

## History and Good [1]

All that has been said thus far implies that we have abandoned the abstract notion, largely dominant in ethical thought, of an isolated individual who has available an absolute criterion by which to choose continually and exclusively between a clearly recognized good and a clearly recognized evil. Such an isolated individual does not exist; nor do we have such an absolute criterion of the good simply at our disposal; nor do good and evil present themselves to us in their pure form. The error of such an abstract ethical scheme is this: only the isolated individual is considered ethically relevant; only what is absolute and universal is seen as normative; and only the choice between the clearly recognized good and the clearly recognized evil is acknowledged as an ethical decision. In other words, the flaw of such a scheme lies in the attempt to reduce ethics [das Ethische] to a static basic formula. The result is a fictitious construct lacking precisely the specifically ethical dimension. Corresponding to this abstraction is a particular kind of practical conduct, an ever-repeated search for a solution to the ethical dilemma that is doomed to fail over and over again. What this amounts to is individuals pulling back from the living responsibility of their historical existence into a private realization of ethical ideals by which they see their own personal goodness guaranteed. In this approach, the ethical task is

viewed as applying specific principles, regardless of the consequences for the particular context. Depending on how radical these principles are, this attitude will lead, by way of withdrawing from responsibility for the whole, to a purely private bourgeois existence, or even into the monastery. However, in practice the ethical isolation of the individual is a fictitious notion. For no one can withdraw completely from human community, indeed, everyone's life is dependent on it. That is why this understanding of ethics is doomed to fail. It fails due to the *historicity* [*Geschichtlichkeit*] of human existence.

This means that a human being necessarily lives in encounter with other human beings and that this encounter entails being charged, in ever so many ways, with responsibility [*Verantwortung*] for the other human being. History arises out of accepting this responsibility for other human beings or for entire communities or groups of communities. Individuals do not act merely for themselves alone; each individual incorporates the selves of several people, perhaps even a very large number. The father of a family, for example, can no longer act as if he were merely an individual. In his own self, he incorporates the selves of those family members for whom he is responsible. Everything he does is determined by this sense of responsibility. Any attempt to act and live as if he were alone would not only abdicate his responsibility, but also deny at the same time the reality on which his responsibility is based. For he does not cease to be the father of a family; rather, instead of being a good father, he is now simply a bad one. He is a good father if he takes on and acts according to the responsibility reality places on him.

The moment a person accepts responsibility for other people—and only in so doing does the person live in reality—the genuine ethical situation arises. This is really something different from the abstract way in which people usually seek to come to terms with the ethical problem. The subject of the action is no longer the isolated

individual, but the one who is responsible for other people. The action's norm is not a universal principle, but the concrete neighbor, as given to me by God. The choice is made no longer between a clearly recognized good and a clearly recognized evil; instead, it is risked in faith while being aware that good and evil are hidden in the concrete historical situation.

To act out of concrete responsibility means to act in *freedom*—to decide, to act, and to answer for the consequences of this particular action *myself* without the support of other people or principles. Responsibility presupposes ultimate freedom in assessing a given situation, in choosing, and in acting. Responsible action is neither determined from the outset nor defined once and for all; instead, it is born in the given situation. The point is not to apply a principle that eventually will be shattered by reality anyway, but to discern what is necessary or “commanded” in a given situation. One must observe, weigh, and judge the matter, all in the dangerous freedom of one's own self. One must indeed enter the sphere of relativity, in the twilight that the historical situation casts over good and evil. The self-denial often necessary for those who act responsibly is to prefer what is better over what is less good, since “absolute good” is capable, to an even greater extent, of provoking nothing less than evil. The so-called absolute good would in such a case be bad, and that which is relatively better is “absolutely” better than the “absolute good.” This throws the freedom of those who act responsibly into the sharpest relief: it is freedom from servitude even to an “absolute good.”

Those who act responsibly take the given situation or context into account in their acting, not merely as raw material to be shaped by their ideas, but as contributing to forming the act itself. It is not some foreign law that is imposed on reality. Instead, the action of the responsible person is most profoundly in accord with reality.

