From the moment in our lives at which we learn to speak we are taught that what we say must be true. What does this mean? What is meant by "telling the truth"? What does it demand of us?

It is clear that in the first place it is our parents who regulate our relation to themselves by this demand for truthfulness; consequently, in the sense in which our parents intend it, this demand applies strictly only within the family circle. It is also to be noted that the relation which is expressed in this demand cannot simply be reversed. The truthfulness of a child towards his parents is essentially different from that of the parents towards their child. The life of the small child lies open before the parents, and what the child says should reveal to them everything that is hidden and secret, but in the converse relationship this cannot possibly be the case. Consequently, in the matter of truthfulness, the parents' claim on the child is different from the child's claim on the parents.

From this it emerges already that "telling the truth" means something different according to the particular situation in which one stands. Account must be taken of one's relationships at each particular time. The question must be asked whether and in what way a man is entitled to demand truthful speech of others. Speech between parents and children is, in the nature of the case, different from speech between man and wife, between friends, between teacher and pupil, government and subject, friend and foe, and in each case the truth which this speech conveys is also different.

It will at once be objected that one does not owe truthful speech to this or that individual man, but solely to God. This objection is correct so long as it is not forgotten that God is not a general principle, but the living God who has set me in a living life and who demands service of me within this living life. If one speaks of God one must not simply disregard the actual given world in which one lives; for if one does that one is not speaking of the God who entered into the world in Jesus Christ, but rather of some metaphysical idol. And it is precisely this which is determined by the way in which, in my actual concrete life with all its manifold relationships, I give effect to the truthfulness which I owe to God. The truthfulness which we owe to God must assume a concrete form in the world. Our speech must be truthful, not in principle but concretely. A truthfulness which is not concrete is not truthful before God.

"Telling the truth", therefore, is not only a matter of moral character; it is also a matter of correct appreciation of real situations and of serious reflection upon them. The more complex the actual situations of a man's life, the more responsible and the more difficult will be his task of "telling the truth". The child stands in only one vital relationship, his relationship to his parents, and he, therefore, still has nothing to consider and weigh up. The next environment in which he is placed, his school, already brings with it the first difficulty. From the educational point of view it is, therefore, of the very greatest importance that parents in some way which we cannot discuss here, should make their children understand the differences between these various circles in which they are to live and the differences in their responsibilities.

Telling the truth is, therefore, something which must be learnt. This will sound very shocking to anyone who thinks that it must all depend on moral character and that if this is blameless the rest is child's play. But the simple fact is that the ethical cannot be detached from reality, and consequently continual progress in learning to appreciate reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action. In the question with which we are now concerned, action consists of speaking. The real is to be expressed in words. That is what constitutes truthful speech. And this inevitably raises the question of the "how?" of these words. It is a question of knowing the right word on each occasion. Finding this word is a matter of long, earnest and ever more advanced effort on the basis of experience and knowledge of the real. If one is to say how a thing really is, if one is to speak truthfully, one's gaze and one's thought must be directed towards the way in which the real exists in God and through God and for God.

To restrict this problem of truthful speech to certain particular cases of conflict is superficial. Every word I utter is subject to the requirement that it shall be true. Quite apart from the veracity of its contents, the relation between myself and another man which is expressed in it is in itself either true or untrue. I speak flattering or presumptuously or hypocritically without uttering a material untruth; yet my words are nevertheless untrue, because I am disrupting and destroy the reality of the relationship between man and wife, superior and subordinate, etc. An individual utterance is always part of a total reality which seeks expression in this utterance. If my utterance is to be truthful it must in each case be different according to whom I am addressing, who is seeking to me, and what I am speaking about. The truthful word is not in itself constant; it is as much alive as life itself. If it is detached from life and from its reference to the concrete other man, if the truth is told without taking into account to whom it is addressed, then this truth has only the appearance of truth, but it lacks its essential character.
It is only the cynic who claims to speak the truth at all times and in all places to all men in the same way, but who, in fact, displays nothing but a lifeless image of the truth. He does the halo of the fanatical devotee of truth who can make no allowance for human weaknesses; but, in fact, he is destroying the living truth between men. He wounds shame, degrades mystery, breaks confidence, betrays the community in which he lives, and laughs arrogantly at the devastation he has wrought and at the human weakness which cannot bear the truth. He says truth is destructive and demands its victims, and he feels like a god above these feeble creatures and does not know that he is serving Satan.

