

Martyrs: The Suffering Path of Baltic Christians
Oskar Schabert

Oskar Schabert, *Märtyrer. Der Leidensweg der baltischen Christen*
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to my old faithful
St. Gertrude Church congregation in Riga,
ever proven in suffering

and to the beloved
St. Ansgar Church congregation in Hamburg,
ever ready to confess.

Those who do not want to suffer
oppression and the depths
will never experience the righteous acts of God
and therefore will never love and praise Him properly.
Dr. Martin Luther

“Wonderful is Christ,”

mirabilis est Christus, wrote Doctor Martin Luther to his friend Spalatin in 1524, rejoicing when he heard that “the Gospel is rising and progressing in the Baltic countries on the distant Baltic Sea.”

Foundations. Wonderful is Christ, the Lord of the Church, in his works, especially in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Baltic countries. He gave it rapid growth and an inner strengthening in this “land of Mary,” where the bishops and knightly orders were the lords of the land. The Gospel took firm root here, a few years after the Theses were written. In the middle of a secularized Catholic land, the Lord built his Church here.

The Baltic Evangelical Lutheran Church was one of the first to give itself a constitution, to establish an order of worship, to create a hymnal that helped promote worship life far beyond the borders of the country in the whole of northern Germany; it built up the care of the poor in Christian communities on an evangelical basis through the creation of the “God-box”; in short, it laid firm *foundations* in all areas in a short time, on which a proper Christian life could be built.

Of course, the *Germans* of the Baltic countries first and foremost poured forth from the spring of the Gospel, freshly created by Luther. Through the Baltic Germans the blessing soon also came to the other peoples inhabiting this land, the Indo-European tribe of Latvians and the Finno-Ugric tribe of Estonians. Both peoples received from the hands of the Baltic German theologians the Bible and the Catechism in their own languages, and the songs of the Lutheran Church soon resounded in the Latvian and Estonian congregations in the mother tongue familiar to them.

In one human generation, the arch-Catholic land had become Protestant. What a wonder that with this rapid growth, the leaven of the Gospel had not yet penetrated the depths of the people. But wonderful is Christ. He, who destined the Church for greater things, was to found it more deeply. He sent it hard times of testing for this purpose.

Purification. The rotten Catholic Livonian-Baltic Catholic State of the Teutonic Order, fully weakened by the Reformation, became a prey of the Poles. After the conquest of the Baltic lands, Rome immediately sent its core force, the Jesuits, who were supported by the Polish state in all their endeavors, to eradicate the “cursed Lutheran heresy” with sticks and stones in the old land of Mary. It was then that the Baltic Church had to go through its first difficult period of testing.

The Churches were to be taken from Protestant congregations and placed in service again to Catholic worship, but the congregations kept their Churches occupied and only retreated when fanatical Polish mercenaries drove them out of them by force. Although the Jesuits succeeded in bringing isolated congregations over to the Catholic Church by applying the harshest coercive measures, most of them remained steadfast “*to their word*” and willingly endured all persecutions. The pastors were thrown into prisons, but the brave German superintendent of Riga, Mag. Hermann Samson, declared: “We want to stay with the pure word of God as long as there is still breath in us,” and in the north of the country a simple Estonian farmer, Jaan Werwe, admonished the people sighing under oppression: “If our bodies are damaged, they can still be healed by God’s help, but if souls are lost, they cannot be saved, for which reason we will by no means renounce our faith.”

The tribulation period of the Counter-Reformation bore rich fruit. The gospel became more and more a matter of personal conviction, and so the Lord was able to give the thus purified and deepened Church outward victory as well.

Expansion. *Wonderful is Christ.* When distress had reached a pitch under the pressure of the Polish state and by the violence and cunning of the Jesuits, and Lutheran Christianity as the power of the country’s public life was most seriously endangered, Christ sent the Nordic Lion—the Swedish King Gustavus Adolfus—as a savior. He came sailing across the Baltic Sea and in 1620 brought freedom to the Baltic Evangelical Lutheran Church.

For about a hundred years the Baltic Evangelical Church had been at rest. The firm foundations laid by the Fathers of the Reformation period were cleared of the rubble

and the puny superstructures of the Jesuit period, and on the old firm foundations the walls of the houses of the Church, organically connected with them, were now built. Hands that have been bound for the sake of Christ, and hearts that have suffered for the sake of faith, are good builders. As the war-ravaged country recovered in a relatively short time under the strict but firm Swedish regiment, the destroyed Churches and parsonages were restored everywhere. Unforbidden, the preaching of the pure Gospel resounded from all pulpits in the country, deepening the old, good, purified life of faith and awakening new life. Strict Protestant Church discipline soon helped to overcome the savagery of the time of persecution and war. The consistories watched over the firm ecclesiastical order everywhere in the country. The university founded by Gustavus Adolfus provided for the training of theologically educated preachers. Firmly established, protected by the state, the Church rose after the first period of persecution, deeply penetrating the country's character with its nature, even shaping it. But orders once created to manage need start to constrict, if they remain laws in the face of changed life and the growth of life, and easily become rigid fetters that do more harm than good. And woe to the Church that bases its authority on the power of the state.

Wonderful is Christ. He loved the Baltic Church too much to let it wither away as a state Church. That is why he let new times of urgency come over the Baltic Church. He wanted to take away from it all external supports.

Form of a servant. The Nordic War with all its horrors began. The Muscovites wanted to force access to open sea; the Swedes did not want to give up the Baltic coastland. The battle raged for a long time; the unfortunate land almost became a desert. Finally, in 1721, the Peace of Nystad was concluded. Peter the Great's Russia was now the master of the Baltic lands and remained the unrestricted master for two hundred years. This Russia, closely connected with Greek-Catholic Orthodox Christianity, wanted to become the master of the Baltic Lutheran Church, because in the Russian Empire only the "right-believing" Church rightfully existed; all other Churches were only "tolerated" by the state, so the Baltic Evangelical Lutheran Church would also be only a tolerated one. *Wonderful is Christ.* He gave his Baltic Church the form of a servant, this being the Christian Church's very own form. It is true that in the first half of Russian rule the Church still enjoyed a certain degree of toleration, for Peter the Great had sworn for himself and all his successors that, even if the Orthodox Church was the dominant one in the Russian Empire, the Evangelical Lutheran Church would remain recognized as the national Church in the "Baltic governorates." The proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to the Lutheran rite were also guaranteed by the state, except that the Lutheran Church was not allowed to engage in "propaganda," which was the right of the state Church only. No member of the state Church could be received into the Lutheran Church, for according to Russian law every member of the Orthodox Church, together with all his descendants, belongs to *that* Church for all time. "Apostasy," and likewise the reception

of an apostate, was considered a criminal offense. In these last provisions of Russian state law lay the germ of coming sufferings.

It took quite some time before the first conflict of this kind occurred. The Russians who came into the country did not understand the language of the preachers, so they could not become victims of propaganda, and the clerics could not propagandize among the Baltic people because they did not know the language. If in those times pastors and parishioners felt the harshness of the Russian state and were banished, these were mostly acts of cruelty on the part of the half-Asiatic Russian despots, such as the barbarian Peter the Great who, significantly, smashed Luther's precious wedding cup to the ground during his visit to Wittenberg, because he was not allowed to acquire it for himself. Whoever resisted the tsar, he smashed.

Moreover, the rationalism that prevailed in the Baltic Church at that time did not have any drive for propaganda. This should have changed when, with the beginning of the nineteenth century, rationalism was broken and there was an awakening of faith. In the long years of Russian rule, the priests of the state Church had learned the Baltic languages and could now propagandize among those of "other faiths." For this purpose, a bishopric of the Greek Church was established in Riga in 1836 with large state funds, but it had to prove its worth. The few Russian officials who ended up in this purely Protestant country, along with the small Russian merchant communities, by no means justified the expenditure of such large means as those necessary for the maintenance of the bishopric. So propaganda, called "mission," had to do it.

Suffering. Allegedly, the Latvian and Estonian population, restrained only by the domineering pastors, longed to turn their backs on Lutheranism and profess the faith of the emperor. Cunningly, the Russian priests took advantage of the famine that had broken out as a result of the misgrowth of the 1840s—promising bread to the starving poor if they "would accept the emperor's faith." The police rounded up the congregations; the "flying mission Churches" began their activity. Hunger hurt, promises lured, liquor did the trick; confirmations and "chrismations" began (children who did not want to follow their drunken fathers were also forcibly chrismated), but the main thing was that the chrismated were "inscribed" [in the Church register]. Whoever was thus inscribed as a member of the Orthodox Church belonged to this Church for eternity, together with all his descendants. When disillusionment set in, when the promises were not fulfilled, when the relatives who remained Lutheran sharpened the conscience of the apostates, when the pastors chastised apostasy in their sermons, thousands of the infatuated wanted to return in repentance to the Lutheran Church. They confessed to the pastor, they publicly confessed their sin of denying the truth for Judas' pieces of silver. The children who had been "con-chrismated" knew nothing and wanted nothing to do with the Greek Church, and as Lutherans they demanded to be served still by their pastors. State law forbade the latter, but conscience founded in God's word commanded the pastors: take the penitents, take those

confirmed without their knowledge or against their will, as members of the Lutheran Church—and so they acted, making themselves guilty of a criminal offense, of defaming and damaging the ruling Church. How great the need was in the congregations, of which, for one example out of hundreds, the parish of Jürgensburg in Livonia, where the flying mission Churches and liquor heaped up the most evil.