However, this concept of “accordance with reality” [*das*

Wirklichkeitsgemäße] requires further clarification. A misunderstanding would lead to that "servile attitude toward the facts" (Nietzsche) that always retreats from wherever the pressure is greater, that justifies success on principle, and that in any given situation chooses the expedient as being in accord with reality. Misunderstanding accordance with reality in this sense amounts to irresponsibility. Neither a servile attitude toward the status quo, nor a protest based on principle against the status quo in the name of some ideal reality, leads to genuine accordance with reality, the hallmark of responsible action. Both extremes fall equally wide of what is essential here. In any action that is truly in accord with reality, acknowledgment of the status quo and protest against the status quo are inextricably connected; for, as we have pointed out in chapter 1, the most fundamental reality is the reality of the God who became human. This reality provides both the ultimate foundation and the ultimate negation of everything that actually exists, its ultimate justification and ultimate contradiction. In that God became human, and only because of that, human beings and their world are accepted and affirmed. The affirmation of human beings is based on God's taking on humanity, not vice versa. But because of that, they really are affirmed. God did not take on humanity and become human because human beings were worthy of divine affirmation. Instead, it is because human beings deserved the divine No that God took on humanity and affirmed it; God became human, thus bearing and suffering, as God, the curse of the divine No upon human nature. The attempt to understand reality apart from that action of God in and upon reality means living in an abstraction; it means failing to live in reality and vacillating between the extremes of a servile attitude toward the status quo and a protest in principle against it. Only God's becoming human makes possible an action that is genuinely in accord with reality. The world remains world. But it

only does so because God has taken care of it and declared it to be under God's rule. The world must end before the kingdom of God can come. However, this very world that has been condemned in Jesus Christ is in Christ also accepted and loved and is promised a new heaven and a new earth. The world that is passing away has been claimed by God. We must therefore continue to reckon with the world's worldliness but at the same time reckon with God's rule over it. What actually exists is given anew its legitimacy and its limits. Affirmation and contradiction come together in concrete action in the world. However, neither affirmation nor contradiction is derived from an unreal ideology, but springs from the reality of the world's reconciliation with God as it has taken place in Christ. In Christ, all human reality is taken on. That is why it is ultimately only in and from Christ that it is possible to act in a way that is in accord with reality. The origin of action that is in accord with reality is neither the pseudo-Lutheran Christ whose only purpose is to sanction the status quo, nor the radical, revolutionary Christ of all religious enthusiasts who is supposed to bless every revolution, but rather the God who became human, Jesus Christ, who loved human beings, judged them, and reconciled them with God.

Given this point of departure, to act responsibly means to include in the formation of action human reality as it has been taken on by God in Christ. Christ did not cause the world to cease being the world, and every action that seeks to confuse the world with the kingdom of God is a denial of both Christ and the world. By grounding responsible action in Jesus Christ we reaffirm precisely the limits of such action. Because we are dealing with worldly action, this responsibility has a limited scope. No one has the responsibility of turning the world into the kingdom of God, but only of taking the next necessary step that corresponds to God's becoming human in Christ. Responsible action is nourished not by an ideology but by

reality, which is why one can only act within the boundaries of that reality. Responsibility is limited both in its scope and in its character, i.e., both quantitatively and qualitatively. Every transgression of this boundary leads to catastrophe. The task is not to turn the world upside down but in a given place to do what, from the perspective of reality, is necessary objectively [sachlich] and to really carry it out. But even in a given place, responsible action cannot always immediately do what is ultimately right. It has to proceed step-by-step, ask what is possible, and entrust the ultimate step, and thus the ultimate responsibility, to another hand.

God became *human*. That is why responsible action has to weigh, judge, and evaluate the matter within the human domain. That is why it must also seriously consider the consequences of action and dare to look at what lies ahead in the immediate future. Responsible action must not want to be blind. However, because it was *God* who became human, responsible action, although conscious of the human character of its decision, must completely surrender to God both the judgment on this action and its consequences. Whereas all action based on ideology is already justified by its own principle, responsible action renounces any knowledge about its ultimate justification. The deed that is done, after responsibly weighing all circumstances in light of God's becoming human in Christ, is completely surrendered to God the moment it is carried out. Ultimate ignorance of one's own goodness or evil, together with dependence upon grace, is an essential characteristic of responsible historical action. Those who act on the basis of ideology refuse on principle to ask the question about the consequences of their action. This allows them to be more certain about their own goodness than those who act responsibly, within the limits of their abilities, after having seriously considered the consequences. Those who act on the basis of ideology consider themselves justified by their idea. Those who act responsibly place

their action into the hands of God and live by God's grace and judgment.

