



**MAKE
WAY
FOR THE
SPIRIT**

MY FATHER'S
BATTLE
AND MINE

CHRISTOPH FRIEDRICH
BLUMHARDT

Make Way for the Spirit

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The Blumhardt Source Series

Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore, editors

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Make Way for the Spirit

My Father's Battle and Mine

CHRISTOPH FRIEDRICH BLUMHARDT

Edited by Wolfgang J. Bittner

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Christian T. Collins Winn*



P L O U G H P U B L I S H I N G H O U S E

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Series Foreword

THE BLUMHARDT SOURCE SERIES seeks to make available for the first time in English the extensive oeuvre of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–1880) and his son Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842–1919), two influential religious figures of the latter half of the nineteenth century who are not well known outside their native Germany. Their influence can be detected in a number of important developments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestantism: the recovery of the eschatological dimension of Christianity and the kingdom of God; the recovery of an emphasis on holistic notions of spirituality and salvation; the rise of faith healing and later, Pentecostalism; the convergence of socialism and the Christian faith; and the development of personalist models of pastoral counseling.

Their collected works make available their vast body of work to scholars, pastors, and laypeople alike with the aim of giving the Blumhardts a full hearing. Given the extent of their influence during the theological and religious ferment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we believe that these sources will be of great interest to scholars of that period across various disciplines. It is also true, however, that there is much spiritual and theological value in the witness of the Blumhardts. We hope that by making their witness more widely known in the English-speaking world the church at large will benefit.

The project outline is flexible, allowing for volumes that aim either in a scholarly direction or towards the thoughtful lay reader. The emphasis will be to reproduce, with only slight modifications, the various German editions of the Blumhardts' works that have appeared since the late nineteenth century. A modest scholarly apparatus will provide contextual and theologically helpful comments and commentary through introductions, footnotes, and appendices.

MAKE WAY FOR THE SPIRIT

During their long ministries, the elder and younger Blumhardt found themselves called to serve as pastors, counselors, biblical interpreters, theologians, and even politicians. No matter the vocational context, however, both understood themselves as witnesses to the kingdom of God that was both already present in the world, and also breaking into the current structures of the world. Together they represent one of the most powerful instances of the convergence of spirituality and social witness in the history of the Christian church. As series editors, it is our conviction that their witness continues to be relevant for the church and society today. We hope that the current series will give the Blumhardts a broader hearing in the English-speaking world.

Christan T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore

Preface to the English Edition

Christian T. Collins Winn

IT WAS INEVITABLE that Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt would live in the shadow of his well-known and beloved father, Johann Christoph Blumhardt. His father came to the attention of wider circles after a small revival occurred in his southwestern German congregation following a purported exorcism, and as a result became a widely respected pastor and spiritual counselor throughout Germany, France, and Switzerland, and was even known in Great Britain and the United States.¹ The events surrounding the sickness and eventual recovery of Gottliebin Dittus, a parishioner in Blumhardt's congregation in Möttlingen, became the stuff of horror stories when details of the episode were eventually spelled out by the elder Blumhardt in his report to the church consistory.² The otherworldly drama had ended when Dittus's sister Katharina, who was starting to show similar symptoms, cried out in a voice "not her own": "Jesus is victor!"³ This phrase became the central watchword of Johann Christoph Blumhardt's subsequent ministry.

Not long after, a renewal movement began within Blumhardt's congregation. Rather quickly, people far and wide began to journey to see Pastor Blumhardt, confess their sins, receive absolution – a rite of some controversy

1 See Dieter Inging, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt: Life and Work, A New Biography* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009); and Christian T. Collins Winn, "The Blumhardts in America: On the Reception and Significance of the Blumhardts for American Theology," *Pneuma* 38 (2016): 1–25.

2 See Johann Christoph Blumhardt, *Der Kampf in Möttlingen*, in *Gesammelte Werke von Johann Christoph Blumhardt*, series I, vols. 1 and 2, edited by G. Schärfer, P. Ernst, and D. Inging (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979).

3 See Friedrich Zündel, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt: A Biography* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2019), 117–157; and Inging, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt*, 162–187.

in Lutheran circles – and listen to his compassionate, visionary, and stirring sermons. This did not please church officials, since parishioners were abandoning their local parishes to travel many miles to see Blumhardt. So, after some negotiation, Blumhardt ceased accepting visitors for pastoral counseling and refrained from offering absolution or prayers for healing.

Eventually even this restraint was not enough, and so Blumhardt decided to step down from parish ministry. With the help of a generous benefactor, Blumhardt was able to purchase a recently restored spa, Bad Boll, and convert it into a spiritual retreat center. Meanwhile, Gottliebin Dittus and her siblings had joined the Blumhardt household, becoming indispensable in Blumhardt’s ministry.

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt was born in 1842 and grew up in the midst of these remarkable events. He was even a recipient of a good bit of “mothering” from Gottliebin Dittus, who by all accounts was a stern, powerful, and lively individual. After Christoph took over from his father in 1880, it was not long before those in the original group that had experienced the events in Möttlingen had all died: Dittus in 1872, Johann Christoph Blumhardt in 1880, and Christoph’s mother, Doris Blumhardt, in 1886. When Hansjörg Dittus, Gottliebin’s older brother, died in 1888, the last of the “Möttlingen generation” was gone.

It is not surprising that Christoph Blumhardt would turn in a new direction as the “Möttlingen generation” faded, or that a new focus would emerge. Already by 1886, following his mother’s death, Blumhardt struggled for a new direction.⁴ By the time Hansjörg passed away in 1888, Blumhardt described undergoing a kind of “inner pause.”⁵

The first inklings of a possible change appeared after Blumhardt suffered a serious illness in 1889. Christoph noted that God was calling him away from the ministry of healing with which Bad Boll had become almost synonymous, saying, “Time and calling change, and we do not please God by always clinging to the old and customary ways, but by paying heed to the signs that show us new ways.”⁶ Precisely where Blumhardt was heading was not yet clear, but some of the reasons for the change were human selfishness and preoccupation with health for its own sake, rather than an openness to see instances of healing as signs of what God intended for the

4 See Christian T. Collins Winn, *‘Jesus is Victor!’ The Significance of the Blumhardts for the Theology of Karl Barth* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 113–116.

5 See Simeon Zahl, *Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross in the Preaching of Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 39–40.

6 Christoph Blumhardt, *Eine Auswahl aus seinen Predigten, Andachten und Schriften*, vol. 2, edited by R. Lejeune (Zurich: Rotapfel, 1925), 127.

whole of creation. As he stated it: “I must frankly admit that for a long time already I have not felt happy about the increasing number of personal talks and letters in which health – and often only health – was eagerly sought from me through prayer. A great deal of misuse has resulted from this, as well as from all kinds of teachings and institutions which permit healing through prayer to seem a meritorious work in its right; healings which many were excessively elated over, or even proud of.”⁷ This change was but a first step towards reimagining the relationship between God’s spirit, the kingdom of God, and the living Christ on one side, and the institutional church on the other.

The next step appeared in 1894, when Blumhardt decided to no longer function as a pastor at Bad Boll, laying aside his title. In his New Year’s meditation of January 1, 1894, Blumhardt stated, “Now, for my part, as I am the one who must do that which can best serve peace, I am determined to allow a change to come into my house and into the work within it in the course of this year. I feel driven to develop precisely these thoughts which I have shared here. If I can operate more freely simply as *housefather* I do not feel any obligation to be the *pastor* in my house. I have decided to detach from my person all the importance of an ecclesiastical title.”⁸ Consequently, in the following years Blumhardt, as Timothy Scherer notes, “preaches less often, the communion is replaced by a communal meal, and baptisms and confirmations ceased. Blumhardt’s congregation in Bad Boll gradually gives up all the special rights and entitlements of a church. Parishioners now have to attend the other Lutheran congregation in Bad Ball in order to receive the sacraments.”⁹ The problem – stated even more clearly in the present text – was that ecclesiastical practices (whether ritual, hierarchical, or dogmatic) had arrested the power and flow of the Holy Spirit, which always longs to do something new in creation.