It is Good Friday. Hundreds of communicants have received the food and drink of eternity at the altar of the Church; the last communion guests have departed from the table of the Lord. Pastor Kuntzendorf was about to give the final blessing to the congregation when forty men and women came to the altar, fell on their knees, and begged for the Holy Supper. The pastor recognized them and dismissed them with the words: “You have denied the faith of your fathers. How dare you come in here?” And their spokesman answered him, “We have long hungered for the holy Supper. We do not set foot in the Greek Church; it has deceived us. To mingle with your Suppers we have not dared, for we have denied the faith. But today you yourself have preached on our Savior’s word: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. So forgive us and accept us.”

“You know, I must not give the Holy Supper to you, lest I and you come in for the harshest punishments.”

“We know it, the emperor forbids it, but God commands accepting repentant sinners. We will not rise from our knees until we receive the Holy Supper as a seal of our forgiveness.”

For the sake of his conscience, Pastor Kuntzendorf reconciled the apostates with God and the community and celebrated the Holy Supper with them. And he and the “apostates” willingly submitted to criminal prosecution by the state.

Such was the suffering of pastors and parishioners around the middle of the last [i.e., the nineteenth] century.

The clerics were sent by higher command on their version of mission, and received a medal for twenty-five conversions or, if they had no conversions to show, were punitively transferred to lower-paid positions. And the pastors, for the sake of their conscience, could not refrain from serving those who wanted to return home in deep repentance, or the children of the “chrismated” who had nothing in common with the Russian Church.

Since every such official act brought the pastors under judgment, the “reconverts” did not want to put their pastors in such a difficult position. They entered into “marriages of conscience,” marriages without a state-recognized rite, so that they did not need to sign the “reversal” that obligated them at an Orthodox wedding service to “educate their children in the teachings and rites of the Orthodox Church.” They baptized their children themselves and endured much hardship if, when called before the all-powerful police, they could not produce legally valid baptismal and marriage certificates, which could only be issued by clergymen. Parents, however, who had been

married in the Orthodox Church and had signed the reversal on the upbringing of children but who, for the sake of their conscience, did not keep it, were deprived by the court of their children, who were handed over to the Orthodox for upbringing. In short, distress grew and disorder appeared. The pastors demanded: don't spare us, we will marry, baptize, etc., if you are ready to suffer with us for the sake of truth. So the pastors acted for the sake of their conscience and thus became criminal offenders in the eyes of the Russian state.

Under the mild emperor Alexander II, there was a certain pause in the persecution of Lutheran pastors and parishioners. Strained complaints were left in abeyance, showing off was not supported, new criminal charges were followed up reluctantly, the clerics were instructed not to demand the "reversal" at the marriage ceremony; but already under Alexander III, that narrow-minded autocrat, all gentleness and leniency came to an end. The severity of the law was applied. According to the Pan-Slavic principle—Russia for the Russians, and in the whole of Russia *one* faith, *one* language, *one* law—such unity should be imposed by force on the population of Russia, which consisted of a hundred different peoples. And that had to go. If the Russian state enforced it ease, [it was in part because] almost all German or Danish Protestant princesses who came to Russia as empresses or as grand duchesses accepted the "true Russian faith," and brought up their children as Russians, so according to this "shining example" the "Russification" of their "subjects" could also take place. The driving force of this Russification and Orthodoxy of all the peoples of Russia was the Almighty Chief Procurator of the "Holy Synod," Pobedonostsev, the most sly and fanatical minister and politician of Russia—and his evil spirit. He wanted to make the greater Russian Empire an easily governed unified state in which only the Russian language and the Russian faith would rule, praying the will of the one Russian czar, who was also the head of the Russian Church by his chrismation. And the Pan-Slav politicians behind Pobedonostsev promoted his efforts most energetically; they hoped that this unified Russia would receive a greater political impulse in order to, according to the (falsified) Political Testament of Peter the Great, finally put the Orthodox Cross on the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople. The realization of these Russification ideas was particularly hindered by the Baltic lands. Here was an ancient indigenous German culture; here Evangelical Christianity prevailed among the entire population, up to 90% of its population. The Baltic lands were the gate through which the "rotten West" penetrated. This catchword is how the pan-Slavists of Russia understood the achievements of evangelical freedom and European culture, especially its political achievements. The "rotten West" was feared as poison to the healthy, pious Russian people, as endangering the absolutist regime, and as undermining the ancient Orthodox faith. This Baltic gateway to the rotten West had to be closed, and for this purpose the Lutheran Church, the strongest full-blown work of Balticism, had to be destroyed. In politics these men who, besides their parochial activity, had to fulfill all the civic functions and do great work in the

schools of thousands of parishioners who settled over vast stretches of land, never took an active part, but in the intellectual and spiritual sphere they were the leaders of the people the mediators of all the good that traveled on the temporal and eternal soil of the “rotten West.” Therefore, Pobedonostsev first wanted to make these leaders harmless and then to pounce on the people of the Church. And now a persecution begins, which increases more and more. Indeed, small pauses [in the persecution] also took place, but they became shorter and shorter, smaller pauses for breath, periods of refreshment, which gave the heavy sufferers strength to endure the new attacks of suffering. From then on, these sufferings would not stop, even when the forms of government changed. Whether absolutist tsarism, constitutional monarchy, democratic-socialist republic, or Bolshevism prevail—as different as they are, as one they are in the persecution of the gospel. As for the life of the Church, so also for its suffering, the form of government is indifferent. Whether Herod or Pilate, whether Nicolas II or Pobedonostsev, whether Rodzianko or Kerensky, whether Trotsky or Lenin rule—as different as they are, they are all persecutors of the Gospel.

Under Nicolas II, a weak man proud of his self-rule, Pobedonostsev reached the height of his power. Ruthlessly he proceeded at first against the pastors. Because of baptisms, marriages, confirmations, and communions for the reconverts they were persecuted, for example the different doctrines of the Church were criminally prosecuted as blasphemy against the Orthodox state Church. Suspensions from office,* imprisonment, and banishment were the order of the day. At a synod of that time, the general superintendent reported that of the 150 pastors of the Livonian provincial Church,[†] 118 pastors were under criminal investigation. When General Superintendent Hollmann was asked at that time in St. Petersburg if the Livonian Consistory did not present a pastor of his district the award of the “Golden Chest Cross,” he gave the manly answer: “We do not need the Golden Chest Cross of the Russian state. We have enough with the Cross of Christ.” We young pastors would have been ashamed to appear at the Synod as those against whom criminal proceedings had not yet been instituted. With admiring reverence we look up to the old fathers, such as old Pastor Kuntzendorf, who has been under “judgment” for forty years of his forty-five-year term of office.

In the case of the suffering God gives us to bear, we should not ask “why” but “for what purpose” God sends it to us. Most of the time we will suffer according to the words of the Lord in John 13:7, “What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand.” Suffering is never in vain. Martyrdom is always blessed. Soon it

* In the following up to page 36 [of the original book] I have used much from the lecture “The Martyrdom of the Baltic Church” from the *General Evangelical Church Newspaper* Nov. 1919, which I wrote.

[†] Before the war Livonia counted 144, Courland 103, and Estonia 56 parishes with altogether about three hundred pastors and two million Protestants.

was clearly on the record that the willing, faithful suffering of the Lutheran pastors of Livonia had helped to bring about freedom of conscience for all Russia, which was proclaimed to the Russian people by Nicholas II in the Manifesto of Faith at Easter 1905. Along with freedom of faith, all the subjects of the Russian Empire were given the other freedoms of the “rotten West,” the freedoms of the press, of the person, of assemblies. But the Russian state came too late.

The first blood witnesses. According to its old principle, *divide et impera* (“divide and conquer”), the Russian state had torn apart what God had united by a common homeland, Lutheran faith and German culture, and continued to incite the Latvians and Estonians alike against the Germans, hoping that once German influence in the country was broken, Latvians and Estonians would be too weak to assert themselves against the power of the Russian spirit. Latvian socialist-nihilists used the radicalism to which the Latvians and Estonians, like all young peoples, were inclined in order to propagate *their* ideas. The Russian government gleefully tolerated this activity and did not realize that it also was going to sink into the grave that those nationalist-nihilist socialists were supposedly digging for German barons and pastors. With the help of German social democracy, the Latvian revolution of 1905/06 was organized according to plan. Almost all the landowners whose estates were destroyed fled. The hatred of the nihilist-socialists was directed against the Church and especially against the pastors, who remained in place to show the congregations with pastoral faithfulness the way of truth in this confusion. The Churches were desecrated and the pastors, as enemies of the people who allegedly did not grant them a bit of freedom, had a flood of lies and dirt poured on their heads. Soon the fanatics took action.