Thus a profound mystery of history as such is disclosed to us. Precisely those who act in the freedom of their very own responsibility see their action as both flowing into and springing from God's guidance. Free action, as it determines history, recognizes itself ultimately as being God's action, the purest activity as passivity. Only in this perspective is it possible to speak now of good in history. Neither the ideological good nor the purity of subjective intention [Gesinnung] nor even the freedom of responsible action as such is able to fulfill the reality of the good in history. Only where freedom understands its origin, essence, and goal to be grounded in God's own action, which means only where it is God who appears on the scene as an acting subject (through the free, responsible action of a human being), can we speak about good in history. Nothing but God makes human action in history good. God incorporates it into God's own hidden plan that pursues the goal of history as it has been revealed in Christ. Good within history consists of this goal, which can be summed up in the expression "rule of Christ" [Christusherrschaft], and of whatever serves this goal according to God's will. What is good in history is God's action alone; human historical action is good only insofar as God draws it into God's own action and as the human agent completely surrenders all to God's action without claiming any other justification.

To what extent a human action serves the divine goal of history and thus actualizes good in history is something we cannot know with ultimate certainty. That is left to the hidden counsel of God. For ideologues, the correspondence between action and idea provides the unambiguous standard by which to judge good and evil. In contrast, those who act responsibly "in accord with reality," and deliver their action into God's hands, have to console themselves with faith in

the forgiving and healing grace of God. They cannot prove that they are right, because living reality does not provide them with an unambiguous standard. What is more, they are faced with an even deeper and more mysterious abyss. God uses both good and evil to achieve the divine purpose, and, as far as human eyes can see, often does it in such a way that the "good" causes harm and the "evil" brings benefits. It is through Judas Iscariot that Christ becomes the redeemer of the world. Paradoxically speaking, Judas, for a moment, holds the salvation of the world in his hand. However, the evil *must* take place; Judas *must* act in order that the world receive the benefit of reconciliation with God. In God's own good, human good and evil are thus overcome. The disciples of Jesus cannot accomplish what Judas Iscariot accomplishes. In this case, the service of God's cause proves to be weaker in advancing God's cause than hostility against God. God moves along God's own path, which cuts across human good and evil. God proves to be the one who alone seeks to do the good, and to whose wrath and grace every action must be surrendered.

Does this mean negating the distinction between good and evil? No, but it means that human beings cannot justify themselves by doing good since it is God alone who does the good. The power of the divine guidance of history leaves human beings dependent on God's grace.

But if God's good, that is, Christ and the guidance of history toward God, cannot simply be accomplished by us through our direct [action], *then what is it that constitutes the good in human historical action?* First of all and formally speaking, the good consists of nothing more than allowing our action to be determined by the knowledge that it is not us but indeed God alone who accomplishes good in history. It consists of our refraining from the search for absolute standards with which to justify our action, and accepting instead the

intrinsically hopeless predicament facing all who bear responsibility in a particular historical context, namely, the predicament of having to do the good without being able to do it. It means renouncing any self-justification in the ultimate freedom of daring to do the good, that is, what is in accord with reality, what is necessary and commanded, trusting God's grace.

Good is historical action that sees given, concrete reality grounded and sustained by the reality of God's becoming human. In other words, it is good if it allows the world to be world without ever forgetting that God has claimed this world by loving, judging, and reconciling it. What we are talking about here is an action that is worldly through and through, indeed the only action that is genuinely worldly, and which can only take place where the true nature of this world is recognized.