But what of Bad Boll and its traditions and history? Was Blumhardt’s turn away from the church only another iteration of the sectarian spirit that often expresses itself in Protestantism? Did Blumhardt prefer the traditions of his father and Bad Boll over the traditions of the church? In light of the earlier move away from the healing ministry of Bad Boll, the answer to this last question would seem to be no – and for anyone who does not see the answer, this book will make it quite explicit.

7 Christoph Blumhardt, *Eine Auswahl*, vol. 2, 128.

8 Christoph Blumhardt, *Eine Auswahl*, vol. 2, 444.

9 Timothy Scherer, “Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt: Delivering Love in the Political Activity of an *Allerweltschrist*,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA), 108.

For observers and participants in the broader ministry and network of Bad Boll, something seemed amiss. Blumhardt himself felt obliged enough to explain the potential direction that his ministry appeared to be taking, and how this new direction related to the established structures of Protestant Christianity, as well as to the expectations and ministry of his beloved father. So, over the course of 1895, Blumhardt penned this book, which he called *Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes* (Thoughts on the Kingdom of God), and published sections in issues of his *Vertrauliche Blätter*, a circular newsletter for the Bad Boll network that included readers in Germany, France, and Switzerland. When the last section was published in December of 1895, the publication of the *Vertrauliche Blätter* also came to an end, marking another transition in Blumhardt's life and ministry.

Blumhardt's Evolving Perspective

THIS BOOK DEFINITELY CLARIFIES Christoph Blumhardt's position vis-à-vis his father, Pietism, and the broader Protestant church. Blumhardt discerns that his shift is entirely in keeping with the basic spirit and expectations of his father, though with some nuanced differences. The primary ostensible difference can be boiled down to Christoph Blumhardt's feeling that his father was too bound by institutional or traditional Christianity, unable to loosen himself from its grip, especially in regard to doctrinal teaching and to the significance of the church as the realm of the Spirit. And, from Christoph Blumhardt's perspective, his father was far too deferential to the ecclesiastical authorities. For the younger Blumhardt, Möttlingen exposed the relativization of the institutional church, which had become complicit with the power of death and its various modern expressions. Critiques of nationalism, capitalism, exploitation, deprivation, poverty, war – all these bubble just below the surface of the text, waiting to come out in Blumhardt's subsequent preaching as he moved closer to joining the workers' movement and the socialist party in 1899.

The text offers a unique marker for understanding Blumhardt's own development, but it is also of great interest in its own right. Offered here is a significant contribution on the role that the experience of the Holy Spirit should play in theological thinking and especially in the action of discipleship, vis-à-vis established practices and doctrines. How does the new wind of the Spirit relate to old structures?

Another significant theme is a theology of history that attempts to avoid the schematics that developed over the course of Christian history, finding especially powerful expressions in varied forms of nineteenth-century

chiliasm. God is alive, the kingdom of God is present, and the Spirit does indeed move in and through history in concrete ways. But any and every moment of irruption can only be discerned as a “station on the way” to the final goal, which only God can bring. Yet for that goal to appear, human cooperation is necessary—even if only expressed in a longing for the kingdom of God to come.

Furthermore, the Spirit does not blow powerfully among Christian circles because they have made peace with death and its various manifestations—even allowing the Christian gospel to be distorted into a message of heavenly bliss in the hereafter. For Blumhardt, God’s final Sabbath intention, that flourishing and irrepressible life will completely overcome death, is not something to be put in an appendix under the heading “after life.” No, it can be experienced in the here and now in penultimate ways. When the ultimate comes, it will mean the transformation of everything and everyone. In the meantime, people of faith are called to the labor of prayer, struggle, and discipleship.¹⁰

This is the expansive vision that Blumhardt begins to spell out in these pages and which would take on clearer contours as his ministry and work continued, particularly among the working class.

On the Present Volume

THE PRESENT TRANSLATION is based on the edition of Wolfgang J. Bittner, which is based on the complete 1895 edition. The chapter titles and section headings are not original to Blumhardt. Originally crafted by Bittner, we have retained them for the reader’s convenience but have also reworked them to better reflect the actual content that follows. We have also retained Bittner’s introduction and afterword because they provide additional background on the text at hand, including some historical details regarding Blumhardt and the text that will be especially helpful to nonspecialists.

Finally, a note regarding an issue of translation: Blumhardt’s use of the word *Fortschritt* deserves some explanation. Attempts to explain both the elder and the younger Blumhardt in the light of larger cultural, philosophical, or theological categories have sometimes used this term, which can be translated as “progress,” as an indication that both Blumhardts were

10 For further discussion and analysis of the varied themes in this work, see Klaus-Jürgen Meier, *Christoph Blumhardt: Christ, Sozialist, Theologe* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1979), 35–44; Collins Winn, ‘*Jesus is Victor!*’, 129–136; Zahl, *Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross*, 61–84; Scherer, “Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt,” 95–110.

more or less espousing the doctrine of “progress” that was dominant in the nineteenth century. This is particularly the case in regard to Christoph Blumhardt, since *Fortschritt* was one of his favorite terms for describing the movement of the kingdom of God into the future.

Though we cannot deny that Blumhardt was a child of his time, to assume that his conception of the forward movement of the kingdom and the Spirit is simply an assimilation of the dominant expectations of progress that marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is misleading and problematic. This is because Blumhardt speaks not so much about the forward movement of history, but rather about the movement of the kingdom of God. The latter can actually stall out even while the former continues in its own fits and starts. From Blumhardt’s perspective, the forward movement of the kingdom stalls principally because the human proclivity to resist God’s aims in the world actually bars God from giving both penultimate and the ultimate outpourings of the Spirit to rectify the world.¹¹ These aspects of Blumhardt’s conception of the movement of history and the movement of the kingdom of God in history are sufficient enough to distinguish his thought from Hegelian conceptions of progress as well as more popular iterations. To retain this distinction, we have primarily translated *Fortschritt* as “forward movement” throughout the text.

11 For further discussion, see Zahl, *Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross*, 69–76.

Editor's Introduction

Wolfgang J. Bittner

GOD MARCHES FORWARD in history. If we want to live with God, we have to accompany him on this march no matter where it leads. Whoever stands still is in danger of losing God. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt wrote this book, which he titled *Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes* (Thoughts on the Kingdom of God), in great haste. He wanted to explain to his closest friends his current (1895) standpoint regarding the experiences of his father, Johann Christoph Blumhardt. Similar thoughts from Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt have appeared in other books, but this book has been practically unavailable and pretty well unknown.

There must be a reason for publishing a new edition. Is it merely the reproduction of a historical text? No! Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt was a witness, and God gave him remarkably clear insight into what has validity for God's kingdom. Our time is different in many respects from his, yet today we are faced with events similar to those he had to take a stand to in his time. People were calling for revival and making reference to the elder Blumhardt's experiences. But were they appealing to Blumhardt's example without the deep surrender that recognizes God's right to their very being? That is, were they skirting around the renewal of their own lives? In calling for renewal, were they really interested in God and his rulership or in themselves? Was God able to freely assert his rightful claim in them or did they want God to help them implement the rights that they claimed?

