happen, then Christianity still has a task to perform in Europe."[37] As expressed in the title of a series of sermons, Niemöller described his postwar preaching as a message of guilt and hope, not the one without the other. To meet Christ in one's suffering neighbor and offer mercy was premised upon hope in God's mercy; that in showing mercy to the sufferer, the believer was participating in God's own merciful nature.

Conflicted Responses to Stuttgart

Sixty years later, it remains difficult to read the Stuttgart Declaration with indifference. In an interview conducted decades later, Victoria Barnett recorded the comments of a wife of a Confessing Church pastor who was herself also a member of the Nazi party:

> The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt impressed me deeply, and I passed it on, even to people who didn't want to accept that guilt . . . I was simultaneously a party member and a victim of fascism. I think it was much easier to be one or the other.[38]

When one is simply a victim, one can focus on the suffering one bears. But such simplicity was not possible for Germany. In the autumn of 1945 Germany was in shock, devastated in every way by the allied bombing campaign, with its civil and industrial infrastructure destroyed. An occupied country, with no self-government, Germany was unable to take any initiative in recovery. But they were not simply victims. As news of the atrocities in Nazi concentration camps spread worldwide, they were also a nation in disgrace. With winter approaching, they faced the further catastrophe of starvation. The occupying powers set rations which varied from 950 to 1150 calories per day. To put this in context, the rations at the *Belsen* concentration camp had been 900 calories.[39] To make

37 Ibid.

38 Quoted in Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of The People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 213.

39 James Bacque, *Crimes and Mercies: The Fate of German Civilians under Allied Occupation, 1944-1950* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, revised 2010), 90. This created a worrisome reality in the competition for German loyalties as the Cold War already began to emerge. As military governor of occupied Germany (1947-49), General Lucius Clay

matters worse, the winter of 1945 was followed by one even more severe. It is not surprising that most Germans were far more conscious of their own sufferings than the sufferings they had recently inflicted on the rest of Europe.

During this time of *Zusammenbruch*, many Germans felt themselves pried loose from the Nazi hands of terror only to be placed in the vice-grip of a victor's justice; that now as a nation they were being punished collectively for Nazi crimes. Certainly, anyone aware of the Morganthau Plan or who had read the Potsdam Declaration, would not find this to be unwarranted. Thus when Germans read or heard about the Stuttgart Declaration, many feared their pastors' words would now be used as further justification for endless Allied punishment. Moreover, Niemöller, as the most famous living survivor of the concentration camps, could have become a symbol of those who stood up to Hitler, a reminder that not all Germans were indiscriminately to be lumped together. Instead he painfully chose to be honest about his own moral failure. It was not an honesty easy to imitate. To some it was not admirable; it was treasonous.

For fellow Confessing Church pastor and later professor, Helmut Thielicke, Niemöller's self-accusations seemed "grossly indiscriminate" and he worried they were creating a defensive reaction amongst Germans.[40] In a controversial sermon preached on Good Friday, 1947, nearly two years after the Stuttgart Declaration, Thielicke risked arrest by breaking the law that forbade any public criticism of the occupying powers. That evening he spoke not just of German guilt, but also about 'the guilt of the others', that is, the Allies.[41] Thielicke challenged what he called "a passion without grace," namely, inflicting collective punishment on Germany now for two long years since war's end, with no end in sight.[42] Helplessly, Germans watched as the Allies' official orders of occupation (JCS 1067, deeply influenced by the Morganthau Plan and enforced by the U.S. army), directed that nothing be done in any way to rehabilitate the destroyed German economy.[43] It was widely believed within Germany (as Herman's World Council of Churches reports document) that two consecutive postwar winters of increasing starvation could only be attributed to deliberate Allied policy. In his autobiography, Thielicke recalled that he accepted the Stuttgart declaration as

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bluntly warned Washington, "There is no choice between becoming a Communist on 1500 calories and a believer in democracy on 1000 calories." Quoted in Beschloss, 273.

40 Helmut Thielicke, *Notes from a Wayfarer: The Autobiography of Helmut Thielicke* (New York: Paragon House, 1995), 218.

41 Ibid., 235.

42 Ibid., 232.

43 Beschloss, 169.

"a thoroughly moderate and level headed document."[44] But his illegal criticism of Allied policy shows how difficult it was for Germans to hear Niemöller's astringent message of 'guilt and hope' while living under a military occupation based instead on "guilt and punishment" with no end in sight. In retrospect, we must remember that Thielicke's (and indeed much of Germany's) response to Niemöller's message occurred prior to General George Marshall's tenure as Secretary of State. For it was the Marshall Plan which signaled a dramatic turn in U.S. policy towards Germany. But it was a turn that only came after Marshall's appointment in 1947. Even then, Marshall's strategy first had to endure vigorous debate in Congress, becoming American policy only in March, 1948, nearly three years after the war had ended.