Good is historical action that receives its laws of historical action from the center of history, from the event of God's becoming human. Since it is true that God became human in Jesus Christ, that God entered history, so that he was born at the time of the emperor Augustus, when Quirinius was governor of Syria, that he was a man during the time of the emperor Tiberius, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate—then this is the point where the very nature of history must reveal itself to us. Then Jesus Christ is the only source of knowledge about the nature and law of history as it is conceived and intended by God. Good is the action that is in accordance with the reality of Jesus Christ; *action in accordance with Christ is action in accord with reality*. Instead, it is because human beings and human reality deserved the divine No that God took on humanity and affirmed it; God became human in the body, thus bearing and suffering, as God, the curse of the divine No upon human nature. Correctly understood, this statement is not an ideal demand but an assertion that springs from reality itself.

Two grave misunderstandings of this assertion are found throughout the entire history of Christendom and continue into the present. The first misunderstanding considers Jesus Christ to be the founder of a new ethical ideology that must be applied to the historical reality. The second misunderstanding considers Jesus Christ only as the divine sanction of everything that exists. The first case gives rise to an eternal conflict between the necessities of historical action and the "ethic of Jesus." In the second case, everything that exists is addressed without any conflict as though it were Christian.

Sometimes an "ethic of Jesus" appears that is detached from the faith in God's becoming human in Christ and the reconciliation of the world with God through Christ. It may take the form of the Sermon on the Mount interpreted in the way we just mentioned. Whenever that happens, it leads either to events of religious enthusiasm and revolution [schwärmerisch-revolutionäre Ereignisse] or to renouncing the "application of this ethic" in historical action and hence to a privatization of Christian ethics altogether. The "ethic of Jesus" fails either within the large context of dealing with the historical world, as in the case of the religious enthusiasts [Schwärmer] during the time of the Reformation, or it retreats into the extremely narrow confines of the private life of the individual, as for example in pietism and also in the liberalism of someone like Friedrich Naumann. But such an "ethic of Jesus" does not lead to concrete historical responsibility. Hence the platitudes that currently prevail throughout Christendom, such as declaring the Sermon on the Mount useless for politics and similar slogans. What dominates this perspective is the notion of a self-sufficient, "autonomous" historical reality, upon which a Christian ethic, which in its origin and nature is foreign to reality, is then to be forcefully imposed. However, what is overlooked here is the decisive fact from which alone the structure of what is real can be understood, namely, God's

becoming human, God's entering history, taking on historical reality in the reality of Jesus Christ. What is overlooked here is the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is the word of the one who did not relate to reality as a foreigner, a reformer, a fanatic, the founder of a religion, but as the one who bore and experienced the nature of reality in his own body, who spoke out of the depth of reality as no other human being on earth ever before. The Sermon on the Mount is the word of the very one who is the lord and law of reality. The Sermon on the Mount is to be understood and interpreted as the word of the God who became human. That is the issue at stake when the question of historical action is raised, and here it must prove true that action in accord with Christ is action in accord with reality.

Action in accord with Christ does not originate in some ethical principle, but in the very person of Jesus Christ. This is because everything real is summed up in Christ, who, by definition, is the origin of any and all action that is in accord with reality.

Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of the person who lives responsibly. He is not the individual who seeks to attain his own ethical perfection. Instead, he lives only as the one who in himself has taken on and bears the selves of all human beings. His entire life, action, and suffering is vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]. As the one who has become human he indeed stands in the place of all human beings. All that human beings were supposed to live, do, and suffer falls on him. In this real vicarious representative action in which his human existence consists, he is the responsible human being par excellence. All human responsibility is rooted in the real vicarious representative action of Jesus Christ on behalf of all human beings. Responsible action is vicarious representative action. Vicarious representative action is not presumptuous and overbearing only insofar as it is grounded in God's becoming human, which brought about the real vicarious

representative action of Jesus Christ on behalf of all human beings. It is only on this ground that there is genuine vicarious representative action and thus responsible action.

The responsibility of Jesus Christ for all human beings has love as its content and freedom as its form. The love that is meant here is the realized love of God for human beings and the love of human beings for God. Since Jesus Christ is the incarnate love of God for human beings, he is not the proclaimer of abstract ethical ideologies, but the one who concretely enacts God's love. Human beings are not called to realize ethical ideals, but are called into a life that is lived in God's love, and that means lived in reality. In God's love human beings encounter the holy judgment of God according to the eternal commandments of divine righteousness. These commandments differ from all ideologies in that in Jesus Christ they are fulfilled in the midst of history, fulfilled as God's love becomes real in the world. Severed from their fulfillment, they crush human beings and the world more terribly than any ideology; as commandments that are fulfilled in Christ, they carry and sustain human beings and the world in God's love. The commandments of God's righteousness are fulfilled in vicarious representative action, which means in concrete, responsible action of love for all human beings.