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt was a man of great intellectual and spiritual breadth and also a man of great inner depth. God leads to wide

expanses. The dimensions of biblical hope that were opened up to Blumhardt are breathtaking. Blumhardt had hope for the present, for our everyday earthly world. He thought that to postpone this hope to the next world was dangerous, a treacherous curtailing of hope. God's promises are valid for the world as a whole, and they are valid for our physical life. Blumhardt fought against a Christian hope that had lost interest in this world; against a faith that had lost interest in our physical bodies. This is the only sense in which we can understand his involvement in politics and his commitment to the social problems of his time. If our hope is to keep up with God, we must hope until we expect the abolition of death right here in our earthly concerns.

Blumhardt's thoughts about renewal were never about strategy. He fiercely resisted any progress that was supposed to be doable in human strength. God leads us down into the depths. Blumhardt realized this more and more—in fact, the “Christian” person whose self-will has not been broken is truly more of an obstacle to the advance of God's kingdom than any sinister power from hell. It will depend on the small circle of believers whether or not Christianity is restored, whether or not the world is renewed. Are the people who are calling for renewal today really concerned about God? Or are we trying to help ourselves and merely hiding under the blanket of Christianity? God is not interested in helping people get their rights. He wants first of all for people to acknowledge his right to rule in their lives. That, then, is also the best help for them. God's way leads the same people who are calling for renewal to relinquish their lives again and again. They cannot bypass this surrender.

Depth and breadth are not opposites! They are both descriptions of the same path. Jesus knew and taught his disciples that God gives life from death. “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24). God's way has as its objective a broad horizon. But to reach this objective God's way goes through the depths. Christendom cannot escape that, nor can Christian renewal movements, no matter how hopeful and dynamic they may be. Whoever does not first take heed of the depths to which God wants to lead him will squander the breadth he was hoping for.¹ God himself went his way through history according to this rule and showed his Messiah that this was the way. Jesus affirmed this way and held his disciples to it. Whoever is looking for renewal that really comes from God must live accordingly. God leads through the depths to the breadths!

1 Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6; Matt. 10:39, 16:24–25; John 12:15.

Who Were the Blumhardts?

THE FATHER, JOHANN CHRISTOPH BLUMHARDT (July 16, 1805–February 25, 1880), after serving as a vicar in Dürrmenz (1829–1830) and as a teacher at the Basel Mission (1830–1837), first was the vicar in Iptingen (1837–1838) before finally being appointed pastor at Möttlingen, near Calw, in July 1838. Through giving pastoral counsel to a sick young woman, Gottliebin Dittus, from June 1842 to December 1843, he was led to experience the healing of the sick and given an insight into the reality and power of the world of demons. Even more importantly, he also experienced the reality of victory in the name of Jesus. “Jesus is victor over all powers of darkness.” That was the cry of victory which permeated and shaped the movement that followed. And was it ever a movement! A movement of repentance began that no one had foreseen, let alone consciously initiated. First the whole village was pervaded by the fear of God, then the next village, and soon the movement had spread throughout the region. People felt God’s consuming holiness, which led them to repent deeply and start a new life in tangible ways. Healing and godliness became one.

Blumhardt’s activity as a pastoral counselor soon exceeded the limits of a village pastorate. He recognized God’s leading in this. The purchase of the Bad Boll spa gave him the space and opportunity he needed to care for sick and searching souls. Blumhardt became the housefather of a large communal family. All visitors were welcomed as a matter of course. He retained the rights of a pastor for the congregation in his house – in fact, he always tried to uphold his connection to the Lutheran church.

The salient features that shaped Blumhardt’s life and work have remained alive in the memory and consciousness of Christianity. Because Gottliebin Dittus was healed, believers realized that healing the sick is just as much a part of the church’s task as preaching the word. This idea had long been buried. The firsthand experience of dark, demonic powers and the extensive view into the kingdom of darkness provided the background against which the bright light of this jubilant realization flared up: God has promised us victory in the name of Jesus, his Son, and indeed he gives it to us even now. The far-reaching revival movement gave Blumhardt a hope which spanned the world, a hope that burst all confines: God wants to renew the whole world! But this hope was linked with prayer and the ever-growing certainty that God has to pour out his Spirit on humankind again and to a degree as yet unknown. Revival is possible only when it takes place through God’s own strength. All we can do is hope for it and, believing, pray for it.

Johann Christoph Blumhardt's ministry is a witness to God's power. We can see he received the strength from God that he hoped for. This fact, however, is at the same time an affront to a Christianity that is smug, sedate, self-satisfied, and withdrawn. Still, whatever Blumhardt spoke and wrote was mostly sympathetic and compensating. He did not make it his job to fit his experiences, recognitions, and hopes into the familiar form of normal Christian life. He simply hoped that the church would be changed through the new experiences of the Spirit that God wanted to give her, so that she herself could be the bringer of a movement of renewal. He had to see that this was not so. The church remained the same as she was.

And what about the people who gathered around Blumhardt at Bad Boll? Did they turn out to be the bringers of a new movement? Blumhardt may have hoped and prayed for this. His son Christoph, too, strove for it for a long time. But what he saw – and increasingly felt to be the worst destroyer – was the way in which an experience of the Spirit again and again got tied up with the selfishness of pious people. It was not resistance from without that crippled any progress; it was the very Christians who had had deep experiences of God. They wanted to use God's power for themselves. When it came to making themselves available, without reservation, to the living God for his service to the world, they fiercely resisted. Instead of carrying God's hope into the world, they preferred to withdraw into "closed circles, separate from other people, and you know that this is the soil on which the worst Christian flesh grows. This flesh (unless it dies first) is capable of destroying Christ's spirit."²

With good reason we see unity in the ministries of father and son Blumhardt. But it is unity within diversity. Characteristics that strike us as sympathetic and compensating when coming from the father turn out to have corners and sharp edges coming from the son. Issues addressed by the father could be overlooked or disregarded if you didn't want to accept them, but these same issues coming from the son are pointed and unavoidable. The father's life appears to be a cohesive whole with a consistent approach, whereas the son's life can easily be divided into different periods.

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (June 1, 1842–February 8, 1919) was born shortly before his father's "battle" for Gottlieb Dittus began. He grew up as a rather shy child in an environment marked by constant wrestling and hoping for God's help. God's intervention was taken for granted as a natural part of dealing with the varied needs of daily life. These needs flowed in, first to the parsonage in Möttlingen and later to Bad Boll. Christoph studied

2 Christoph Blumhardt, *Eine Auswahl*, vol. 2, 585.

theology at his father's request, not because of any inclination on his part. After serving as vicar in several places, he returned to Bad Boll in 1869 to help his father, becoming his assistant and, eventually, his successor.

We cannot emphasize enough the influence Gottlieb Dittus had on Christoph Blumhardt. He himself only hinted at it. He says he owed to her "the ability to be broken without becoming a broken individual. No fiber was spared. You had to yield to her iron will." Her death on January 26, 1872, was a turning point in his life. At her deathbed he experienced that "remarkable birth" which he referred to occasionally in later years. "A greater battle was fought that night, which ended again with: Jesus is victor! And that's why we live as we do to this day. This much has remained unchanged: our living connection to the Lord Jesus, who does not rest on behalf of the earth and its people, but accompanies them forward step by step and lets his children on earth feel the impact of his victory."

When Johann Christoph Blumhardt died in 1880, Christoph Blumhardt became the housefather. "There was a great outcry from innumerable people, telling me by letter or verbally that now the religious pleasures they had enjoyed every year, provided by my father, were at an end. I was overcome by silent rage: Is that the fruit of the life of a godly man, that in the end everyone just laments because they think they have to go without certain religious pleasures? Isn't God's kingdom greater than the man who worked for it?" The son received strength and wisdom to continue his father's work in the strength of God. Soon people even said, "It feels like the old pastor never died." This was the spirit in which Christoph Blumhardt continued to work at first. This period lasted until the spring of 1888. Robert Lejeune, the first to publish an extensive selection of Blumhardt's writings, used the Möttlingen slogan "Jesus is victor" to characterize this period.