After two Balts, Ovir and Segebrock, shed blood for the Gospel in the service of the Lutheran mission at Mount Meru in Africa, the Baltic Church was also now honored with having produced martyrs. Thunderous heat lay on Livonia when the Provincial Synod of 1906 took place. When we said goodbye, we shook hands quietly and seriously. Each asked himself: Who will be affected? Soon came the news of the murders.

As we once learned in our youth the names of the martyrs Polycarp and Lawrence, etc., we may also place here the names of men who, like these blood witnesses, sealed their faith with death: Provost Zimmermann, and the pastors Taurit, Grün, Schilling, and Busch all had to give up their lives because they did not stop preaching: Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s. And, besides these blood witnesses, there was a whole series of martyrs who endured severe persecution and ill-treatment for the sake of Christ’s name and praised the Savior with their suffering. Thank God, none of them denied him. They proved themselves as martyrs.

What was the result of this period of suffering? It was violent. After the Russian state had put down the revolution with a strong hand, it had come to the conclusion that the much-maligned Germans, especially the pastors, were a reliable element of the

state, and so German Protestants were now given the freedom to work and create. It was a pleasure to live at that time. The Protestant Germans in Russia had never before known such freedom to work and create for themselves; indeed, this was an absolute novum: the authorities even encouraged their work. In the national sphere, after all the schools were taken away from the Germans under Pobedonostsev, a flourishing German school system emerged. In the ecclesiastical and internal missionary field, progress was made, and the possibility was offered for Protestant Christians, who had previously been forbidden to do so, to unite. In the social field, many exemplary things were created for the benefit of all peoples living in the Baltic region.

Russia, however, could never deny its pharaonic nature. No sooner was it freed from the plague of the Japanese war, no sooner was it cured of the plague of revolution, than everything was forgotten. The oppression of German Protestants began anew. What was given in freedoms and rights with one hand was taken back with two. Nationalist agitation started again strongly. Now it went on record that the leading newspaper "Novoye Vremya" worked with English money, promoting everything that was German and Protestant. The slander had its effect. This was clearly demonstrated at the outbreak of the war.

War. With the outbreak of the [First World] War, national passions reached their boiling point. On the one side they greeted each other with the godless "God punish England"; on the other side, Russian policemen and peasants carefully searched the skulls of German prisoners of war for Satan's horns. The Germans must be devils, otherwise the atrocities reported daily in the newspapers and documented in the "photographs" would be impossible. They could not be Christians in any case, because Christians wear the baptismal cross on their chest. No Orthodox Christian and therefore no Russian subject can have anything to do with these unchristian Germans. It came to such a pass that self-evident works of Christian love for wounded Germans were stamped as a state crime. Not only against German enemies, but also against their own two million German subjects, who had been Russian citizens for generations, the rampage began. Just as in the south of Russia, where German farmers who were called into the country for the uplifting of culture two hundred years prior were declared to have no rights and were sent to Siberia by the hundreds of thousands even though their sons fought on the Russian side, so too the Baltic Germans were sent by the hundreds, by the thousands. Although at first it seemed as if this senseless campaign was waged against only the German nation, in fact it was also against the Gospel. The field preachers appointed for the half million Protestant soldiers of all nationalities in the Russian army, whose salaries were raised by donations freely made out of love in the congregations, were dismissed one by one as unnecessary. Finally, to keep up appearances, one single field preacher remained, a Latvian. The Evangelical field hospital, also created and maintained by the congregations, was recognized as the best on the Russian side, but because it was Evangelical it was put out of action far behind

the front. The ban on speaking the German language in public was also applied to preaching, etc. Again, anti-God socialist powers used the situation to carry out their propaganda under the cover of nationalist agitation, and the Russian authorities were again blinded.

The revolution of 1917 broke out. Freedom of faith and speech was proclaimed, but it was only on paper. Of the eighteen Baltic, German and Latvian pastors sent to Siberia, none was allowed to return to his congregation, although the congregations applied for them to. The persecution of all Germans and Evangelicals continued unhindered. Everything remained the same. Instead of the czar ruled only Mr. "Omnes," the rabble. The pressure became more and more unbearable. The Red Terror reared its head. The Bolsheviks,[‡] who had piled up in the north of the country, took four hundred Germans, Latvians, and Estonians hostage and deported them to Siberia. The general longing was: Oh, that the Germans would come! Then a Latvian leader said, "Holy Hindenburg, help, or we are lost!" And the Germans came. Singing the song "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," they brought to the Baltic lands the freedom that the noble German sword had won in a hot struggle. "Now Thank We All Our God" rang out from the lips of *all* Protestants in the land. When the days of hardship and terror came to an end, the jubilation was indescribable.

But we were bitterly disappointed. What the German sword had won, the pen of German bureaucracy spoiled in a few days. We, who knew the country and its people, were not listened to; if we gave advice, they pushed us aside. The Latvian Spartacus, however, raised his head in the Baltic lands. Before we lost our way, the collapse of the German power was upon us. We were rendered weaponless by the German occupation force. The withdrawing German troops often bought their departure from the Bolsheviks by handing over their weapons. The Bolsheviks took the German weapons and let the Germans march on foot to their homeland. At the end of December 1918, the German administration, headed by Commissar Winnig, had assured the Baltics that they were in no danger, and English warships were lying in Riga harbor, taking sharp action against the increasingly insolent Bolsheviks. But the situation quickly worsened. The Germans withdrew hastily, the English quietly left the harbor, and we Balts were at the mercy of the Bolsheviks. Many who believed themselves endangered fled. A small band of Baltic heroes held off the onrushing Bolshevik tide outside Riga's walls, but on January 2 it was clear that Riga could not be held any longer. Now for most people it was too late to flee.

In the dark early morning of January 3, 1919, the pastors of Riga gathered with their brave General Superintendent Gaehtgens and Deputy Provost Eckhardt to discuss what to do. Since the majority of our parishioners could no longer flee, we pastors decided to

[‡] "Bolshevik," plural "Bolsheviks" = the maximalists of the communist socialist movement that Marx founded.

stay with our parishes, because, as Provost Eckhardt expressed the opinion of all, “What will become of the parishioners who cannot flee when those who could be their guides and support seize the harbor’s banners?” Thus we remained, invoking God’s mercy. In the afternoon of the same day, the last members of the German army departed from Riga. Half an hour later the first bunch of Bolsheviks with their red flag entered Riga—spreading fear and terror.

Bolshevism. Immediately the Latvian Communist Soviet government was constituted, which openly declared that law and justice do not apply but rather communist conscience is decisive. I shall pass over descriptions of the governmental measures which sought to realize the communist principles of the ruling proletarian class: the robberies of bourgeois society, the nationalization of industry and commerce, the complete gagging of the press, the ostentatious violation of the rights of the individual insofar as they were citizens, the omnipotence of the Workers’ Council, and so on, and will instead describe the position of the Communist Soviet government on religion.

Religion was, according to the famous pattern, declared a private matter. Godlessness became a Party matter. Nothing religious in word or image was allowed to make itself felt in a public or state institution. Religious instruction in schools was banned, as was school prayer. Schoolchildren gathered before school to pray in Churches. The Churches themselves were desecrated. From the pulpits communist leaders spoke nonsense and blasphemy. Satan was celebrated as the first blessed revolutionary who brought freedom to the people from the bondage of “God.” The workers’ *Marseillaise* was sung by the mob in the Churches to the sound of the organ—organists were forced to play. For weeks, the pulpit and Churches were consecrated anew every Sunday by the pastors in protest against the desecrations. Then the communists moved the meetings to the worship service hour of the congregation in order to get the congregation out of the habit of going to Church. Nothing helped. The Churches were and remained full. Then the [communists] resorted to another means. In order to break the power of the gospel, first some pastors were arrested, and some were sentenced to death for “anti-revolutionary activities” in the revolutionary year 1905/06. Provost Marnitz and Pastor Treu were executed. In short, the situation in Riga was the same as before in Estonia and north Livonia, where Professor Hahn and the pastors Hesse, Pauker, Adolphi, Schwarz, and Jende had gone to their deaths for the gospel. A tremor went through our ranks. Any gathering was forbidden, so we came together secretly for prayer and blessings for the congregations. And the parishioners, robbed by the Bolsheviks, crowded to the only treasures left to the Church: word and sacrament. The Churches became more and more crowded. The arrest of pastors increased and finally extended to almost all of them. Even the *emeriti* old men were laid hands on because they dared to take the place of the arrested parish pastors. Eckhardt was torn from the pulpit; Hoffmann was led away from the altar as he distributed Holy

Communion to his crowd of confirmands. In the prison corridors we met and greeted each other. Now it was a genuine

Christian persecution.

Wonderful is Christ. He who sends such suffering to his own that they may be tempted (I Pet. 4:12, 14), he also causes the spirit of glory to rest on those who suffer.