Love that is directed toward real human beings rather than to some idea of a human being cannot be regulated by any law but takes place in the freedom of personal dedication. Again and again Jesus thus becomes the one who breaks through the law for the sake of the "law" or, more clearly put, for the sake of the freedom of God's love. Love accepts what is real [das Wirkliche] just as it is, as proper to love. Love does not despise what is real for the sake of an idea, but accepts it as a given and as loved by God. Love does not derive its way of dealing with what is real independently from the real, but from the reality of the real, from its being-loved-by-God. The nature of all concrete

responsible action is to grasp in what is real the love of God with which the real, the world, was loved and then from God's love to find the way of dealing with reality. Only love itself can identify God's love in that which is real, and, free from any unreal ideologies, is in its action bound by the reality of God's love, which loved the world in Jesus Christ. What confers the freedom to act responsibly toward the world and within history is to recognize Jesus Christ as God's love for the real world with its real history, politics, etc., or, in other words, to recognize real human beings, circumstances, movements, i.e., the real world as present in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ as present in the real world.

Jesus is not concerned with the establishment and realization of new ethical ideals, that is, with some kind of personal quality of being good, but exclusively with God's love for human beings. This is why he is able to enter into human guilt, *able to be burdened with their guilt*. Jesus does not want to be considered the only perfect one at the expense of human beings, nor, as the only guiltless one, to look down on a humanity perishing under its guilt. He does not want some idea of a new human being to triumph over the wreckage of a defeated humanity. Love for real human beings leads into the solidarity of human guilt. Because he loves them, he does not acquit himself of the guilt in which human beings live. A love that abandoned human beings to their guilt would not be a love for real human beings. In vicariously taking responsibility for human beings and in his love for the real human being, Jesus becomes burdened with guilt; indeed, he becomes the one upon whom ultimately all human guilt falls. Jesus does not shirk it but bears it in humility and infinite love. As one who acts responsibly in human historical existence, as a human being having entered reality, Jesus becomes guilty. However, since his historical existence, his entering into human flesh, is solely grounded in God's love for humanity, it is God's love that lets Jesus

become guilty. Out of his selfless love for human beings, out of his sinlessness, Jesus enters into human guilt, taking it upon himself. In Jesus sinlessness and bearing guilt are inextricably intertwined. As the one who loves without sin, Jesus takes upon himself the guilt of human beings, and in carrying the burden of this guilt he proves himself as the sinless one.

In this guilty yet sinless Jesus Christ all vicarious responsible action has its origin. Precisely because and when it is responsible, because and when it is exclusively concerned about the other human being, because and when it springs from selfless love for the real human brother or sister—vicarious responsible action cannot seek to withdraw from the community of human guilt. Because Jesus took the guilt of all human beings upon himself, everyone who acts responsibly becomes guilty. Those who, in acting responsibly, seek to avoid becoming guilty, divorce themselves from the ultimate reality of history, that is, from the redeeming mystery of the sinless bearing of guilt by Jesus Christ, and have no part in the divine justification that attends this event. They place their personal innocence [Unschuld] above their responsibility for other human beings and are blind to the fact that precisely in so doing they become even more egregiously guilty. They are also blind to the fact that genuine guiltlessness is demonstrated precisely by entering into community with the guilt of other human beings for their sake. Because of Jesus Christ, the essence of responsible action intrinsically involves the sinless becoming guilty. It is a sacrilege and an outrageous perversion to extrapolate from this statement a blanket license to commit evil acts. Only where a person becomes guilty out of love and responsibility does their action have a part in the justification pertaining to Jesus Christ's sinless guilt-bearing. What remains is the qualitative difference between the action of Jesus and our action, between the essential sinlessness of Jesus' willingness to become

guilty and the universal contamination of all human action by original sin. Even though human responsible action is never the action of someone who is sinless, it nevertheless participates indirectly in the action of Jesus Christ. It does so in contrast to any self-righteous action based on abstract principles. What we have here is something like a relative sinlessness, which is demonstrated by responsibly taking on another's guilt.