In the first period we can already see signs of what becomes powerfully evident in the second period: God's help and God's blessing are never given to us as an endorsement that we should continue doing things as we have in the past. God's power leads to repentance. We have to fight with determination against anything in ourselves that wants to be independent of God, even if it is good and pious. God is looking for people who are not interested in themselves but in God and his honor; he needs people who let themselves be set on fire by God's hope for the whole world.

Difficult experiences in the household, in his family circle, and in his own life led Blumhardt to the slogan which permeates this second period: "Die, and Jesus will live." It was a time for serious judgment of oneself. Blumhardt

wanted to lead his family, coworkers, and friends into a time of deep-going purification. The book we are reprinting here is the most conclusive writing for this second period, which ended soon afterwards, about 1896.

The third period shows a different face. For Christoph Blumhardt, still intent on reaching out, the ring of judgment dies away. The certainty of “God’s love for the whole world” takes shape more and more clearly, molding Blumhardt’s ministry and his life.

Blumhardt looked passionately for truth and for movements working for change. He felt that any movement which bore truth must come from God. This led him to join the Social Democratic Party of Württemberg in 1899, and he became their representative in the Württemberg Provincial Diet from 1900 to 1906. He never glorified this movement, but he acknowledged that here were people who, though they didn’t speak of God, were closer to the truth than representatives of the state church who referred to God and his word but had become blind to the injustices and inequalities in the world. We can hardly imagine today what that meant within the political landscape of that time and the existing form of church involvement. Blumhardt believed that movements of God convey God’s love to the world and that is why he joined them. After Blumhardt was elected, church authorities asked him to lay down his pastor’s title. This did not surprise him – it was certainly characteristic of the church. As far as he was concerned, laying down this title merely gave him greater freedom to follow God. So even though the motto “God’s love is meant for the world” was not coined by Blumhardt, you can feel his heart in it.

Blumhardt refused to be reelected to the Provincial Diet. The year 1907 marked the beginning of his withdrawal into quietness, which continued until the end of his life. It was not only a withdrawal from active politics. Because of serious illnesses he gave up the full responsibility for Bad Boll. He spent his last years at his house, called Wieseneck (meadow corner), in Jebenhausen, near Göppingen. However, from there he kept in touch with Bad Boll and regularly preached the sermon at Bad Boll for the next ten years. This last period of his life was marked by an increasingly quiet hope, which in stillness grew stronger and more convinced until it encompassed the whole world – “God’s kingdom is coming!”

The Illness and Healing of Gottliebin Dittus

CHRISTOPH FRIEDRICH BLUMHARDT REFERRED again and again to what happened in Möttlingen with Gottliebin Dittus. “Möttlingen is

our birthplace. Möttlingen influences the way we live even today. I don't know where we would be without Möttlingen. Möttlingen is the ground on which we stand and thrive. That is where the Savior opened the door that is still open."³ In this book, he refers to these events frequently. But he could assume that his readership was familiar with what happened there. So to help the modern reader, I will give a brief sketch here of the most important occurrences.

Johann Christoph Blumhardt took up his work as a pastor at Möttlingen in July 1838 and was married in September of the same year. On the surface his congregation appeared to be devout and positive enough. But inwardly many were unmoved. Blumhardt's predecessor had told him that the congregation had been "preached to death." They regularly slept through his sermons. But how do you wake up a congregation? Blumhardt did not have to look for a way. It was unexpectedly laid at his feet in the person of Gottliebin Dittus, a gifted young woman, unmarried, who lived in the village with two of her siblings. In addition to various maladies, including a limp, an increasing number of strange phenomena started to occur, which the people said were spooky. The longer this continued, the more people in the village and beyond got to know about it. Counseling, prayer, and reading the Bible only seemed to make it worse.

June 26, 1842, turned out to be a decisive turning point. Blumhardt was called on this Sunday evening to come to Gottliebin, who lay unconscious after terrible symptoms. At that moment Blumhardt realized "something demonic was at work here." Then he was gripped by a kind of wrath: "I sprang forward, grasped her cramped hands, forcibly placed her fingers together, as in prayer, and loudly called her name into the unconscious girl's ear, saying, 'Put your hands together and pray: "Lord Jesus, help me!" We have seen long enough what the devil does; now let us see what the Lord Jesus can do!' After a few moments she woke up, prayed those words after me, and all convulsions ceased, to the great astonishment of those present."⁴

This was the beginning of a struggle that lasted (with sometimes appalling manifestations) until the end of December 1843. Times of quiet alternated with severe and increasingly serious "attacks" that I will not describe here. The gruesome realities of witchcraft and magic were revealed to Blumhardt. It is hard to imagine how Blumhardt and his wife, Doris, survived this time. Their saving grace was that during this whole time they learned to trust in the power of the name of Jesus more and more. They

³ Christoph Blumhardt, *Eine Auswahl*, vol. 2, 14.

⁴ Zündel, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt*, 127.

sought for direction in prayer and by reading the Bible. They did not resort to any manipulation or medicines – they relied solely on the prayer of faith and later on fasting and reading Bible verses. They became increasingly convinced of the following: if Jesus helps us, we will be helped; if he does not help us, any other help will be our undoing.

In this way, Blumhardt went through the depths during this time, which led him into a breadth that he hardly noticed at first. Gottlieb was healed and freed from demonic possession once and for all around Christmas 1943, just a year and a half after the struggle began. The signal for the end, which came after frightful manifestations, was the harrowing howl that issued from the mouth of Gottlieb's sister Katharina, saying, "Jesus is victor! Jesus is victor!" That was the end of the struggle for this family. They were completely free, and this showed clearly in their emotional and physical recovery.

This ending proved to be a new beginning. People grew so troubled by their sins that they came to Blumhardt for confession without any prompting on his part. This was the beginning of a movement of repentance and revival that went far beyond the locality of his congregation.

Blumhardt had no intention whatsoever of publishing an account of his experiences. But because of the impact of these events, the news spread of its own accord. It spread so far that the church authorities demanded an account from the pastor. In August 1844, Blumhardt, with a heavy heart, gave the Stuttgart church authorities a thorough report, labeled "confidential." Copies of this report were soon circulating, without Blumhardt's knowledge. Although Blumhardt did not want further circulation, he agreed to have his account published in 1850. In addition to this publication, there are several smaller statements and the comprehensive *Verteidigungsschrift gegen Herrn Dr. de Valenti* (Written Defense against Dr. de Valenti), which appeared in 1850. All Blumhardt's accounts have been carefully collected in the scholarly book *Der Kampf in Möttlingen*, with extensive commentary. However, the most widely read account is the one included in the biography of Johann Christoph Blumhardt by Friedrich Zündel, which first appeared in 1880.⁵ This is based on Blumhardt's *Krankheitsgeschichte* (Account of Gottlieb Dittus's Illness) and describes these events in detail.

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt believed deeply that the events described in these accounts show the working of God. He felt they represented the birth of the movement in which he himself stood as his father's

5 Zündel, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt*.

successor. It was a battle through which God himself initiated a new time.

And yet the son criticized his father. Why? In the son's opinion, what happened should have been kept secret by the small circle of those involved. The results of such an experience are self-evident, but the God-given experience which creates these results should be kept secret. According to the son, publishing what happening at Möttlingen was harmful for God's cause on earth, not helpful. It only drew people's attention to the sinister events, so they fixed their gaze on the past and not on the victory given by the living God, who wants to lead his people forward. People noted the secrets of darkness and got interested in them. Thus, they failed to realize that God wanted to use this victory to lead to more victories in completely different forms.