A wonderful time began. All the prisons were overcrowded. Probably four thousand people were imprisoned. Everywhere there were also pastors. How everyone fared, I cannot describe. Martyrdom records are always difficult to obtain. The experience is too tremendous, the images one sees too shocking for fellow witnesses to be able to pass on an objective picture in all its parts to posterity. And in many martyrdoms there are no witnesses who could report on anything. So I have to limit myself to reporting what I personally experienced and of which I have *reliable* accounts. The hardest hour I experienced was not the rough treatment in prison, not the mean work we were forced to do, like cleaning drainage pits (in the case of widespread spotted typhus and other epidemics), driving fertilizer carts in the city, pokes and curse words, which I, like each of my other associates, got abundant taste of. The hardest thing was when, after the most shameless body search, the prison administration, consisting of nothing but degenerate subjects, wanted to take my New Testament, which I had always been accustomed to carrying in my coat pocket. It was particularly valuable to me, since it had accompanied me to Siberia and I had held many hundreds of Bible lessons from it. Now it was to be taken from me, because the prison was a state building, and nothing religious was allowed to be found in a state building. I resisted, declaring that I would not let go of it because I live from it. God gave me strength to answer all the insults calmly and firmly, so that finally the brutish boss got bored and threw my New Testament at me with contempt. So I left custody in the dark of night on March 4, 1919, with my New Testament, arm in arm with a dear brother minister, and went to the actual prison with the prayer request of the 121st Psalm: "The Lord bless your going out and your coming in." In the dark unheated cell we entered and we prayed Col. 4:3, "that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison." It is wonderful how God has opened the doors. Not only was I allowed to speak about the mystery of Christ in my own cell in front of sixteen prisoners every morning and evening, but there were also days when I was allowed to preach the gospel in four other cells. What profound hours those were in the presence of God! What a hunger for divine words there was everywhere! How often did we receive the request, "Please try to sneak into our cell to pray with us," and in many cells other men prayed with their comrades. There was hardly one cell where there wasn't regular prayer. Men who had not learned to pray here learned, and vowed not to unlearn it. And as with the men, so with the women.

When God's word is on the move, a wonderful time begins. The word is translated into action. Grumbling falls silent. Discipline takes hold, servant love comes alive. The wife of a fellow prisoner praised it: "I never knew there could be such a world of beauty and love on earth," she said. It was the love of the Crucified that created a world of beauty in the midst of the world of filthy prisons, crude guards, hunger, darkness, cold, lice, and bugs.

The weeks slipped by. All thoughts were focused on the day when freedom would come to us. We clung to that hope, even as one by one we were taken away to be executed.

And the day came.

Our Baltic brothers and sons, united with German comrades, stormed Riga. It was a small group, but terror had come over the Reds so they fled like chaff before the wind. The rage of the Communists, taken by surprise, was immense. They snorted that they could no longer bring the hostages they had in their hands to safety, to secure with the lives of these the lives of countless Communist prisoners who were in German hands. For a long time they were not able to take away all the hostages, and that is why on that day in one prison they killed thirty-two hostages, women and men, of the latter eight pastors. We sixty-four hostages in our prison were saved from execution by God's grace, not, as unbelief tends to say, "as if by a miracle," but rather the miraculous intervention of God. We were about to be dragged to a cell for execution with hand grenades when our liberators arrived. We were able to disarm our guards and take the keys. The hour of freedom had dawned on us, obvious even to the stupidest eye, *by God's grace*. We held a thanksgiving service. "Now Thank We All Our God" rang out in the prison corridor. Psalm 107:10–16 teaches us to pray and give thanks. Only after did we go out into golden freedom. But there was no rejoicing, because soon the news of the death of the brothers and sisters in the other prison reached us, and day after day came new tales of sorrow. From the north and from the south of our homeland, after the "great wall of China" with which Bolshevism had closed us off from the world had fallen, news came in about how terrible the murders had been by which Bolshevism wanted to secure the rule of the proletariat. Bolshevism became a murderer everywhere, in Moscow as in St. Petersburg, in Munich as in Budapest; in the Baltic countries, it became a mass murderer. In the five months of its rule it executed 3,654 death sentences in Riga alone; how many in the whole of the Baltic lands cannot be determined at present. Red was its flag, bloody was its rule—without law and justice, and mostly without interrogation, the death sentences were passed according to "revolutionary conscience." When thirty prisoners were sentenced to death and only twenty-seven were found inside the prisons, because the ruling disorder did not know where the three missing prisoners were, they just took three other prisoners at random and shot them too, because "thirty had to be shot." The number of direct executions goes into the thousands, in Riga as said 3,654; in Wesenberg, a country town of Estonia,

three hundred at one time; in Dorpat in the terrible “murder-cellar” one hundred fifty met death in one night. Innumerable were shot during the transport because of “suspicion of escape” and even without suspicion of escape. Of the three hundred men, women, children, and old men driven as hostages from Mitau to Riga in the dark night on the slippery 45-km long rural highway, only eighty-five arrived alive in Riga. The others were shot, if they fell or slipped from fatigue, by the executioners on horseback hunting them down. Two hundred fifteen found their death on this Via Dolorosa.

Besides the bullet, typhus wiped out those interned in prison terribly. The Bolsheviks let the prisoners starve and freeze, often even refused relatives bringing food to the prisoners: “What’s the big deal if citizens die? Then they don’t need to be shot to death.” Of course, they did nothing for hygiene. Vermin, especially lice, these carriers of spotted typhus, were innumerable. Warm water for washing the body—to say nothing of a bath—was given to the prisoners only once every fourteen days. Medicines did not exist. Whoever got infected was almost certainly doomed to death. The heart was weakened by dropsy caused by starvation, camphor did not exist or was not given, and the heart could not withstand the blaze of fever.

Thus tens of thousands became victims of the satanic Bolshevik rule.

And as in the prisons, so also outside the prisons. Actually, all people under Bolshevik rule live in prison; only the “proletarians” lived as free lords. All the rest had no civil or human rights—their lot was suffering. The most severe sufferings that citizens not enclosed in prison had to endure were mental ones, almost more unbearable than bodily sufferings. Almost unbearable was the disrespect of all divine and human rights. The divine was mocked, everything sacred trampled in the dirt. The personhood of the non-Communist was outlawed; if the Communist wanted his boots, he took them from him, as well as any household goods. If he wanted his apartment, the non-Communist had to vacate it and leave all his belongings to the Communist. The citizen did not know a peaceful night’s sleep. Every night, any “workers’ council” could make a house search, steal, rob, and arrest. Whoever is not a member of the ruling Communist party is defenseless, without rights and—without work. Commerce and trade are stagnant, everything is nationalized. According to Revelation 13:17, “no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast.” (The pastors did not even get bread vouchers, and without vouchers there was no bread, or only at unaffordable prices, up to thirty rubles = sixty marks per pound). In addition to this unemployment, all commoners were forced to work without pay. Educated old women were forced to load wood or clean the dirty meeting rooms of the Communists. No productive work was done. The nationalized factories reworked the material taken from owners with Communist workers who were “state employees.” Work was done at the expense of the state, which paid for these expenses with paper money. No factory made a profit. Money lost more and more of its value, and with it the dearth of food increased day by day, to the point of hunger. The children, pale and flabby, cried for

bread that their mothers could not give them. The old people sank from weakness in the street. The doctors wrote in countless cases the cause of death: "*inanitio gravis*" — the scientific term for starvation. The English blockade of the coasts was ironclad, food could not be imported, and almighty England did not allow the Baltic and German troops that were prepared to destroy the Bolsheviks to go into action. Thus, inside the unhappy country, the Communists' fanatical godless hatred murdered, and from the outside, long, oh, too long, cold calculating politics resisted the onset of help. When the first wild cavalcade of horsemen with the blood-red banner came to Riga, for the citizens it was like the apocalyptic horsemen, through whom the most terrible *war*, the fratricidal war, came upon them with all its horrors, followed by exhausting *hunger*, life-sapping *pestilence*, hollow-cheeked *death*. Everywhere lamentation and death moans and, in addition, the mocking laughter of hell formed an eerie chorus. Satan ruled, and his cheapest tools were the dehumanized "gun-women," mostly young prostitutes, to whom murders were wantonness—spiritual daughters as they were of that woman (Revelation 17:6) who was drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. The Bolshevik period of suffering brought the heaviest and greatest sufferings upon the much-tried Baltic Church. It lived through days of which it could be said that, if they had not been shortened, no man would have been saved (Matthew 24:22).

Harvest. What were the high thoughts that God had about such sufferings? We are allowed to think about these thoughts of God, even if we will of course experience many things only afterwards.

In order to do this, it is necessary to put the sufferings of this period in context with those of earlier times and with what we thought we recognized as God's thoughts about the earlier times of suffering.

If we look at all the suffering that the Lord gave to his Baltic Church through the centuries of its history, thus shines out from it all:

Wonderful is Christ.

He founded the Baltic Evangelical Lutheran Church through word and Sacrament;
He deepened its life of faith in the tribulations of the Counter-Reformation;

In the time of Swedish rule, he granted it the external protection of the state for the sake of its calm external development;

In the time of the Russian rule, he withdrew from it this protection, which threatened to lull it into security, and he made its shepherds and flocks go through a hard school of suffering for the sake of faith, that they might become strong for the last great sufferings, which—

He made them endure in the Bolshevik persecution of Christians; he took from the Church all human supports: assets and institutions, Churches and parsonages; he took from it pastors and consistories, made it leaderless, only —

He remained with it, that it might have life and full sufficiency in him (John 10:11); word and sacrament were its only wealth.