As we now return, after these reflections, to the question of the good in human historical action, it has at least become quite clear from this discussion that the problem is not how to apply a so-called ethic of Jesus to history. Instead, the question of good has to do with the claim of the one who, in his own person, fulfilled the essence of history—the claim of Jesus Christ, the one in whom God became human, upon history, whose ultimate reality is none other than himself. The sayings of Jesus, for example, those in the Sermon on the Mount, can then only be understood as words of the one who lives in concrete responsibility for all human beings, really standing in their place and acting on their behalf (and not by confronting them with ideals that they cannot fulfill), as words of the one whose responsibility consists in freely given love for the real human being (and not in the realization of some kind of idea of the human), as words of the one whose pure love manifests itself by entering into the guilt of human beings (and not by isolating itself from this guilt). The sayings of Jesus, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, are the interpretation of his existence, and thus the interpretation of that reality in which history finds its fulfillment in God's becoming human, in the reconciliation of the world with God. They are divine commandments for our action in history insofar as they are the reality of history that has been fulfilled in Christ. They are words that in and through Christ have been implanted [eingesenkt] into history; they are its hidden life, which is visible [in] Christ alone. Therefore,



they are not valid only for an abstract ethics—indeed, this is precisely where they are not valid—but they are valid within the reality of history. Any attempt to isolate them and to turn them into a “group ethics” cuts them off from their origin, from the event of God’s reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ, and thus robs them of their real power; it disfigures and distorts them into a weak ideology.

To be as concrete as possible, let us now focus on the question of the *validity* of the Sermon on the Mount for human action in history. Two grave errors are found throughout the history of the church up to the present. Nevertheless, the church has again and again managed to find the right path between them. One error grows out of the assumption that a principle defines what is Christian, the other that a principle defines what is worldly. It is also possible for both errors to exist side by side. In the first case, this Christian principle is isolated and understood as a law that has to be forced on the world. The Sermon on the Mount is declared to be the law of all action in the world. It takes the place of state laws. Abolition of military service, property, and the swearing of oaths are the obvious consequences. Experience with the failure of all such attempts in the real world then leads one to propose turning the hitherto neglected worldly arena into a principle. The law of the world, having proved more powerful than the law of what is Christian, is now accorded rights of its own, in principle, over against what is Christian. In the affairs of the world, i.e., in all matters of political and historical action, it is declared that anything Christian is out of place. This whole arena is governed by the autonomous nature [Eigengesetzlichkeit] of the world. Things Christian belong to a special ecclesial, religious, or private domain in which alone they can be rightfully exercised.

Sectarianism [Schwärmerei] and secularism are the two forms these errors have taken throughout Christendom. In spite of seeming to be mutually exclusive, both of these positions have in common that they

understand the Christian and the worldly as principles, which means independently of the fact of God’s becoming human. Understanding them as principles only leads to an eternally insoluble conflict, which practical action is never able to overcome, and by which it will be ground down. Consequently, the essence of Christian existence comes to be defined as enduring this insoluble conflict with the pathos of a very profound knowledge of reality. The Christian’s action thus acquires the dark glow of tragic heroism. It is plainly evident that this aspect is completely foreign to the New Testament and the sayings of Jesus. The statements in the New Testament regarding Christian action, as well as the Sermon on the Mount, do not grow out of bitter resignation over the irreconcilable rift between the Christian and the worldly, but from the joy over the already accomplished reconciliation of the world with God, from the peace of the already accomplished work of salvation in Jesus Christ. Just as in Jesus Christ God and humanity became one, so through Christ what is Christian and what is worldly become one in the action of the Christian. They no longer battle like eternally hostile principles. The action of the Christian instead springs from the unity of God and world brought about in Jesus Christ. However, this unity must not be understood as a principle. That would ruin everything. Instead, this unity exists solely in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom God became human, acting in vicarious representative responsibility [stellvertretende Verantwortung] and entering out of love for the real human being into the guilt of the world. Originating from Christ alone, there is now human action that is not crushed by conflicts of principle, but springs instead from the already accomplished reconciliation of the world with God. It is an action that, completely free of tragic or heroic overtones, soberly and simply does what is in accord with reality. It is an action of vicarious representative responsibility, of love for the real human being, of taking on oneself

the guilt that burdens the world. What is "Christian" and what is "worldly" are now no longer defined from the outset. Instead, both are understood in their unity only within the concrete responsibility of action that is based on the unity accomplished in Jesus Christ.