About this Book

JOHANN CHRISTOPH BLUMHARDT'S PASTORAL CARE, begun in Möttlingen and continued in Bad Boll, led to a lively and far-flung correspondence. In order to stay in touch with the many people and to answer questions of general interest he circulated a newsletter, *Blätter aus Bad Boll*, from 1873 to 1877. On January 1, 1882, the son started sending his own *Briefblätter*, or newsletter, to a wide circle of friends. He included sermons, devotions, answers to questions, and items of news. But gradually the son got the impression that only some of the old Bad Boll friends had inner understanding for the path he was taking. So, in spring of 1888 he started publishing *Vertrauliche Blätter für Freunde von Bad Boll* (Confidential Newsletter for Friends of Bad Boll), a series that he planned to publish at irregular intervals in a smaller format. It was confidential so he could use it as a venue to discuss issues with a smaller circle of friends and companions. Blumhardt probably initially planned to distribute both newsletters in parallel, but already by the end of 1888 he discontinued the *Briefblätter*. Anyone who desired could subscribe to the confidential newsletter and thereby count himself part of the inner circle around Blumhardt. The form and content of this newsletter really were confidential. Blumhardt no longer wanted to spend so much of his time filling the needs of pious consumers.

This and several other changes in the outward running of Bad Boll resulted in a slew of inquiries, even accusations against Blumhardt, implying that he had strayed from the foundation on which his father had stood. People said Bad Boll was not what it used to be. So in April 1895 Blumhardt started to write a series of articles for the confidential newsletter. He wanted to respond more fully to these objections to his new position.

These articles were published without titles or headings. Blumhardt did

not foresee that his thoughts would expand far beyond the initial purpose. He also at first had not thought of discontinuing the confidential newsletter. But now these pamphlets followed in rapid succession: April 1895, chapters 1, 2, and 3; May, chapter 4; June, chapters 5 and 6; July, chapters 7 and 8; August, chapters 9 to 11; September, chapters 12 and 13; October, chapter 14; November, chapter 15; and in December the closing chapter 16 with a title page and a table of contents that included chapter and subject headings.

Blumhardt did not formulate these thoughts as a unified whole, well organized and polished. As he wrote, his thoughts rose above the original reason for writing to address fundamental issues such as: What progress can we hope for in God's kingdom? What stands in the way of this progress? The manner in which this book came into being, "in which I have tried to present my point of view," explains why there are some rough places and some repetition. By the end of 1895, Blumhardt published these essays as a book in itself. Back in September, he had already notified his readers:

This year I hope to write two or possibly three more booklets to follow this one, and that will complete this presentation of my current position. Then the publication of these little booklets will stop, because I think I will have said enough, that is, unless some reason comes up for publishing something. For the time being, however, as I have already said, I feel that I have said enough. I would like to express the wish that you read again what has been published already.

The last pamphlet really was the last issue of Blumhardt's confidential letters.

An Overview of the Book

BLUMHARDT STARTS WITH HIS REASONS for writing (Introduction). Why was he withdrawing to a smaller circle of friends—as evidenced by the confidential newsletters? That didn't look like progress. Many people who belonged to the inner circle did not understand him. Why the changes in the running of the household at Bad Boll? Why the refusal to continue so readily and so universally to pray for healing for the sick? Why the urgent and sharp call to embrace judgment, the call to surrender one's own life? These questions stemmed from the feeling many of his friends had that the son had slipped off the foundation his father had laid. The basic theme, which Blumhardt develops in this book in various ways, is this: the

foundation for both father and son is the same; but as for what should be built on that foundation, God gave the son more clarity than the father had.

In the first illustration (chapter 1), Blumhardt characterizes his father as a man of forward movement, a man who walked forward with God and did not get stuck. Yet even here, he starts to criticize his father, by saying that his father tried to fit God's ways into the traditional forms of church life. When this proved impossible, God moved on ahead of the elder Blumhardt. First the father and then the son realized that God wants to achieve new goals. The new time that God had given them held new slogans and gave new instructions to anyone who wanted to accompany God (chapter 2).

In chapter 3, Blumhardt compares God's history, from beginning to end, to a series of milestones along a path, a succession of stations. The basic problem – common to all times – is that people mistake whichever station they are at with the final goal and get stuck there. This hinders God's progress through history. After God has given someone magnificent experiences, they prefer to take a rest and not go any further. Instead of looking ahead to God, who has moved on, they look back. The result is preaching that turns only to the past and knows nothing of God's direct intervention in the present. This preaching slowly loses power. This chapter is probably the most important one for understanding Blumhardt's view of God and history.

In chapter 4, Blumhardt looks at his father's actions and ideas that, for him, stand above criticism: The struggle in Möttlingen against the powers of darkness has a rightful place within God's kingdom and undeniably has meaning for today. Even more: God's history always involves people. Any growth or progress that really comes from God will inevitably take a struggle. Whenever people make themselves available to God, God's kingdom involves them in some form of fight. The son considered his father to be such a fighter.

In the next chapters, however, Blumhardt takes a critical look at his father's experiences and his conduct. Publishing the account of Gottliebin Dittus's illness harmed the whole movement. It drew people's attention to the story and to the "interesting" occurrences emerging from the demonic world. The struggle did lead to a victory for pastoral counseling, but then people's attention shifted and they did not see the necessity of now giving themselves up completely for God's cause (chapter 5). The elder Blumhardt's deference to God's love for humankind and for the existing traditions in his church led him to make compromises which almost shipwrecked him

(chapter 6). He realized this himself and came to the conclusion that only a new intervention on God's part, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit – above and beyond anything heard of to date – would be able to put Christianity (and humankind) back on its feet. His forward-looking hope convinced him of this (chapter 7).

But the movement in Möttlingen carried a defect within it right from the beginning, in spite of its enduring significance: people used it for themselves. They looked for their own salvation. Their selfishness was not broken – it persisted (cloaked in a pious mantle) as the criterion by which they shaped their lives. This led the son to take steps appropriate for his situation. He felt that me-Christianity is in direct opposition to a Christianity in which believers make themselves available to God, in which believers are willing to sacrifice themselves for God's cause (chapter 8).

The next two chapters discuss healing the sick in a biblical and modern context. Chapter 9 looks at physical healing, and chapter 10 at the relationship between body and soul, and between the role of doctor and pastor. Blumhardt takes a sober look at healing from two points of view: the hope God offers us and the adverse realities of the times we still live in.

Blumhardt was anything but an admirer. In the next chapter (11) he criticizes his father's relationship to the church authorities. Here again he considers fundamentals. What do we do when we recognize God's will and the way he wants us to go and it is in opposition to what church leaders require? Blumhardt even takes the problem to a deeper level: What do we do when there is a conflict between our love to our neighbor and our love to God?

Up to this point Blumhardt has mostly been looking back at what his father experienced in order to explain his own position – where he agrees and where he differs. Now he turns to his father's hopes. Here, too, he does not just accept his father's ideas; he also rejects some. Yet as before, his sole reason for criticizing is to clarify the essence of what his father wanted so that it carries weight.

First (chapter 12) Blumhardt makes the following clear: progress in God's kingdom is not manmade, not a human achievement. It is not true that the kingdom of God automatically grows out of pious, Christian conduct. The kingdom is not something humans can bring about, but God's creation. It is not a question of a natural process, as though one period in history grows into a more elevated and more perfect one. Here we see an eschatological doctrine of history portrayed as a doctrine of creation.