Who can proclaim *the fruit of blessings* of this last suffering for the sake of Christ? Most of it, and even the greatest, remains hidden from human eyes; eternity will reveal it one day!

But some things soon emerge from the apparent chaos of suffering with radiant glory, the revelation of the *righteous majesty of God*.

In a time when everyone believes he has a right to have a say in everything, when he argues and parlays about everything, God sends thousands of people to suffer. But he preserves some so that not a hair of their head is harmed in the whole time of suffering; he saves some miraculously from the jaws of death; but he lets thousands sink into death. “Why have we been spared?” some ask in amazement. “What have we done to deserve it,” others ask, deeply humbled, “that God saved our lives?” But many, many ponder, “Why do you have to go to cruel death in our lives, which brought families and congregations into the deepest suffering?”

To all such questions and ponderings there is only one answer (I Sam. 3:18): “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.” “Who has been his counselor?” (Rom. 11:34). “Am I not allowed to do what I choose?” (Matt. 20:15).

God has reminded us again that, in his kingdom, his absolute monarchy is the permanent form of government. We humans owe him adoration and silent obedience, even when he demands the most difficult thing of us: to lay down our lives for him. He has demanded this total sacrifice from many. He has given many martyrs suffering and death, but also martyr’s glory. This is another fruit of blessing from this time of suffering: *after a long time, God has once again raised up a great host of martyrs on the old Christian cultural soil of the Evangelical Church*. When the first martyrs of the Lutheran Church, Heinrich Voes and Johannes Esch, were burned at the stake in Brussels, Luther recognized the great importance of this martyrdom for the entire Lutheran Church. He proclaimed the greatness of this event by composing a new hymn, “A New Song Here Shall Be Begun,” and wrote to the Christians in Holland, Brabant, and Flanders, “God be praised that we have lived to see and hear real saints and true martyrs.” The Baltic Evangelical Lutheran Church of our days has also seen such

martyrs.

This fact, which is so important in the history of the Church, should be remembered by the whole of Evangelical Christianity.

St. Augustine says, "It is not the punishment but the cause that makes the martyr of Christ." Thousands of people suffered death by bullet in those days. Not all of them died as martyrs of Christ. Of the thousands, hardly any were judged as murderers or thieves or evildoers (I Pet. 4:15); murderers and thieves were "pardoned" when they became Communists, which they all did. The murdered were probably all martyrs of *justice*, because they were judged without any moral guilt after having been condemned mostly without interrogation, based on false accusations. Some were also martyrs of the *truth*, which they testified by their word against the Communists. But many, infinitely many, were also martyrs of *Christ*, who suffered for his sake because they could not refrain from testifying to him—first of all the pastors, who by their office must stand out by such testimony. They were clearly aware of the situation. Prof. Dr. Theol. Hahn, pastor of the university congregation in Dorpat, at a time when many fled, wrote to a brother minister before his arrest, "I believe we will have to answer very seriously before the Lord of the Church if, when, and how we vacate our posts, which are after all his posts that he entrusts to us. It seems to me that our behavior in such times is extremely serious. The value of the parsonage is essentially decided in such times... How important it is in the present, in this time of darkness, that in all positions where there is even a possibility of influence, the powerful works of God and Christ are put into effect with the dedication of the whole person... If we are not ready to sacrifice our lives for the sake of witness to the Gospel, we prove that the Gospel has not had its necessary full value for us. In short, the fact that staying at our post possibly, even probably, brings dangers for us is not yet a reason for me to leave it."* And this faithful shepherd did not leave it; he stayed serving his congregation. When worship services in the Church were forbidden and the Church was given over to be used for meeting rooms, he preached in the parsonage and in the houses of parishioners where they gathered secretly, and with such power and inner benefit that he said, "Even if I should die now, my staying would have been worthwhile." After such a meeting he was arrested and locked up in a "murder-cellar," the basement of a bank, with many, all too many fellow sufferers. Here he became a *silent* martyr who did not speak much but had all the more lasting effect by working without words.

He had saved his Greek New Testament, in which he immersed himself—daily, hourly, always seeking and finding light anew. Then he prayed silently with intimacy and emotion. The greatest blessing came to his fellow prisoners from this saintly person's life, whom everyone could see was in the most intimate contact with God. A fellow prisoner, who had completely forgotten how to pray, began to pray again, simply because he saw *that* Hahn was praying and *how* he was praying. For all his silence in bearing suffering, Hahn was strong. Despite all the threats, he did not denounce his "colleagues" he didn't sign any false "protocol" that was presented to him. When it became clear to him that his execution was inevitable, his prayer wrestling increased in depth. He lived only in communion with his God. A fellow sufferer

gratefully testifies that a miraculous power emanated from his handshake. When, one by one, his fellow sufferers were called out to execution, and after a few moments the shots and the death cry were heard, and then his own name was called, he walked with a steady step, “as if he were hurrying,” to the place of execution. His face reflected an expression as if his soul, already carried away from this earth, was filled with the consciousness that in the next moment he would stand as a victor before the throne of his God. Two bullets in the head put an end to this rich life. He has become a guide to blessedness for thousands of parishioners and students, and behind every word that has remained in the hearts of his listeners, one now stands out: “Amen, this is certainly true, that what he taught us, he sealed with his death.”

Just as Hahn clearly and consciously remained at his post in Dorpat, even though he was threatened with death, so all pastors, aware of the serious situation, remained at their posts, even if clear testimonies are not available from all of them. Not all of them wrote out their “testament” in those days, as Provost Eckhardt of Riga did—and not everything that was written down has been preserved. Eckhardt’s testament, which he wrote down shortly before his arrest, has been found and was read to the congregation after his funeral sermon. The passage in question reads, “If I should now be imprisoned and die for the sake of my witness, God help me that I may not weaken even in such times, but rather that the spirit of the first witnesses may also show itself alive in more of us, the weak ones. But may the congregation, for its part, also show ever firmer courage to confess. We can only be helped out of the misery of the times if a willingness to become martyrs for our convictions comes alive in the congregations also. Things cannot get better as long as those who call themselves Christians are so appallingly pliant and bow to every ‘direction’ that pursues its goals a little more ruthlessly. We want to counter this with a Christian ruthlessness. Otherwise Christianity will be trampled on by people, like salt that has become stupid. — The most beautiful fruit of my pastoral work would be this: that I could meet quite a lot of my parishioners before God’s throne, who confessed their God also before the people, even under the heaviest temptations.” Eckhardt, who poured out his prayers in some songs before his arrest, one time sang:

Give me an eye bright with hope
despite all the darkness of this time;
let me stand at heaven’s threshold,
a witness of your glory!

And on another occasion:

Yes, Lord, I really want to,— want to
show myself as a true Christian.

But you will divinely bend down
quietly to my will.

God bent down toward him, and he did not weaken. He proved himself before God and men as a witness of his glory with victorious faith. A few days before his execution, he wrote: "We must be prepared for everything. Everywhere we remain in the hands of God—, who does not stop at prison walls. Even in prison, one does not let oneself be robbed of the confidence of the resurrection and eternal life."

He led his associates, who were led out of his cell for execution, praying all the way to the cell door. Then he himself went praying to the place of execution a few minutes later, as he wrote in a note from prison: "We want to remain upright." He chose for his funeral text Psalm 16:6, "The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage."

As the sun in the rainbow shines a whole abundance of colors so that no one can say which color is the most beautiful, so Jesus, the sun of all martyrs, reveals in the suffering and death of the same such an abundance of world-conquering glories that no one can say which is the greatest.

As moving as is Hahn's quiet strength and Eckhardt's courageous martyrdom, so also heroic is the martyrdom of the Estonian pastor Hesse. When the Bolsheviks entered Estonia, he stayed in a remote farmstead in order to be able to serve the congregation from there as undetected as possible. He was betrayed. During this time he celebrated holy communion with his wife and, certain of his death, chose as his funeral text Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? — One thing have I asked of the Lord, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

They brought him into the city before the tribunal. There a letter was presented to him to sign, that everything he had preached was a lie. If he signed it, then he could go free. Hesse took the paper, read it, tore it up, and threw the shreds at the feet of his judges. Then they blinded him, led him to the river, put his back to the bank, and shot him. But the lord remained his light and the strength of his life—until he was allowed to praise him with his death, whom he had known all his life.

As heroically as Hesse endured his martyrdom, so brightly shines the pastoral faithfulness of the martyr Pastor Pauker of Wesenberg. He faithfully served his three hundred fellow prisoners in Wesenberg with words and refreshed them with prayers, offering them support in all their weakness, showing them the power that makes God mighty even in the weak.