The Sermon on the Mount confronts those who are compelled to act within history with the event of the reconciliation of the world with God in Jesus Christ, thus placing them into genuine Christian responsibility.

This genuine Christian responsibility encompasses all activity within the world. It most certainly cannot be confined to some kind of isolated religious sphere. Because it is grounded in the reality of God's becoming human, it pulls the rug out from under the false realism that has been rooted in the emergence of the modern theory of the state since Machiavelli. The ultimate consequences of this have become manifest only in our time, revealing that this theory is, in fact, doctrinaire and out of step with reality. Claiming to represent an exceptionally sober understanding of reality, this so-called realism identifies the nature and goal of all historical-political action as unlimited self-assertion, a goal to which everything else must be subordinated. Historical-political action and Christian action thus become mutually exclusive opposites. Self-assertion, force, rebellion, struggle, and entanglement in guilt on the one side are irreconcilably opposed to self-surrender, renunciation, suffering, love of enemies, forgiveness, and innocence on the other. Force and love are opposites. People say that it is utopian to regard the Sermon on the Mount as a basis for historical-political action. This view has become so widespread, especially in Germany but also far beyond its borders, that historical-political action and Christian action have been completely torn apart. However, it is not difficult to prove that this view is in conflict with reality, unrealistic, and false. When observed superficially, this presumed realism seems persuasive because

of certain historical phenomena in the political and economic needs, whose astounding successes are entirely based on the ruthless use of force. But such an observation is already exposed as superficial insofar as it is restricted to an extremely short period of time without waiting for the outcome of those kinds of successes. Also overlooked is the fact that even the most unscrupulous use of force always needs a mask of Christian concepts in order to succeed. This is an unwilling acknowledgment that even political action cannot be based on force alone. This alleged realism opposes reality because it overlooks the limits imposed on any abuse of force in history and thus the failure of any rule based on force alone. This alleged realism opposes reality by not recognizing how every use of force in history [lives] from the acknowledgment, even if only a hypocritical one, of certain ultimate realities that constitute the inner law of history itself. Furthermore, the foundations of this so-called realism are false insofar as they fail to understand the meaning of the Christian concept of love and thus of the concepts of self-denial, forgiveness, suffering, renunciation, love of enemies, and innocence [Unschuld]. Pseudo-realism turns these concepts into abstract ideals instead of understanding them in Jesus Christ's becoming human, that is, in their worldly and real form. Just as God became human, and can never again be understood merely as an idea but only as the one who became human, so God's love also took on a worldly form and is the love of God only in that way, never just as a vague idea.

Love—as understood by the gospel in contrast to all philosophy—is not a method for dealing with people. Instead, it is the reality of being drawn and drawing others into an event, namely, into God's community with the world, which has already been accomplished in Jesus Christ. "Love" does not exist as an abstract attribute of God but only in God's actual loving of human beings and the world. Again, "love" does not exist as a human attribute but only as a real

belonging-together and being-together of people with other human beings and with the world, based on God's love that is extended to me and to them. Just as God's love entered the world, thereby submitting to the misunderstanding and ambiguity that characterize everything worldly, so also Christian love does not exist anywhere but in the worldly, in the infinite variety of concrete worldly action, and subject to misunderstanding and condemnation. Every attempt to portray a Christianity of "pure" love purged of worldly "impurities" is a false purism and perfectionism that scorns God's becoming human and falls prey to the fate of all ideologies. God was not too pure to enter the world. The purity of love, therefore, will not consist in keeping itself apart from the world, but will prove itself precisely in its worldly form. Seen from this vantage point, it is not only possible but obligatory to understand historical action as Christian action, as action that springs from God's love that becomes human.