Next Blumhardt shows in broad strokes how revolutionary changes in biblical times were the work of God. However, even if we expect change

for the future to come not from human achievement but from the creative hand of God, we still have to imagine in concrete terms what we are hoping for. So Blumhardt outlines his father's three hopes for the future (chapter 13) – the future that will come from the hand of God and the future by which he oriented his life. The son feels, nevertheless, that the father supported his hopes with three false “staffs,” and these staffs curtailed his hopes and diffused their power. He hoped for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the institutional church was the false staff that intervened; he hoped for the formation of a new Zion, and mission was the false staff that intervened; and he hoped for the abolition of death on earth, and Christians' hope for personal salvation was the false staff that intervened. According to Christoph Blumhardt, what we have to do now is recognize the false staffs and resolutely lay them aside in order to give free reign to the three hopes and hence to God's power to recreate and make history. So, in conclusion, Blumhardt devotes a whole chapter to each of the three hopes (chapters 14 through 16).

Tips for Reading

THIS EDITION IS BASED on the complete version compiled into a book by Blumhardt at the end of 1895, though he never released it to the book trade. Readers may be assured that they have Blumhardt's unabridged text in front of them. Admittedly, the book can be challenging to read; some of Blumhardt's observations are more readily applicable to our time than others, and some passages repeat or belabor a point. However, the intent of this book is to present Blumhardt's thought unfiltered and unvarnished.

Blumhardt used the Bible heavily in his thoughts and arguments. Rarely, however, did he give the reference he had in mind. As editor, I have added many biblical references that are obviously indicated by Blumhardt's text, without attempting to be exhaustive. The chapter titles and section headings are also my addition.⁶

If anyone would like to get an overview of the important sections or acquaint themselves with Blumhardt's train of thought before reading the whole book, I would recommend chapters 3, 12, and 13. Chapters 14 to 16 and chapter 11 are also good starting points. In the afterword I briefly outline the theological content.

Blumhardt was not a polished speaker or writer. He consistently said what he thought without worrying about whether he might be misunderstood. The introduction and afterword should help you at least to discover

⁶ These have been revised for this English edition.

the breadth of Blumhardt's thoughts. No matter how you look at it, his thoughts are challenging. Some passages that seem exaggerated to us today may have been occasioned by the situation Blumhardt was in, which is history for us. But is what Blumhardt faced and endured really only for the past? I would ask the reader not to attempt to put Blumhardt in a box. You will not be able to. What seems strange and new to you could be a call that will lead you to truths that we, as individual Christians and as the church of Jesus Christ, need to recognize and start putting into practice.

PART I

The Creative Tension

Continuity and Change

Introduction

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt

DEAR FRIENDS, I HAVE been told several times that much of what I have written in my confidential newsletters¹ is not easy to understand. People say they cannot grasp what I am trying to achieve or what my position is in these turbulent times, when faith is battling against unbelief, subjective Christianity against ecclesiastic orthodoxy, narrow-minded Pietism against fanatical religious trends. Many may be wondering which of these trends I fit into. Others may be hoping to find in these newsletters confirmation for their own views. Still others may already be antagonistic and so they will understand as little as the first group. I fully realize that not everyone will immediately agree with me on every point. I think I have given sufficient evidence of this by the fact that, of late, I have sent out my little leaflet to friends only occasionally, at irregular intervals, only when I felt I had to, and with a strong emphasis on the confidential nature of these publications.²

We had to make certain changes to previous customs in our life, changes prompted by new experiences, both inner and outer. I knew from the outset that even our close friends would not understand right away the new life that was thrusting itself upon us. What I could envisage was so clear and thrilling! I saw clearly how immature and inadequate our former ways were and I also saw clearly the new route we had to take. But I had to hold back until what I knew in my heart to be true showed itself outwardly in our life. To a certain degree this has now taken shape, even though it will need to continue to grow before we have done justice to the truth we have been shown.

1 Blumhardt's *Vertrauliche Blätter* were published at irregular intervals starting in spring 1888.

2 See Bittner's introduction, section 3, about the transition of the newsletter from *Briefblätter* (newsletters), which Christoph Blumhardt published from January 1882 until the end of 1888, to *Vertrauliche Blätter*, circulated from spring 1888 until December 1895.

Our little ship has reached somewhat calmer waters now. So, I am happy to be able to fulfill the wish expressed by many of my friends to provide a more coherent and comprehensive statement of what has been given to us and what is even now the driving force behind every detail in our life.

The Same Foundation

A PARTICULAR FOCUS of this book will be to show that I have not strayed (as some people think) from the foundation on which I have always stood. That foundation is too secure and too eternal—laid down not by human beings but by God—for a single pebble to be broken off. However, some houses built on this foundation turned out to be manmade products of their time. These had to be abandoned, even though in their day they may have been a refuge that felt like home. I am surprised that many of you are so frightened by the demolition of these manmade constructions that you fail to notice the solid foundation underneath, on which we are still standing. This proves to me just how important it was for God to shake us free of so much that is of the flesh and comfortable. Otherwise, in the end, even in our circles, temporary and practical arrangements would have started to look as though they had come from God. In which case we, too, would have become static, unable to meet the needs of changing times. Rigid forms kill the Spirit. You can see this in nature, in creation, where life is always found in moving organisms, not in locked drawers.

It is impossible for me to explain to our friends my present point of view without drawing on the experiences of my dear father, Johann Christoph Blumhardt. These are recorded in the biography written by my departed friend Zündel.³ As I write the forthcoming issues of this confidential newsletter, I plan to include extracts from the biography (which will give more details) for those who do not have a copy.⁴ The biography is almost completely out of print, but I couldn't bring myself to have it reprinted because, at least for the time being, I am not planning to make my new views on the biography available in bookstores.⁵ Public opinion is governed by all sorts of different spiritual trends and intellectual interests, and I do not

3 The first edition of the biography of Johann Christoph Blumhardt by Friedrich Zündel appeared in 1880. By 1887 there had been five editions. Unless otherwise noted, all citations come from the English language version: Zündel, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt*.

4 Evidently Christoph Blumhardt was planning to quote passages from Zündel's biography, but in fact there is not a single quote in the text that follows.

5 The book you have in your hands first appeared as ten issues of *Vertrauliche Blätter*, from April to December of 1895. Then as of January 1896 it was available from Bad Boll, as a booklet, published by Christoph Blumhardt himself. He never made it available to the book trade.

want to provoke public opinion, which might turn against us. I cannot see any advantage for the kingdom of God in so doing. My hope is that the insights we have been given may unobtrusively stir others into action, here or there, wherever the news may go. Therefore I plead, especially with those readers who do not agree with me, not to start a public debate. However, I am ready to discuss any objections in this confidential newsletter.⁶ I think this will serve the truth better than public conflict.

In this book I will be obliged to comment on certain key moments in my father's life from my current point of view and in light of my present experiences. Sometimes I will approve and sometimes I will have to amend. This is because recent experiences have put a new light on my father's original experiences, and from this vantage point we can see that some of what we all thought was significant has proven to be insignificant and must therefore be laid aside. In this new light I will also feel compelled to draw certain obvious conclusions from my father's experiences – conclusions that he shied away from, because it was not yet the time. Yet no matter how different our movement and direction may appear today, it will soon become evident that an unbroken chain of experiences has built a bridge from Möttlingen to the present, bringing to us new hopes. Our present situation and outlook is but one more link in this chain and cannot be separated from the earlier links.

Or, to use a different metaphor, imagine a river – even though the water continues to flow forward, it remains connected to its source. All along, one of my prime concerns has been not to lose the original character of this movement, because its origin has shown itself to be a source of living water. This living water came as one of God's revelations through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all lords and whose absolute power again and again clears the way for the truth of God's kingdom. His absolute power is still at work today just as in the time of the apostles.