As Thielicke's response indicates, it is not surprising that Stuttgart was highly controversial and was greeted in Germany with very mixed feelings. In retrospect, Niemöller considered his efforts a failure.[45] His personal acknowledgment of guilt was more than most Germans were willing to imitate. Nevertheless it stood out as a sign of fundamental change in the German Church and its relation to the State. For in the end, the humble, personal invitation for Germany to confess and lament — not the sins of the others, but its own, was stronger than the denials of the defeated or the punitive demands for "justice" by influential Allied politicians. Gradually more and more Germans chose not to deny their guilt and retreat to self-pity as after WWI.

Why did Germany change? Klaus Scholder has traced it to the resistance of the Confessing Church, beginning with Barmen. The same spirit led to the declaration of Stuttgart. Stuttgart was simply theologically and psychologically more real and convincing than self-justification and blaming others.[46] What Niemöller declared to a reluctant nation was this: if you are going to travel the path of reconciliation, you must step out personally. You cannot wait for it to be popular. You cannot wait to see if your repentance will be reciprocated in some advantageous way. If one does not take personal responsibility, how can one receive personally a new start and personal forgiveness? Confession alone sets one free. When we face our own culpability, we are less likely to blame others

44 Thielicke, 218.

45 "Who was Martin Niemoller?," Sybil Niemoller von Sell, Remembrance and Recollection, ed. By Locke and Littell, etc. 21. John Conway says for the most part the German people refused to accept the challenge which Stuttgart put before them — to take personal responsibility for their nation's tragic course. "'How Shall the Nations Repent?' The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, October 1945," in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol 38, no. 4 (Oct. 1987), 619.

46 Klaus Scholder, "Fate and Guilt in History," in *A Requiem for Hitler*, 32ff.

and repeat our mistake. Over time, the theological and psychological realism of Stuttgart was simply more credible than its alternatives.

Forgiveness and Foreign Policy

In an interview shortly after his escape from concentration camp, Niemoller was asked by an American chaplain if the world should simply say, "we forgive Germany" and start all over? Niemöller replied that the world would not be able to say: We forgive you, "but the Christians all over the world should say that, and they will start all over again with us. Measures of punishment against the people will not help."[47] In the meantime, the impact of Stuttgart began to be felt as food parcels and supplies started to arrive from the churches, many of whom had made personal sacrifices in sending them.[48] All this was many months before the Marshall plan reversed Allied policy.

The response of Allied churches to Stuttgart was also gratefully noted by the Bishop of Berlin, Otto Dibelius. He recorded in his autobiography that though it was very painful to write words of confession of guilt with no mention of "the guilt of the others," that was not the German Church's role. Moreover, the stream of assistance which poured into Germany from their ecumenical partners convinced him that their confession had been heard in the spirit it was intended.[49] Thielicke has also given public testimony to the fact that the first brotherly and helping hands Germans received after the war were those of Christians.[50]

All in all, Niemöller's contribution to creating a spirit of post war Allied generosity is not something he is usually credited with, but it is a consequence that should not be ignored. Stuttgart's confession opened the hearts of those tempted to seek revenge. Visser't Hooft reports that when he relayed the events of Stuttgart to Protestant assemblies in France, Holland, Britain, and the U.S., many spoke of how this declaration made it possible for them to acknowledge how their own struggle with the Nazis had not been sufficiently faithful and courageous. The German Declaration at Stuttgart had made it possible. The launching of the World Council of Churches itself in 1948 would have been impossible without it.[51]

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47 Of Guilt and Hope, 77.

48 Schmidt, 152.

49 Dibelius, 260.

50 Helmut Thielicke, "Religion in Germany," in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*:, Vol. 260: Postwar Reconstruction in Western Germany (Sage Publications, Nov. 1948), 154.

51 Visser't Hooft, 193-194.

Nevertheless, a time lag followed Stuttgart, in which hope was quite fragile. The Allied policy of collective punishment ("until Germany had learned its lesson") made Niemöller's words of hope only harder for his fellow Germans to hear. Despite the various food and aid parcels from individual churches, all gratefully acknowledged, Germany remained stuck in a near starvation state for three long years after the war, unable to sufficiently repent of all its misdeeds to satisfy its conquerors, unable to feed itself, unable to repair its economy, unable to escape from self-pity. Such a quagmire was precisely what the ecumenical visitors and the Council of Brethren had hoped to interrupt on October 17, 1945. On that day at Stuttgart, the Church had sounded a very different signal, one which in retrospect was incompatible with Allied policy prior to Marshall. Sooner or later, one or the other would have to change.

Hence in retrospect we can say that Stuttgart's message of guilt and hope created a crisis for the Allies also. Both the governments and the Churches of the Allies were in no doubt they had rescued Europe and indeed, Germany, from a wicked, anti-Christian regime. But what were the implications of Christ's gospel for how one treats a defeated enemy? Should the triumph of a "Christian civilization" over its "pagan" enemies entail policies amounting to the permanent degradation of the defeated, including *de facto* the starvation of the most vulnerable — elderly, women and children?