The Sermon on the Mount as the proclamation of the incarnate love of God calls people to love one another, and thus to reject everything that hinders fulfilling this task—in short, it calls them to self-denial. In renouncing one's own happiness, one's own rights, one's own righteousness, one's own dignity, in renouncing violence and success, in renouncing one's own life, a person is prepared to love the neighbor.<sup>1</sup> God's love liberates human perception, which has been clouded and led astray by love of self, for the clear recognition of reality, the neighbor, and the world; thus, and only thus, is one readied to perceive and undertake genuine responsibility.

Thus, the Sermon on the Mount itself confronts a person with the necessity of responsible historical action. It addresses the individual, not to give status to individuals as such, but so they may be what

they already are before God, namely, persons faced with historical responsibility.

Since individuals are always already faced with responsibility, it is wrong to ask the old question whether the Sermon on the Mount might be addressed only to individuals as individuals, but not to those having responsibility for others. The Sermon on the Mount itself regards us as responsible for others and knows nothing of persons as isolated individuals. Moreover, the Sermon on the Mount is not content with simply preparing individuals for their tasks in the community. Instead, it claims them in the very midst of their responsible action itself. It calls individuals to love, which proves itself in responsible action toward the neighbor and whose source is the love of God that encompasses all of reality. Just as God's love for the world is not limited, so human love that springs from the love of God cannot be limited to specific areas and relationships of life. It encompasses everything. The Sermon on the Mount is either valid as the word of God's world-reconciling love everywhere and at all times, or it is not really relevant for us at all. The idyllic life on the shore of the Sea of Galilee—which, by the way, was actually not so idyllic—is no more strongly connected with God's love for the world than the industrial cities and the great political powers of our time. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the most compelling proof that God's love is equally close and equally distant to all times. A love that was limited in any way would not have to be crucified. God has loved the entire world, and that is why Jesus dies. So we are called into this same love for the entire world that has been signed and sealed by the cross of Jesus.

In order to answer the question of the validity of the Sermon on the Mount in human historical action without, however, anticipating the specific question of a political ethic, which will be addressed at a later point, we will seek to make a decision about this problem at

1. *Discipleship*, p. . . . [Bonhoeffer Works vol. 4, 103–109.]

a particularly pertinent point. We choose the domain of politics as particularly pertinent to historical action and consider the validity of the sayings concerning self-denial and love of enemies, for example, for one who acts politically.

One of the abstractions of pseudo-realistic thinking is to define self-affirmation as the only law of political action and self-denial as the only law of Christian action, and to consider them as mutually exclusive opposites, as a dual morality. It is the very position that understands as principles both the worldly and the Christian, thereby ignoring the reality of God's becoming human, and thus does not comprehend either the worldly or the Christian. Only where the becoming human of God's love is taken seriously can it be understood that God's love for the world also includes political action, and that the worldly form of Christian love is therefore able to take the form of a person fighting for self-assertion, power, success, and security. It is here that the limits or, rather, the ultimate foundations of the law of self-assertion in political action become evident.

Political action means taking on responsibility. This cannot happen without power. Power is to serve responsibility.

## History and Good [2]

The question about the good always finds us already in an irreversible situation: we are living. This means, in any case, that we can no longer ask and respond to the question about the good as if we first had to create life new and good. We ask about the good not as creators but as creatures. We are not concerned about what would be good if we were not living, that is, under some imaginary circumstances. Indeed, as those who are living we are not even able seriously to ask that question, since we can contemplate an abstraction from life only as those who are bound to life, and thus not in genuine freedom. Our question is not what is good as such, but what is good given life as it actually is, and what is good for us who are living. We ask about the good not in abstraction from life, but precisely by immersing ourselves in it. The question about the good is itself part of our life, just as our life is part of the question about the good. The question about the good is asked and decided in the midst of a situation of our life that is both determined in a particular way and yet still incomplete, unique and yet already in transition; it happens in the midst of our living bonds to people, things, institutions, and powers, that is, in the midst of our historical existence. The question about the good can no longer be separated from the question of life, of history.