God Knows the Truth

ANOTHER IMPORTANT REASON for me to focus on our origins is because many of the key events in my father's life have been misunderstood and misused by a lot of people at the expense of the truth. I thank God

⁶ Christoph Blumhardt was probably planning to discuss these issues with Bad Boll's friends using the semi-public platform of these *Vertrauliche Blätter*. That never happened. The subject matter that he was presenting took on such importance for him that he continued to write very rapidly and obviously with a strong inner sense of urgency. After writing the leaflets that make up this book, Blumhardt did not write anything for the public for quite a few years.

that he has preserved my ability to think independently. I thank God that he intervened in my life to help me renounce today things that we loved dearly, things that over the decades had come to seem right and good, but that turned out to be merely human and did not belong to God's kingdom.

One thing you should know: I am not interested in what happens to me or mine. In that case we would be opening ourselves up to human honor. All we want is to work for God's kingdom and nothing but his kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33). In doing this more and more fully, we are ready in the end to lose our own lives and count all things as garbage in order to gain Christ (Phil. 3:7-8) – the same Christ who conquers and is alive. He lives so that the life of all creatures will be swallowed up in his life. Their life will appear brand new on his Day, truly an act of creation by God the Father through the Holy Spirit.

1

The Foundation Remains

ANYONE WHO KNEW MY FATHER, Johann Christoph Blumhardt, superficially (without a deeper insight into the longings of his heart) could happily consider him conservative – even though his experiences had given him many new and enlightening insights into Holy Scripture. It was not difficult to discuss matters with him, even if your basic outlook was very different from his. God had placed in his heart a warm love for the whole world and for all people, and it radiated from him. This love allowed him to look beyond the specific principles and organizations of the different Christian churches, even when these were obstacles and when they forced him, on a personal level, into an increasingly lonely position. Undaunted, he continued to bring everything and everyone into the light of his hope for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and he expected the Holy Spirit to accomplish all the changes he was yearning for. So he was able to rejoice and had great hopes for every person of faith. In fact, through this hope of his, he was able to reassure believers of many different backgrounds – they all felt strengthened by what he said.

A Man of Progress

BUT NO MATTER HOW conservative he may have seemed to many, in actual fact he was not like that at all. He had witnessed something else; he had seen into the future world; he had seen promises being fulfilled, which made him passionate for Jesus, the victor, the one who will turn the whole world upside down according to the will of God. At heart he was a man of progress. He may have worked thankfully and conscientiously within his given circumstances, but in his heart of hearts he looked forward with

longing, day and night, for something new, something eternal, something prophetic, promised, and certain. In quiet times when we would sit together, never once did I see him satisfied with things as they were. He thought our contemporary Christian lifestyle was bleak and boring compared with the bright picture of God's kingdom that had emerged full of promise in his heart and soul. He felt this picture confirmed the hopes of the nations since earliest times.

On one hand, he was most faithful to the church as it was – its sacred writings and symbols, its views, and its worship. In all of this he considered himself to be a member of the church in Württemberg. Yet, on the other hand, you cannot really call him a servant of the church. He served the kingdom of God, the kingdom that he could not find realized in any church. He knew, however, that it does exist in spirit and in truth. He was conservative by conviction because he believed that God would do the revealing. Therefore, he did not expect any progress to come from men and women – only from God. This gave him the ability, for God's sake, not only to put up with a given situation, but even more, to take full advantage of it for the goals of God's kingdom.

New Wine and Old Wineskins

IT NEVER OCCURRED to my father to develop new doctrines, new organizations, or new forms in order to bring about new life and new fellowship. He was deeply impressed by what God had given in the Reformation through Luther, and so he did not presume to openly criticize the [Lutheran] church. He held to this church even though he felt that it was inadequate in many ways. Wherever he could he, he tried to bring in some fresh life through the cracks in the old structure – for example, regarding intercession, confession, and deliverance from both physical and emotional bondages caused by demon possession. He held to this church even though it opposed him, put him down, and sought to quench his spirit. Because he had faith, he resigned himself [to things as they were] and waited for a new time that would come from God, for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This expectation kept him on tiptoe, inwardly fresh and alive, ready for any step forward, ready to leave everything behind should God speak anew or should Jesus Christ give his heavenly Father's work a more perfect form.

Certainly, my father himself was not fully aware of how different the present state of affairs was from the future for which he yearned. His vision was still shrouded in many ways. God permitted him to first try and see if the present forms could be reshaped – if the existing vessels (the church's

ordinances) would be able to hold that which he felt was needed for the future of God's kingdom. He just could not yet grasp that the church might, under certain circumstances, actually reject a living testimony coming from God and choose instead the existing ordinances. Therefore, he remained hopeful until his death that the church ordinances used by the people surrounding him would be able to incorporate his experiences. This is why, again and again and with extraordinary love, he tried to reconcile his own inner advances with the doctrines and forms of worship surrounding him and even to justify the old ways.

New Attempts and Failures

IN HIS ATTEMPTS TO ACCOMMODATE, my father wrote several testimonies, such as the "Fifteen Advent Sermons,"¹ which lost a lot of their verve simply because he was trying to harmonize the more liberated outlook and more Spirit-filled life that God had given him with traditional, dogmatic forms of doctrine, church traditions, and customs. You could say that my father was still caught in the shackles of [traditional] theological work-fetters that have entangled Christians voices since ancient times. People often look for salvation by trying to find answers to questions that basically are none of our business. I remember, for example, the debate on eternal salvation and eternal damnation, to which my father devoted an excessive amount of time in deference to some church teaching or other. I must admit that he defended his beloved traditional church viewpoints with an eloquence that would have been more appropriate for the profound, eternal thoughts that lay in his soul.

But I do not want to belittle his efforts to merge the new with the old, the essential with the nonessential. He was trying to bring about a general consensus as a basis on which faith and hope could be further developed. The benefit of using conventional methods of theological thinking and research was that he won the support of a large, open-hearted circle in which his hopes caught fire. This circle inevitably became liberal (in spite of my father's loyalty to conventional ways) because progress was simply in him. In fact, this power to advance was stronger than he was and led him beyond what he could possibly have foreseen.

After all, the people in more narrow-minded circles, whom he solicited with such love, did not in the end regard him as one of their own, while

¹ *Fünfzehn Predigten über die drei ersten Advents-Evangelien, zur Beförderung christlicher Erkenntnis* (Fifteen Sermons about the First Three Advent Gospels: to Promote Christian Knowledge), Stuttgart, 1864.

those in broad-minded circles, who allied themselves to him and his hopes for forward movement, found themselves isolated more or less everywhere because of those very hopes. Therefore, I say boldly that God did not let him get bogged down in conventional ways, no matter how much time and effort he sacrificed for it. In the end what he most deeply longed for, all his experiences and his hopes, were completely different from what other people wanted them to be. So my father did not end his life within the narrow framework of religious thought, but instead bearing in mind all peoples, for whom he saw God's kingdom coming in an undreamed-of and wonderful way. His last words were, "The Lord will open his hand in mercy toward all people!" These words do not fit into the narrow framework of any political party or specific people, nor into any existing church or state. They fit only into the wide horizons given to us by the Bible in the Old and New Testaments.

The Same Forward Movement

THIS SEQUENCE OF EVENTS was a milestone for me. I realized that my father's attempt to bring progress in the old ruts had failed. For years I, too, tried to find my way within the inner and outer circumstances handed down to me by my father. But when he died I knew that my task was to work for *the same forward movement* that motivated him.² And to this day those of us who know we were shaped by my father's struggle realize that we are being swept along by this progress. We have never tried in our human strength to uncover this or that little treasure; we merely longed and wrestled in prayer to God, hoping that he would lead us to new clarity. This much we knew for certain: If we stand still we will get separated from what God is saying today, from the living witness that is hammering on the doors of our world today.