One night, one of the guards—one of his former confirmands—who had enlisted for prison duty for the sake of daily bread, came to Pauker and whispered to him, "Come with me, I want to help you escape. I have just heard for sure that tomorrow morning all three hundred will be executed, you too. There is still time, come quickly." And Pauker answered him without thinking, "Thank you—but go alone, I'm staying. Up till

now, I have been able to strengthen the poor three hundred — tomorrow, when they take their hardest walk, I will have to stay with them all the more." So he stayed and that night he prepared the comrades to die. When morning came and they were led out, they went proudly and calmly to the place of execution, the three hundred with their faithful shepherd. On the place of execution, where the shotguns and machine guns were already pointed at them, Pauker intoned the song, "Let Me Go, That I May See Jesus." The Red Guard soldiers stumbled and gave no fire. They were shouted at: Shoot! They hesitated, the lovely melody sounding too wonderful, the song of the three hundred condemned to death too moving. — Finally, as the second verse began, "Sweet light, sun that breaks through clouds, oh, when will I get there?— — —," the salvos cracked. The great moment had come,

The flock and their shepherd,
in faith, Lord, in you
together will be blessed.

The same faithfulness to the shepherd shines from P. Wachtsmuth's martyrdom. In the darkness that lay over the Mitau-Riga road of torment he did not think of escape, which some of his comrades succeeded in doing, but persevered with his parishioners who were with him, strengthened them with the comfort of the Gospel, as if in prison, and remained with them until he was executed with the few who arrived in Riga alive.

Like these pastors, many, oh, all too many, have gone to their deaths. How they died, God knows. We have received scanty information about some of them. The young Pastor Grüner went to the place of execution singing, "When I Am to Depart." The same song on his lips was sung at death by Pastor Wühner from Walk. Fearing the interference of his congregation, which loved him above all else, he was taken away to the city of Pleskau. As he sang his death song with a transfigured face, it made such an impression on the executioners that they refused to shoot "such a man." The dehumanized "gun-women" had to be brought in, for whom execution was wantonness. They murdered this noble witness of Jesus Christ with mocking laughter.

We know nothing of the deaths of many pastors. They were found shot in the woods or on country roads, often weeks later — no one witnessed their deaths; the executioners were too dull and obtuse to report even a word about their deaths. Often, very often, God's punishing arm reached these murderers quickly — many of them soon met with a "quick evil death" of their own and so could not give a report.

The names of the Baltic pastors established so far who were honored to praise the Lord with their testimonial deaths are:

In Estonia: 1. Hesse, 2. Pauker; in Dorpat: 3. Hahn, 4. Schwarz; in Livland: 5. Wühner, 6. Adolphi, 7. Jende, 8. Bosse, 9. Grüner, 10. Schlau, 11. Scheinflug, 12. Hassmann, 13. Tschisko; in Riga: 14. Paul True, 15. Marnitz, 16. Döbler, 17.

Scheuermann, 18. Taube, 19. Hoffmann, 20. Fromhold-Treu, 21. Savary, 22. Bergengrün, 23. Eckhardt; letztere acht wurden gemeinsam im Zentralgefängnis hingerichtet, also Riga am 22. Mai 1919 befreit wurde. In Kurland: 24. Wachtsmuth, 25. Moltrecht, 26. Bernewitz, 27. Strautmann, 28. Bielenstein, 29. Gilbert, 30. Rutkowsky.

Like the pastors, many members of the congregations died. City missionary v. Boetticher preached to his associates from his New Testament on the place of execution until the bullet closed the mouth of this silent, blessed witness. And the Latvian farmer-congregational leader Behrsing and the farmer-homesteader Puika, a deep-rooted Christian, died like heroes. The courageous matron of the deaconesses' house in Mitau, Sister Marie Schlieps, died heroically on the Mitau-Riga road of torment, as did the young twenty-one-year-old concert singer v. Klot, who so often cheered up her comrades with the song, "Even If I Don't Know the Way, You Know It Well." In the face of her executioners she expressed the wish, "Now only do not weaken," and she went to the place of judgment, as it says in that song:

"Therefore I wait in silence, your word is without deceit;
you know the way for me, that is enough."

Who can name all those who, among the many executed, went to their death praising Christ? God has written them in the Book of Life, where we also will read all of them on his day. More than that, we will see them "clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" (Rev. 7:9).

Wonderful is Christ, he who has again adorned his Church with martyr glory and made every kind of *suffering for his name's sake*, even when he did not demand martyrdom, precious: "Blessed—most blessed—are you when men revile you and persecute you on my account" (Matt. 5:11). — All those who were allowed to suffer in this way have experienced this. All those who have been in such suffering humbly testify they would never want to erase this great time from their lives, for the sake of their great inner gain.

Rich blessings of sanctifying power have come from such suffering to the families of the sufferers and the congregations. They all bless the suffering, even if with teary eyes.

In this suffering, faith grows and love strengthens. The Churches remain full; those who are still free come in droves. After all the hardships that the women and relatives of the imprisoned experienced outside the prisons, they are driven to experience a Sunday hour of refreshment in the strengthening fellowship of a worshipping congregation, to immerse the weary soul completely in the glory of God in a quiet Bible study, to be refreshed with life from God in a communion celebration. If the pastors cannot perform their duties because they have been killed or are languishing behind prison walls, members of the congregation take their place and perform the priestly service. If there is

no wine available for the celebration of holy communion, they make their own communion wine from berries and water and celebrate communion in the desecrated Churches. Women laboriously cart the corpses of those who have been released from their torment to the cemetery, for even the hearses were taken from the Churches by the Communists and converted into trucks. Women bury the dead; parishioners baptize the children. Even if the parishes had lost every single thing of earthly good and human protection, no one could take away the riches of word and sacrament from them. And a stream of blessings went out from these eternal sources of strength and refreshed an almost languishing land, so that it blossomed and bore fruit as never before.

How love grew along with need! People did not just direct alms to the collection plate; everyone shared everything with others. The little that remained of food, clothing, and money was shared and sacrificed on the altar of Christian love. The collections reached an unexpected height. The doctors gave the last of their privately owned camphor to those suffering from typhus—because there was none in the “nationalized” pharmacies. They gave it away and soon became victims of the terrible epidemic themselves. Glory and honor also to these noble humanitarians who paid for their faithful fulfillment of duty with death and thus completed their service to God.

Just as on the place of execution the witnesses died praising God, just as in the congregations the life of faith and love flourished, so also in the homes a life to the glory of God prevailed. Complaints fell silent; quietly and strongly one bore one’s own and others’ suffering. One prayed and was faithful in intercession, the power of which to bear is felt by all those who suffer. The small became small, the big became big. No one complained about the loss of possessions. No one sighed when he had to give up his home to the “proletarians” and was given a dirty basement by the Communist government to live in, “so that the citizens can see how the proletarians have had to live.” It was a unique time that with its beauty outshone the selfishness and small-mindedness that showed itself also in the circle of the persecuted, in such a way that the small and ugly could not win power over the common spirit.

A pastor who was allowed to officiate for an arrested pastor of a congregation for two months, and then was himself taken to prison and fell ill with spotted typhus, said about this short period of work: “The time was so great and beautiful, the greatest that I have experienced in my life, that I have only one wish: to be allowed to go home to my Lord after this glorious high time of my official life.” And the young, highly gifted senior pastor Döbler—who suffered a martyr’s death so “cold-bloodedly,” as the executioners put it—when he too was brought to us in prison and I asked, “Aren’t you sorry that you stayed and didn’t flee?” told me, “No, being allowed to preach in this time to my congregation and share everything with them was so delicious that I wish and want to suffer for it.”

The great eternal blessing that grew out of the suffering for the individual, the homes, and the congregations, according to God’s will should benefit not only the Balts

but *all* Christians, because according to II Cor. 1:6, "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation." Luther tells us how this should happen. On the occasion of the martyrdom of Henry of Zütphen, he interpreted Psalm 9 for the Christians in Bremen and wrote, "Be glad, and thank and praise God who has made you worthy to see and obtain these his wonders and gifts of grace."

Yes, this should be the first thing: the Protestant Church should learn to *praise* and *give thanks* that God has given us martyrs again. "He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice, I will show the salvation of God!" (Ps. 50:23). If we give thanks for the martyrs, then God can also reveal to us his will to save through the darkness of their suffering, so that, as Luther wrote to the people of Bremen, "It is doubtless out of grace that God allows them to die and shed their blood just at this time, when so many falsehoods and factions are arising, so that he may warn us and through them certify that that is the right doctrine where in the right Spirit is given, which they taught, believed, died for, and by their martyrdom confirmed; just as the holy martyrs long ago died for the sake of the gospel and with their blood sealed and certified it for us."

At a time when even the best of us are almost in despair as to whether the Gospel still has a world-conquering power in itself, God makes these heroes of faith appear before us so that in them we may build up our weak faith. Behold, these are Christians who have overcome through the blood of the Lamb. God preaches to his Christian people, who have become so shy of confession due to their long life under the protection of the state, so shy of confession that they shy away from even the smallest adversity: *To be a Christian means to confess the Lord.*

Confessing. We must confess him not only in the solemn hour of the worship service, in the midst of a celebrating congregation; we must also confess him among hardened, hateful people where our confession is answered not by the beautiful Amen of the congregation but by the mocking laughter of hell, which brings diabolical torment upon the confessors. So let us give thanks and praise God, as Luther wrote to the Christians in Holland, "that God has set before us fresh new examples of his life. Now is the time for the kingdom of God to stand not in words but in power." "For Christ's cross must have blasphemers" — and so must it have confessors who confess the living *God*, the God who works miracles and answers prayers, *Jesus* his Son crucified and risen, who is with us always, even to the end of the age, the *Holy Spirit*, who is the Spirit of God and of glory, who sanctifies life and makes dying victorious.