Nowhere is the Christian message of forgiveness and reconciliation more relevant than when a nation state with a large Christian population must determine how to treat a defeated enemy. Sometimes the issue reduces to basic questions, such as whether or not to let the defeated enemy starve. In the immediate aftermath of WWI, future President Herbert Hoover organized the mission of the American Relief Administration to feed millions of starving Europeans. In his memoirs, Hoover recorded a confrontation with British Admiral, Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, the head of the British delegation. Wemyss saw Hoover outside of the official meetings one day and said brusquely, "Young man, I don't see why you Americans want to feed these Germans." Hoover, a committed Quaker, immediately replied, "Old man, I don't see why you British want to starve women and children after they are licked."[52]

It is beyond the scope of this essay to speculate about the motivations of General Marshall or why President Truman and his cabinet set aside the punitive approach of the Roosevelt/Morganthau Plan. Part of my argument here is that the Stuttgart initiative increased the moral pressure amongst the victorious Allies for a policy towards Germany more in keeping with the teachings of the Church.

52 Quoted in Bacque, 13-14.

In the end, the Marshall Plan evidenced both a change of policy and an Allied change of heart. That this change enabled Germany to begin to emerge from its dire situation confirms Torrance's insistence that in all genuine reconciliation, positive change (repentance) is the result of mercy, rather than its cause.

The point is expressed in a highly personal way by Melita Maschmann in her memoir, *Account Rendered*. A committed and unrepentant Nazi, Maschmann spent time in a prison camp for Nazis after the war, refusing to accept any guilt for her conduct. Though she avoided Jews carefully, a visiting chaplain once brought along a teacher whose parents had both died in concentration camps. When they met, the teacher already knew of Maschmann's past role as a Nazi activist.

> I will never forget the glow of spontaneous kindness in this person's eyes when she first held out her hand to me. It bridged all the gulfs, without denying them. At that moment I jumped free from the devil's wheel. I was no longer in danger of converting feelings of guilt into fresh hatred. The forgiving love which I had encountered gave me the strength to accept our guilt and my own. Only now did I cease to be a National Socialist.[53]

As the Marshall Plan began to take effect, and German society began its first steps towards what became known as "the German miracle," the Stuttgart Declaration and Niemöller's personal application can be seen, in retrospect, as a turning point. Though controversial, Stuttgart blazed the path for Germans to take unprecedented public responsibility for their moral failure, and in the decades since they have done so with a vast social consensus that has helped Germany proceed on a trajectory that makes it unimaginable that she will ever again be seduced by the militarism and nationalism that had formerly permeated society and made it so vulnerable to Hitler's message. As for whether Stuttgart has had a similarly lasting impact upon the United States and its treatment of its enemies, it could be argued that the non-punitive Marshall Plan stands out not only for its success in leading Europe towards a new co-operative mentality, but also as a part of the moral legacy of the ecumenical Church that gathered together in Stuttgart, not to assign blame and punish, but to risk a meeting of believers torn apart by war who in spite of everything which war had done, took the risk of pursuing reconciliation in accordance with Jesus' prayer "that they might be one."

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53 Melita Maschmann, Account Rendered: A Dossier on my Former Self, London: Abelard-Schuman, 1964, 213.

Appendix I
Declaration of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany
October 19, 1945

This text of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland is frequently referred to as the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt. [http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/eur/752-ecg1945]

The Council of the Evangelical [Protestant] Church in Germany welcomes representatives of the World Council of Churches to its meeting on October 18-19, 1945, in Stuttgart.

We are all the more thankful for this visit, as we know ourselves to be with our people in a great community of suffering, but also in a great solidarity of guilt. With great anguish we state: through us has endless suffering been brought to many peoples and countries. What we have often borne witness to before our congregations, we now declare in the name of the whole Church. We have for many years struggled in the name of Jesus Christ against the spirit which found its terrible expression in the National Socialist regime of tyranny, but we accuse ourselves for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently.

Now a new beginning can be made in our churches. Grounded on the Holy Scriptures, directed with all earnestness toward the only Lord of the Church, they are now proceeding to cleanse themselves from influences alien to the faith and to set themselves in order. Our hope is in the God of grace and mercy that he will use our churches as his instruments and will give them authority to proclaim his word and in obedience to his will to work creatively among ourselves and among our people.

That in this new beginning we may become wholeheartedly united with the other churches of the ecumenical fellowship fills us with deep joy.

We hope in God that through the common service of the churches the spirit of violence and revenge which again today is tending to become powerful may be brought under control in the whole world, and that the spirit of peace and love may gain the mastery, wherein alone tortured humanity can find healing.

So in an hour in which the whole world needs a new beginning we pray: "Veni Creator Spiritus."

Bishop Wurm	*Bishop Meiser*	*Superintendent Hahn*
Bishop Dibelius	*Professor Smend*	*Pastor Asmussen*
Pastor Niemöller	*Landesoberkirchenrat Lilje*	*Superintendent Held*
Pastor Niesel	*Dr. Heinemann*	