There is a truth which is of Satan. Its essence is that under the semblance of truth it denies everything that is real. It lives upon hatred of the real and of the world which is created and loved by God. It pretends to be executing the judgement of God upon the fall of the real. God's truth judges things out of love, and Satan's truth judges them out of envy and hatred. God's truth has become flesh in the world and is alive in the real, but Satan's truth is the death of all reality.

The concept of living truth is dangerous, and it gives rise to the suspicion that the truth can and may be adapted to each particular situation in a way which completely destroys the idea of truth and narrows the gap between truth and falsehood, so that the two become indistinguishable. Moreover, what we are saying about the necessity for discerning the real may be mistakenly understood as meaning that it is by adopting a calculating or schoolmasterly attitude towards the other man that I shall decide what proportion of the truth I am prepared to tell him. It is important that this danger should be kept in view. Yet the only possible way of countering it is by means of attentive discernment of the particular contents and limits which the real itself imposes on one's utterance in order to make it a truthful one. The dangers which are involved in the concept of living truth must never impel one to abandon this concept in favour of the formal and cynical concept of truth. We must try to make this clear. Every utterance or word lives and has its home in a particular environment. The word in the family is different from the word in business or in public. The word which has come to life in the warmth of personal relationship is frozen to death in the cold air of public existence. The word of command, which has its habitat in public service, would sever the bonds of mutual confidence if it were spoken in the family. Each word must have its own place and keep to it. It is a consequence of the wide diffusion of the public word through the newspapers and the wireless that the essential character and the limits of the various different words are no longer clearly felt and that, for example, the special quality of the personal word is almost entirely destroyed. Genuine words are replaced by idle chatter. Words no longer possess any weight. There is too much talk. And when the limits of the various words are obliterated, when words become rootless and homeless, then the word loses truth, and then indeed there must almost inevitably be lying. When the various orders of life no longer respect one another, words become untrue. For example, a teacher asks a child in front of the class whether it is true that his father often comes home drunk. It is true, but the child denies it. The teacher's question has placed him in a situation for which he is not yet prepared. He feels only that what is taking place is an unjustified interference in the order of the family and that he must oppose it. What goes on in the family is not for the ears of the class in school. The family has its own secret and must preserve it. The teacher has failed to respect the reality of this institution. The child ought now to find a way of answering which would comply with both the rule of the family and the rule of the school. But he is not yet able to do this. He lacks experience, knowledge, and the ability to express himself in the right way. As a simple no to the teacher's
question the child’s answer is certainly untrue; yet at the same time it nevertheless gives expression to the truth that the family is an institution sui generis and that the teacher had no right to interfere in it. The child’s answer can indeed be called a lie; yet this lie contains more truth, that is to say, it is more in accordance with reality than would have been the case if the child had betrayed his father’s weakness in front of the class. According to the measure of his knowledge, the child acted correctly. The blame for the lie falls back entirely upon the teacher. An experienced man in the same position as the child would have been able to correct his questioner’s error while at the same time avoiding a formal untruth in his answer, and he would thus have found the ‘right word’. The lies of children, and of inexperienced people in general, are often to be ascribed to the fact that these people are faced with situations which they do not fully understand. Consequently, since the term lie is quite properly understood as meaning something which is quite simply and utterly wrong, it is perhaps unwise to generalize and extend the use of this term so that it can be applied to every statement which is formally untrue. Indeed here already it becomes apparent how very difficult it is to say what actually constitutes a lie.

The usual definition of the lie as a conscious discrepancy between thought and speech is completely inadequate. This would include, for example, even the most harmless April-fool joke. The concept of the ‘jocular lie’, which is maintained in Catholic moral theology, takes away from the lie its characteristic features of seriousness and malice (and, conversely, takes away from the joke its characteristic features of harmless playfulness and freedom); no more unfortunate concept could have been thought of. Joking has nothing whatever to do with lying, and the two must not be reduced to a common denominator. If it is now asserted that a lie is a deliberate deception of another man to his detriment, then this would also include, for example, the necessary deception of the enemy in war or in similar situations. If this sort of conduct is called lying, the lie thereby acquires a moral sanction and justification which conflicts in every possible way with the accepted meaning of the term. The first conclusion to be drawn from this is that the lie cannot be defined in formal terms as a discrepancy between thought and speech. This discrepancy is not even a necessary ingredient of the lie. There is a way of speaking which is in this respect entirely correct and unexceptionable, but which is, nevertheless, a lie. This is exemplified when a notorious liar for once tells the truth in order to mislead, and when an apparently correct statement contains some deliberate ambiguity or deliberately omits the essential part of the truth. Even a deliberate silence may constitute a lie, although this is not by any means necessarily the case.