How God has done his wonders among us! His preserving, his saving wonders. Over some he has commanded his holy angels that they should carry them by hand, that their foot should not strike a stone, in all the perilous ways of caring for the captives. And how many he has wonderfully saved! A Christian woman was driven to the place of execution, full of holy joy to be allowed to praise God with her death. On the way, however, God gave her the joy of being able to serve her own, to ask still for her life if it be his will — and at the moment the executioner turned to her, without a

word being spoken by her, he told her: Now go home! How often has such a “coincidence” been experienced, where it was clear even to the stupidest eye: God has let this happen to us.

How glorious were the miracles that God performed on those who, according to his will, should praise him by dying. How strong the weak became, not complaining but preaching, praying and singing they went to their deaths. If there are still Christians to whom it is a question whether miracles are possible, whether they still happen now, a thousand-voiced choir of witnesses answers them: We have stood in a world of God’s miracles, we have experienced them in our own lives.

Jesus, our Lord, how he was alive among those who bore his reproach! His word has proved to be the word of life in our homes, in the Church, in the prisons, in the places of execution. Beautiful words of poets do not go with us into dirty prisons; deep words of philosophers stop at the scaffolds. But Christ’s word remains with us until the hour of death. His word proves itself as God’s word, because when he speaks, so it happens. He gives comfort, and the heart becomes quiet. He teaches to pray, to pray also for the murderers, and he gives us the strength to wrestle down all humanly natural hatred and to pray like Provost Bernewitz, who died with the words, “Father, forgive them” on his lips. Many have interceded in this way before the face of their Lord, including Provost Marnitz.

He was sentenced to death by the tribunal for “anti-revolutionary activity in 1905/06.” His crime was that he preached against robbing, plundering, burning, and murdering, but at the same time he saved many of those sentenced to death by the fast-working Russian field court from execution through his intercession. Now he was sentenced to death. How it went during his execution we can see from the conversation between two prison guards, which a prisoner overheard behind the cell door:

A: Well, yesterday you shot down the old provost, that was also such a cursed commoner.

B: Yes —.

A: Why are you so quiet today? Until now you always enjoyed shooting people down so much that you talked a lot about it.

B: (Silent.)

A: Tell me, did the old dog fight back? Did you have to tie him up?

B: We wanted to, but he said, It’s not necessary, I’ll stand still myself.

A: Well, did he stand still? Did he howl?

B: He stood quietly and did not howl, only spoke a little.

A: What did he say?

B: He didn’t actually speak. He prayed.

A: Ha, ha, prayed? Probably begged for his life, that rascal.

B: No—he prayed—for—us!

Then they both fell silent.

Wonderful is Christ, who makes of weak people such witnesses that they overcome even their crude executioners.

The only person who can pray for his enemies is the one for whom Jesus is the merciful high priest who can make sin, even if it is blood red, to be snow white. The only one who can pray like this is the one who has experienced Christ's grace in himself. He was experienced by all who called upon him with earnestness. He was close to them with his blessing Savior-faithfulness. His life has become a consolation for countless people. "In this case," wrote Döbler from prison just after he had been sentenced by the tribunal, "one quite involuntarily places his sufferings next to those of our Savior, and then one becomes quite silent. How little it is, in fact, that we have to carry. You just have to say it to yourself, and then so it goes, even if the world were full of devils." Christ in Gethsemane has become a teacher for many on how to still the heart and say, "Thy will be done." Christ on Golgotha with his, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" has followed those condemned to death into the deepest depths of human despondency. Christ's victorious "It is finished!" has given the weak strength to overcome. And only the Easter King! Döbler wrote on the evening of Easter Day, "Yes, our Lord and Savior lives, and not only a life for himself, but also for us children of men, so that we may become rich and share in the richest, most wonderful, most God-connected life. — I am condemned today, but — my heart leaps and bounds." Jesus, as a human teacher, would not have been able to do anything in such distress. A fanatic who only fell victim to the swarming crowd would not have been able to offer anything to the suffering. The merciful High Priest of Golgotha, the Easter King, that was the Savior who became counsel, strength, and a hero to those who suffer and die for his name's sake and with blessing confessed those who confessed him.

And how powerfully God's *Holy Spirit* worked in these times of suffering! He awakened hunger and thirst for water even in the hearts of those who had come far from God. He made inquiring about eternity lively. He helped to break old sins and to begin a new life. In an oh, so complacent Christianity, where the Church makes every conceivable effort to bring people to *put up with* the ministry of the word, God shows us a flock of Christians who live with hungering and thirsting souls from the bread of life and thereby gain strength to bear the heaviest things.

God's Holy Spirit awakened, in addition to the hunger for the word, joyfulness in prayer. "How wonderful it is that we can pray," Döbler wrote in one of his last letters. "It is a royal right. We do not know the future, but we know God. Wonderful to be carried by his love, to be guided by his strong hands." So prayer and intercession were practiced everywhere. Jews who lived together with such prayers in the cells were amazed at the Christians' prayerfulness. They left off their complaining and lamenting about their lost money and joined in the common prayer. Inconceivable to them, to whom the prayer of the heart was unknown, was the fact that one could pray not from a "book" but from the "head."

Wonderful was the working of the Spirit. He gave to the accused the words they should speak (Matt. 10:19). He gave to the persecuted, even before satanic judges, serpent-wisdom and dove-simplicity, so that nothing was betrayed that brought harm to others, and yet the truth was not violated. How powerfully the Holy Spirit helped to overcome hatred, envy, discord, selfishness, and arrogance, so that all, high and low, formed a great brotherhood, since everything external was nothing, and the person in which Christ had taken shape was everything. How the weak clung to such!

When in those days of suffering the congregation in the Churches or those gathered in the prison cells for secret devotions confessed the ancient Christian faith, then it was in a higher sense than usual an expression of what one had experienced and learned, and for which one was prepared to suffer. "Religion must be lived," wrote Döbler. "Only then do ever deeper depths open up and one becomes rich and joyful." Experienced and lived religion must be made known by word and deed and, if necessary, by suffering.

Oh, that false doctrine and confessional timidity and un-Christian nature would depart from Christendom and that Christ would be known by all and in all, *for wonderful is Christ, for he blesses the martyrdom of all Christendom*. When the first blood witnesses of Evangelical truth were burned in Brussels, Luther sang:

Leave off their ashes never will;
Into all lands they scatter.

Here are not ashes, here is the blood of the martyrs. Oh, that from your blood a stream of blessing would be poured out, fertilizing the whole of ancient Christendom. Abel's blood speaks, says the Letter to the Hebrews (11:4). Martyr's blood is the most powerful sermon to Christianity: Let us put away the sin of in-name-only Christianity, of shyness in confession, of false doctrine—; let us run with patience in the struggle that is prescribed for us and look up to Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith (12:2). When there is Christianity again, for which confession of faith is self-evident, then:

Even at the door is summer nigh,
The winter now is ended,
The tender flowers come out and spy;
His hand when once extended
Withdraws not till he's finished.

Such a confessing congregation will not tolerate un-Christian or half-Christian sermons, which freeze the tender budding flowers of awakening faith with the fast melting winter snow of human wisdom. Such a congregation will not tolerate members in its midst who deny the living Lord and bring shame to the Christian name, but it will

exercise discipline against all deniers, sharp *discipline* without which a true congregation (Matt. 18:15), which lives by word and sacrament, is unthinkable.

In such communities, people will not be consumed in disputes over this or that incidental matter, but all that rallies around Christ, the living Savior, will confront unbelief and hatred of God in a united phalanx. Where confession of Christ is alive, there will also love again become a power, there will the crumbs of charity or indeed the “joyful” charity that only gives when it pleases itself disappear. Generous love will again be the expression of gratitude for the experienced grace of God. It shares the big as well as the small. The left hand knows nothing of what the right hand is doing. Man does not demand receipts and public thanks, but is glad to be allowed to relieve need—just as one does not shrink from putting one’s hands into the thorny bushes of sinners and of sickening misery in order to help out of grateful love.

Where faith and love have come alive through word and sacrament, that is a *genuine congregation*, nurtured and guided by the ministry of the word. Everything else about law and order—the Church constitution, congregational order, taxes—is a minor matter, though not to be despised. Neither the authorities and officials, nor the bishops or superintendents as *such* are the bearers of healthy, strong Christianity, but rather the joyfully-confessing, strong-believing, warm-hearted Christians bear the congregation and lead it. This was clearly shown in the Baltic persecution of Christians. There was no valid “law” of any kind, no recognized ecclesiastical authority, and yet the congregation was resplendent in glorious beauty at that very time, and the Lord of the Church himself confessed it. Not that the congregation was without office and order; the word established it, and ordered all the rest, and so it shall always remain. In the establishment of ecclesiastical orders, in the creation of ecclesiastical offices, only the word may have a decisive effect, not the state, not diplomacy, not even the mockery of “ecclesiastical diplomacy.” The word teaches: the Church is Christ’s body (Eph. 1:23), so every office and every order must serve to make this body glorious. Yes, everything should serve the Church of Christ. No one should want to dominate it, and all those who have authority should know that they only have anything to do with the Church insofar as they are members of the Church of God, before whom there is no respect of persons.