This is exactly what happened. Today, whether we like it or not, we are prompted [by God] again and again and have to make new changes. Speculation will not help us to understand the kingdom of God; rather God uses definite experiences to give us new insights. Then, unless we are cold and dead, we have to change our views according to what we have just experienced. For this is how God guides his children on earth: he gives us

2 Christoph Blumhardt repeatedly emphasized that his father's death was an outstanding turning point. The anniversary of his father's death became a memorial day at Bad Boll. See for instance the devotions of the son for January 26, in Christoph Blumhardt, *Ansprachen, Predigten, Reden, Briefe, 1865–1917, vol. 1, 1865–1889*, ed. by Johannes Harder (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 65–66.

tangible experiences of judgment and of grace – experiences which it would be a crime to pass over indifferently just to stay true to our old ways of thinking. If we compare today with yesterday and with bygone times, we can see that the same Spirit still compels us today – the Spirit who gave the inescapable summons that Jesus alone must be Lord. However, for the sake of this same Spirit we will from time to time have to suffer through entirely new experiences, which in turn will force us to take up new points of view. For how is Jesus to conquer, if everything has to stay the same as it was before? How is he to rule, if we are not willing to give up anything? How is he to be exalted, if we value our human lives more than we value him?

No Easy Path Ahead

A CHARACTERISTIC FEATURE of my father's life was that he repeatedly found himself thrust into something new, and each new chapter was more powerful than the previous one. As an assistant pastor he was blessed, and people were drawn to him. Even the most stiff-necked sectarians were won over to more reasonable, loving relationships within the parish.³ This event gave his life a new momentum, and he might well have thought that with this new enthusiasm he had done enough. Then he moved to Möttlingen to be the pastor. Of what use to him here was his former position? His enthusiasm died down because the congregation was lifeless. As far as preaching goes, everything had already been tried by preachers better than he.⁴ He grew sad when he realized that all his efforts were useless, even when he tried hard to relate to people in their day-to-day lives. He could not awaken any real love for God and his cause.

Then God stepped in and opened his eyes to see why even the most enthusiastic sermons did not hit their mark. He got a taste of the very depths of hell, for this is where the shackles originated that ensnared the entire congregation. Now every part of his life had to undergo change. What good would it do him to long for the happy days of being an assistant pastor? Now he had to take up a battle and forgo all comforts, until he heard the cry "Jesus is victor!" and his congregation was set free.⁵

Another man might have made it his life's work to continue battling in this way, but my father was faced with yet another change. Though quietly

3 See Zündel, 50–54.

4 Johann Christoph Blumhardt's friend, who preceded him as pastor in Iptingen, Dr. Christian Gottlob Barth, called the congregation a "congregation that had been preached to death." See Zündel, 99. What this meant for Blumhardt is described by Zündel, 108, 160.

5 About the end of the "battle" see Zündel, 151–152.

continuing the battle, he felt he had to do justice to the new circumstances that had developed. Suddenly he had to be a spiritual advisor in a totally new way, unlike anything he had ever dreamed of. He now had a congregation radiant in their first love. Was this not enough? No, this proved to be but a short-lived break. A number of experiences in his congregation made him realize full well that he would have to make another step forward. He challenged his congregation, "If we do not move forward, if we get stuck in the old ruts that all other converts have followed, and the light will go out again!" But any progress that will require a restructuring of life can only come into being through a totally new working of God, through an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, by which former things are overturned and new things built up. Again new ground had been reached. The years at Möttlingen were definitely a highlight – a comfort and a light, a strengthening of his faith – but they were not the *goal*.

It was not long before my father felt he had to leave Möttlingen.⁶ He must have been sad to abandon his congregation and set out into the unknown. It didn't happen without a crisis. My father was like a man going through bouts of fever, until he was weaned from his former role as the pastor of a congregation and felt comfortable in Bad Boll, where God placed him. It was essential for him to die to his Möttlingen. The fruit harvested there was not his doing and not for him to keep – it was God's doing and my father had to hand it over to God, the real vine dresser. He had to leave so as not to waste away in the narrow confines of a parish, caring for a few hundred people, or a single church, or even the larger circles of the Protestant church. God gave him a universal point of view that eventually rose above all confessions.

God's Time Changes

LATER, FOR THE SAKE of this universal point of view (that we had come to with my father) we had to put up with changes, both inner and outer. The spirit of life in Jesus Christ, which keeps us moving forward toward the final goal, forced us increasingly to take responsibility for much that still held us captive. God gave us evidence that he was at work – whenever we started to get too comfortable, he used all kinds of experiences to wake us up. The death of my father, as well as that of all the older members of our family and community (those who had experienced the early days), was reason enough to make us consider changes. If we wanted to be gripped by the truth and to seek for the truth, then we had to listen to what God was demanding of

⁶ Not because of an external force but because of an internal "must." See Zündel, 388–392.

us. We had to look at *our own* attitudes and get clear about what was from above and what was from below. At least we had to get to the point where we could say without hesitation, “We will not cling to anything we are used to. Instead we will be ready to work for anything that is true and just.” For we have set our hearts on things above (Col. 3:1), and whatever is not from above, we will renounce even if it is dear to us. For only things from above belong to Jesus and are eternal. Whatever comes from below is not eternal and is at least able to cause great harm. On this basis we are willing to endure any changes – but we must watch out that we are not the ones to initiate change; that we continue to allow what we *experience* to lead us.⁷

So now we have come to *our* day, which we face with the same earnestness and the same zeal, the same confidence and inner certainty with which my father faced *his* day, fifty years ago at Möttlingen. In his day, the powers of darkness opposed him. He saw people chained in darkness and fought zealously for Christ’s victory over evil powers. In our day, we have not forgotten this. We are well aware of the power of hidden forces. We know of the lingering inner bondages that still obstruct God’s kingdom. But experiences in our day permit us to pay less attention to this. God has opened our eyes so we can see that it is our human selfishness which is resisting God – the selfishness called the flesh. If we can do away with this resistance, it will have even more important consequences than a victory over demons.

A New Watchword

THEREFORE, IN OUR DAY, we have to die, so that Jesus can live. This means that we want to be dead to whatever is human and to whatever focuses on people. Our human nature is not to be nurtured through God, through Christ, and through the Spirit – on the contrary, our human nature, our flesh, is to be revealed and judged through God, through Christ, and through the Spirit. For it is only in this way that we can come to the final forward movement: to a new creation, to a resurrection in terms of godly things, in the spirit of God’s truth and righteousness. The first watchword was “Jesus is victor!” in the battle against darkness and superstition, and later on the watchword was “God is merciful to all creatures, because Jesus is victor!” Today the watchword is “Die! For only then can Jesus live!”

7 By “experience” the son Blumhardt is referring to daily events. He recognized God’s speaking and leading in daily events. He attempted to understand them and to fit in with them. For a discussion of the son Blumhardt’s conception of experience, see Simeon Zahl, *Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross in the Preaching of Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt: The Holy Spirit between Wittenberg and Azusa Street* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

MAKE WAY FOR THE SPIRIT

He can only live and reign, be victorious and rise again, if you renounce what is yours and die to yourselves, so that you, being dead to yourselves, can come to God with your whole heart and your whole soul to bring forth that fruit which is pleasing to God. For only when people submit themselves in a totally new and more perfect way will that victory come which makes God's mercy possible for all creation. For, as I said already, Jesus does not want only victory—he wants life. He wants to live in you, in people who have flesh and blood, for the benefit of God's justice and truth on earth.