From these considerations it becomes evident that the essential character of the lie is to be found at a far deeper level than in the discrepancy between thought and speech. One might say that the man who stands behind the word makes his word a lie or a truth. But even this is not enough; for the lie is something objective and must be defined accordingly. Jesus calls Satan ‘the father of the lie’ (John 8.44). The lie is primarily the denial of God as He has evidenced Himself to the world. ‘Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ?’ (I John 2.22). The lie is a contradiction of the word of God, which God has spoken in Christ, and upon which creation is founded. Consequently the lie is the denial, the negation and the conscious and deliberate destruction of the reality which is created by God and which consists in God, no matter whether this purpose is achieved by speech or by silence. The assigned

1 Kant, of course, declared that he was too proud ever to utter a falsehood; indeed he unintentionally carried this principle ad absurdum by saying that he would feel himself obliged to give truthful information even to a criminal looking for a friend of his who had concealed himself in his house.
purpose of our words, in unity with the word of God, is to express the real, as it exists in God; and the assigned purpose of our silence is to signify the limit which is imposed upon our words by the real as it exists in God.

In our endeavours to express the real we do not encounter this as a consistent whole, but in a condition of disruption and inner contradiction which has need of reconciliation and healing. We find ourselves simultaneously embedded in various different orders of the real, and our words, which strive towards the reconciliation and healing of the real, are nevertheless repeatedly drawn in into the prevalent disunion and conflict. They can indeed fulfill their assigned purpose of expressing the real, as it is in God, only by taking up into themselves both the inner contradiction and the inner consistency of the real. If the words of men are to be true they must deny neither the Fall nor God's word of creation and reconciliation, the word in which all disunion is overcome. For the cynic the truthfulness of his words will consist in his giving expression on each separate occasion to the particular reality as he thinks he perceives it, without reference to the totality of the real; and precisely through this he completely destroys the real. Even if his words have the superficial appearance of correctness, they are untrue.

'That which is far off, and exceeding deep; who can find it out?' (Eccl. 7.24).

How can I speak the truth?

a By perceiving who causes me to speak and what entitles me to speak.

b By perceiving the place at which I stand.

c By relating to this context the object about which I am making some assertion.

It is tacitly assumed in these rules that all speech is subject to certain conditions; speech does not accompany the natural course of life in a continual stream, but it has its place, its time and its task, and consequently also its limits.

a Who or what entitles or causes me to speak? Anyone who speaks without a right and a cause to do so is an idle chatterer. Every utterance is involved in a relation both with the other man and with a thing, and in every utterance, therefore, this twofold reference must be apparent. An utterance without reference is empty. It contains no truth. In this there is an essential difference between thought and speech. Thought does not in itself necessarily refer to the other man, but only to a thing. The claim that one is entitled to say what one thinks is in itself completely unfounded. Speech must be justified and occasioned by the other man. For example, I may in my thoughts consider another man to be stupid, ugly, incapable or lacking in character, or I may think him wise and reliable. But it is quite a different question whether I have the right to express this opinion, what occasion I have for expressing it, and to whom I express it. There can be no doubt that a right to speak is conferred upon me by an office which is committed to me. Parents can blame or praise their child, but the child is not entitled to do either of these things with regard to his parents. There is a similar relation between teacher and pupil, although the rights of the teacher with regard to the children are more restricted than those of the father. Thus in criticizing or praising his pupil the teacher will have to confine himself to single particular faults or achievements, while, for example, general judgements of character are the business not of the teacher but of the parents. The right to speak always lies within the confines of the particular office which I discharge. If I overstep these limits my speech becomes importunate, presumptuous, and, whether it be blame or praise, offensive. There are people who feel themselves called upon to 'tell the truth', as they put it, to everyone who crosses their path.