Everything *external*, from assets to the ecclesiastical supreme authority, is a *minor matter*, though not to be despised.

Word and sacrament are the imperishable divine *wealth* of the Church.

Confessing *faith* and active *love* are the *main thing*.

God wanted to remind his Christian people in all countries of this again through the persecution of Baltic Christians.

If the congregation is to attain such a beautiful form and mature depth, if the promise is to apply to it that even the gates of hell will not be able to overcome it (Matt. 16:18), then the *Bible* must be honored in it in a completely different way than it is often

valued in our days, where through critical research and history-of-religions treatments the judgment has taken hold in thousands of “Christians” that the Bible is a book from ancient times, for ancient times. The word of God of the Bible has proved itself in its old strength in the time of persecution of the Baltic Church at both the individual and congregational level. So the Bible should be for us the old-yet-always-new source from which we draw the water of the life for our faith. Truly, it has proved itself as not outdated but as the most all-modern book because its contents reveal *eternal* truth. In times of suffering, always-new aspects of its truth open up to the astonished, worshipful reader.

It is not the case that the abominations of ungodliness, as described by the prophets or the Psalms, belong to times long past. One must not say: That was once the case, but in our time it is no longer possible—; no, as it was, so it is, and so it will be again and again when ungodliness spreads, and it will spread as in Moscow, Riga, Budapest, and Munich, so also in Paris, London, and New York, because we must be hated by all nations (Matt. 24:9). The colors of Revelation are not only taken from past times, no, they have been recognized with prophetic clarity as inherent to every ungodliness. The ruthlessness of unbelief, the hatred of the powers from the bottomless pit, the raging against the children of God cannot be described more faithfully than the prophets and psalms, the Lord and his apostles do. This is how it was, and this is how it will be when the things that “*now restrain it*” (II Thess. 2:7) are swept away, when the dikes break, and the floods of hell pour over humankind. How often did it happen to us in prison that we exclaimed, while reading the Psalms and prophets, “Quite, quite like now!” It was to us as if a David had suffered under the Bolsheviks, or John described Communist persecutions. But if this description is so faithful, then one also takes firm confidence in the promise: Christ remains victorious after all; he is the man to come. So one clings to him, because he proves himself gloriously as the living one, even in the deepest suffering, where all else fails. One learns to pray: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

Anguish teaches one to mind the word of God. Even the smallest things seem important to the reader. One who has personally gone through the horrors of a winter escape understands the seemingly insignificant word of the Lord (Matt. 24:20), “Pray that your flight may not be in winter.” Whoever reads the story of Gethsemane while condemned to death knows what this means: “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood” (Luke 22:44). How we can understand the conflict in which the imprisoned Paul finds himself (Phil. 1:23–24), “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” Above all the prison letters! One reads them in prison with different eyes than in freedom. How one learns in prison prayer and intercession in the sense of Ephesians 3:14–16, “I bow my knees before the Father, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his

Spirit in the inner man." One gains better understanding even of the "trifles" in the prisons letters, for example, the many greetings at the end of the Epistle to the Colossians. What greetings and counter-greetings mean for the one living in the closed world of prison! As the prison letters receive new light from being in prison, so also the Acts of the Apostles receive new light from the suffering that comes over Churches and their preachers of the word. How greatly the apostles bore their suffering: they left the council's presence rejoicing that they had been worthy to suffer shame for his name's sake (Acts 5:41), and that after they had received a caning for no reason. Who has not felt something of this holy joy himself when he was beaten or insulted because he confessed Christ and his word. How high the Church stands when it hears of the suffering of Peter and John! It does not pray for distant reprieve but prays Acts 4:29, "Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness."

From the Acts of the Apostles, as well as from the Psalms and the prophets, one learns how to pray not only *for* enemies but also *against* enemies, especially against an ungodly authority, against impious rulers who, by taking ungodly advantage of their power, cause unspeakable sufferings to thousands of Christians and expose many weak among them to the temptation to deny Christ. One prays against them because:

The cause and the honor, Lord Jesus Christ,
are not ours, but indeed are yours!

Yes, even if one cannot pray them as a Christian, one gains a better understanding even of the imprecatory Psalms, at least when one is dealing with godless, brutish enemies.

Above all, one learns to pray *for* enemies because "such suffering and death bring along in and with them that one prays for the unrighteous like Christ did," says Luther in his letter to the Christians in Bremen. In fact, in suffering for the sake of Christ, there is not hatred and bitterness against the enemies, but heartfelt compassion for these poor, miserable slaves of Satan, whom also Christ has gained as his own. One remains in opposition to them in the school of the first word of the cross.

It is impossible to explain the richness of the divine word, which in every situation opens up to us new depths of its vitality, just as it is impossible to explain the fruit of the blessing of suffering.

Conclusion. We do not know whether the winter of the Church is already passing, but we do know that the blood of martyrs retains its sacred seed-power even beyond the winter season. Just as the ash of the martyrs dusts all the earth, so the blood of the martyrs becomes a stream of blessing for the whole Church, for II Corinthians 4:15 says, "For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."

I began this brief description of the life and suffering of the Baltic Evangelical Lutheran Church with Luther's words, "Wonderful is Christ." Nothing else did this writing want to be than a praise of our wonderful Lord, who exercised his gracious, disciplining, blessing lordship in the Baltic Church; may God give it to the whole Church as a warning, as a teaching, and as a blessing. So now I want to close with another word from Luther, which he wrote "to all dear brothers in Christ, who are in Holland, Brabant and Flanders, together with all believers in Christ" (whether they are now in Europe, Asia, Africa, America, or Australia): "God be praised and blessed forever that we who have known and worshiped so many false saints have lived to see and hear real saints and true martyrs We up here in Germany have not yet been sufficiently deserving to become so precious and worthy an offering to Christ, though many of our members have not been, and still are not, without suffering. Pray for us, dear brothers, and among yourselves, that we may extend the faithful hand one to another, and hold all in one spirit to our Head, Jesus Christ, who strengthens and full prepares you with grace, in honor of his holy name. To him be glory, praise, and thanks, among you and all creatures for eternity!"

Yes, pray for us Baltic Evangelicals, that also through the power of your intercession God may save us from our distress and help us to preserve the blessing he intended for our Baltic Church, which he led from the heights into the depths, that we may grow in him who is the head (Eph. 4:15), and thus become a blessing to many. Pray in faith (James 1:6), and do not doubt, for

Wonderful is Christ.

NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

I am working on a study of evangelical Lutheran hagiography across the centuries, and in the process discovered this extremely important contribution from the early twentieth century, which may possibly be responsible for unleashing a flood of saint commemorations among Lutherans not seen since the sixteenth century! More to come as my own scholarly work progresses.

The effort it took to reach a usable working translation were extensive enough that I thought it would be a boon to other anglophone scholars to make my English draft generally available. Here are the steps I took to produce the translation.

The book was published in 1920 and so is now, by both U.S. and Estonian law, in the public domain. I downloaded a scan of the original from:

<https://dspace.ut.ee/handle/10062/49318>

I read aloud the complete contents of the book using Word Dictation to get a first German draft (both doubting that OCR could handle the Fraktur font or low-contrast colors of the scan, and wanting a chance to comprehend the German at first pass on my own).

Then I copied and pasted the book by sections into the free version of DeepL online to get a translation draft. I read through this carefully afterwards, noting confusing passages or obviously inaccurate and infelicitous phrasing. In the process I realized that DeepL randomly drops out entire sentences (something that possibly could have been avoided in the paid version?). I went through it again trying to spot the missing sentences and reinsert them. I hope I've caught them all, but I can't guarantee it. If you're reading this for interest or pleasure, it won't be a problem, but if you're using it for scholarship, you'll want to be sure to check it against the German original when you quote.

As much as possible I have followed Schabert's formatting here, including the use of bold, italics (which in old German appears as *s p a c e d w o r d s*), centered words and phrases, and some excessively long paragraphs. The three footnotes are his.

All quotes from the Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version, as I thought its language better matched the era and general tenor of the book than more recent English translations. Sometimes Schabert condensed or paraphrased the Scripture in question, and generally speaking I have followed his lead without indicating ellipses, since he didn't either.

The quotes from Luther can be found in the following English sources (most of which I replicated here, if I had access to them, but a few I had to do myself):

- “A New Song Here Shall Be Begun,” in *Luther’s Works* 53:214–216.
- “The Burning of Brother Henry,” in *Luther’s Works* 32:266–67.
- “Letter to the Christians in the Low Countries,” in *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 193.

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