

The Princeton Seminary Bulletin

Vol. XLII

PRINCETON, N.J., WINTER 1949

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AMSTERDAM ASSEMBLY¹

JOHN A. MACKAY

THERE was great significance in the fact that the Assembly took place in Holland. At a time when freedom is dead in so many lands, how could we who were at Amsterdam forget that the Dutch people have always been stalwart in their defense of liberty? How could we American members of the Assembly forget that it was from Holland that the Pilgrim Fathers set out on the Mayflower on their way from England to New England? How could a Princetonian forget the close historical relationship between the famous House of Nassau and the great university which is one of the glories of this community?

Local circumstances, moreover, did not allow us to forget that it was Coronation time in Holland when we met. Not as the result of a revolution, but voluntarily, a great and much loved monarch abdicated in favor of her daughter. Wilhelmina passed; Juliana came. The festivities connected with the national rejoicing were in full progress. There was the illumination of the canals, the pageantry of the processions and the decorations on the streets. Yet not for a moment dared we forget that the days of our meeting were days of deepening crisis in Berlin. If our gathering was being held in the lap of national festivity, it was no less being held in the very somber shadow of what appeared to be impending doom. As one thought of what might lie ahead in the years to come, one thanked God that the representatives of one hundred and fifty Churches throughout the

world had made a solemn pact with each other to stand together whatever happened in the sphere of international relations.

The Amsterdam Assembly, let it be remembered, was a Council of Churches. It was not a Council made up merely of individual Christians interested in good ecumenical relations. It was not a Council of Councils, nor yet a Council of the great confessional groups. It was a Council of individual Churches, or denominations, who, because all had accepted the common basis, had come together for fellowship and conference and common action. Its Constitution reads: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior."

The most important thing about the Amsterdam Assembly was that it happened. The older churches from the West were there and the younger churches from the great mission fields of the world. Churches from lands that enjoy freedom were there, and the representatives of Churches from behind the "Iron Curtain," and from Spain where a brutal Fascist government is still in power. There were Churches there of the hierarchical and Catholic type, and Churches of the specifically Protestant and Low Church type. Unofficial observers were to have been present from the Roman Catholic Church; but on the eve of the Assembly the Holy See published an edict that no member of the Roman Catholic Church was to be allowed, in any ca-

capacity whatever, or under any circumstance whatever, to be present at any session of the Assembly.

As regards the nature of the World Council of Churches, two things should be borne in mind. One is that the new Council does not represent an attempt to Romanize Protestantism. A very important action was taken in the following terms: "We disavow any thought of becoming a single, unified church structure dominated by a centralized, administrative authority." The ideal which the Council has set before it is a maximum degree of unity, understanding, and cooperation, with a maximum degree of ecclesiastical freedom.

It is important also to remember that it was laid down that no effort should be made from Council headquarters to prescribe or blueprint the form which ecumenical relations should take in the several regions of the world. The great regions were to be left free to express Christian unity and the unity of the Churches in their own way and in terms of their own particular situation.

It was most impressive to find at Amsterdam that while a great diversity of viewpoint existed as to the exact nature of the Church and upon many matters of Christian belief, there was a most marvelous unity of thought upon the great essentials of the Christian faith. The category in which all thinking was done was that of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The fact of the Risen Christ, the living Head of the Church and the supreme ruler of history, was pervasive throughout all the meetings of the Assembly. Our unity was in Christ, who, amid all our diversity, had made us one in Himself. A sense of His reality and sovereign Lordship left no room for ultimate pessimism re-

garding human affairs. Nothing was more striking at Amsterdam than to find that it was the people who had suffered most, whose lot was cast today behind the "Iron Curtain" or amid scenes of desolation and woe, who were the most exultant in their faith. They and we together were aware that the world might have to pass, once again, through a "valley of the shadow of death," blacker and more terrible than any through which civilization had passed before. Believing, however, in the risen and living Christ, we knew that there would be a dawn.

One of the chief distinctions made at Amsterdam was the distinction between a worshipping and a witnessing church. A church worships when the worshippers lift up their hearts to God in joyous self-dedication. It was recognized, however, that despite the liturgical majesty of worship, despite an impressive combination of form and sound and color, despite a moving emotional experience, a worshipping community might be far from being in the fullest sense the Church. For the Church, to be truly the Church, must be a witnessing, as well as a worshipping community. That is to say, the Church must do more than lift itself up towards God in worship, listen to God, and address God. Having heard God's voice it must address itself to the world and its problems, share God's concern for the world, and march at His behest and in His comradeship through all the highways and by-ways of the earth. Thus the Christian Church cannot maintain itself in cloistered detachment from the world. Manifesting itself as a community which transcends all the differences operative in society, it must speak God's message to the generation in which its members live.

It must diagnose the core of the human problem and shed divine light upon man's road through history. It must proclaim the Gospel of redemption for the renewal of human beings, create a new basis for thought and behavior, carry the light and influence of the Christian religion across all the geographical frontiers of the world and into every vocation and sphere where men and women live.

But if the Christian Church is to be in the highest sense the Church and fulfill its function in the world, the laity, as well as the clergy, must play their part in the total task. Nothing was more impressive, at the Assembly at Amsterdam, than the recognition of the fact that the Church had woefully neglected the contribution which only the laity can make. The time has come when the men and women who constitute the laity must be entrusted and inspired by the Church to do many things relating to the evangelization and the Christianization of human society which hitherto have been undertaken exclusively by the clergy. In a word, Christian witness through the Church must be laicized in the truest sense.

I came back from Amsterdam with an enhanced view of the greatness of Christ's Church. There are many things that should shame us about the Church, but there is a glory in it that is not present in any other institution today. And I have returned with this other enhanced conviction. No Church is worth calling a Church, if it is not a Church of redeemed men and women. Mere structure and church order mean less and less to me. If anyone says that something relating to Church structure

is an article of faith, I feel that he has not got to the heart of the New Testament. The thing that ultimately matters is the new man in Christ and that such a person should in the fullest sense think and act as a Christian in the particular sphere of his calling.

I came back, moreover, with a clearer conviction than I had before of the importance of a theological seminary and of Princeton Theological Seminary in particular. Eyes in many parts of the world are directed towards us. I do not know of any theological institution which is more strategically related to the Church Universal than our institution is. It would be terrible if we failed God and our generation and one another, at a time when the crack of new doom may be about to sound, and another abyss to open.

As we start out together, teachers, students, friends, let us now forget things that are behind, even Amsterdam, and strain forward to the things that are ahead. Any light that has come out of that great gathering, let it get into our minds and into our eyes. Any inspiration that may be derived from the past, let it move our hearts and make our members tingle with holy resolve. We can then forget about Amsterdam and carry its light and inspiration forward. Let this be our motto: "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, let us press towards the mark—in holy, halloved comradeship—for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

1. A résumé of the address delivered at the opening of the Seminary, September 28.