



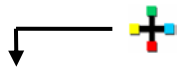
## Can The Churches Give A Common Message To The World?

1953

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*Theology Today* 9, 4 (January): 512-518.

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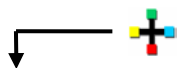
The World Council of Churches is planning to hold its second Assembly in the summer of 1954, and the task of preparation has already begun. The first Assembly at Amsterdam (1948) brought the Council into being. Its importance was not so much in its pronouncements as in the fact that it happened. The only sentence in its Message which has become memorable was the sentence – "We intend to stay together." That decision justified the holding of the Assembly.

But for the second Assembly it will obviously not be enough to say, "We are still together" – though the fact is no small sign of God's mercy. The Churches will rightly expect from the Assembly that it should help to clarify for them their common message and their common task. They will rightly pray that out of so great a gathering there may come some new common insight. And both inside and outside the Churches, men and women will seek in the Assembly's proceedings an answer to the question: "Can the Churches give a common message to the world?"

The whole life of the World Council is, of course, continuously involved in the effort to answer that question by word and by deed. For the next two years the effort will center in common preparation for the Assembly itself through the co-operative study of Christians in many lands and many communions. An "Advisory Commission on the Main Theme of the Assembly" has already issued two reports which are before the Churches. The Study Department is promoting a very extensive programme of study centering around the main theme. The purpose of this article is to ask, "What kind of answer do we expect to this question?"

### **I. Encounter And Challenge**

When one first steps out of the confines of one's own Church and one's own people into an ecumenical conference or study-group, one

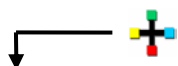


goes through a series of painful experiences. After the first thrill of finding that there are so many different kinds of Christians in the world, one is shocked to discover that most of them hold horribly distorted conceptions of Christianity, obviously warped by all sorts of national and cultural factors. An Englishman, listening for the first time to the remarks of Christians from America, or Germany, or Hungary, or India, feels at first that, whether the man speaking is a Lutheran, an Anglican, a Presbyterian, or what not, it is his national background that is most strongly influencing what he says. "This is doubtless a form of Christianity," he will think, "but it is a very Americanized (or 'Continental,' or 'Oriental') form of it. This man's idea of Christianity is obviously mainly dictated by his national situation." A second discovery, still more painful, is that the same is true of himself. He begins to discover that phrases which he had used with the utmost unction in his pulpit at home are here sharply challenged as expressions of a merely national or cultural sentiment. He begins to look critically both at his own religion and at that of others and to ask, "How much of this is really the Gospel of God, valid equally for every human soul, and how much is an amalgam of that Gospel with the prevailing fashions of thought in a particular nation or group?" The agonizing difficulty of the struggle of ecumenical thinking is the measure of its value. It is not a matter of mobilizing world opinion behind one's own Christian convictions; it is a matter of testing those convictions by the Gospel itself and suffering the penetration of that Word of God of which the Scripture tells us that it is sharper than any two-edged sword.

These first experiences of the ecumenical encounter should warn us to be critical of a certain kind of demand that the Churches shall speak a common message to the world, especially when it is the demand that this word shall be of a certain character—a word of hope, for instance. The Churches are not master of their message. They must speak what is given to them. It may be very different from what the world wishes to hear, or what the Churches wish to speak.

## II. What Does This Demand Mean?

But we must go on further to ask, "What precisely is meant by the demand for a common message?" The Churches already have the ecumenical creeds—summary statements of the Gospel which all

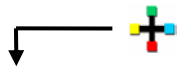


Churches have to proclaim always and everywhere. Will it not be sufficient to point the world there for an answer? What more tremendous message could be looked for than that? Is it not sufficient to go on proclaiming that to the world? "Yes," it will be answered, "but the ecumenical creeds must be translated into the terms of our own day. What we need is a message for our own day and our own situation." Certainly the creeds, and the Gospel which they enshrine, have to be translated, and that is done with more or less success every time an evangelist preaches the Gospel. Throughout the world, in a thousand languages, through the lips of hundreds of thousands of God's servants, this is being done every day. And it is not in vain. The Gospel is still proving itself to be under every sky the power of God unto salvation.

But is it something more than this which is hoped for? Is it, we are compelled to ask, a common program? Of course, everyone will agree that all Christians cannot be united in one political movement, or persuaded to agree about all the detailed objectives of a world program. But, it may be asked, cannot Christians throughout the world unite in pointing the world to common objectives of the largest and most universal kind – to peace, for instance, and to social justice? Cannot the Church effectively define certain common objectives to which the efforts of all Christians everywhere could be directed, and to which Christians by the force of their persuasion and example could summon all men of good will everywhere? Are the Churches called upon, in this sense, to give a common message to the world?

Certainly all Christians must seek peace and social justice, and must summon others to seek them. But the moment we begin to translate these words into practical action we are beset with

our fundamental difficulties. The question of peace cannot be separated from the question of the political order by which peace is to be secured and kept. One could say that all wars spring from the fact that both sides ardently desire peace but differ as to who is to be the guardian of that peace. The question of social justice cannot be separated from the question of what man is, and of what, therefore, his dues are. The pursuit of both these objectives leads us straight into the issues upon which we are at present most deeply divided. And it does not appear that Christianity offers us a point of view from which we can simply transcend these divisions, or from which we can see with complete certitude that the whole of truth lies on



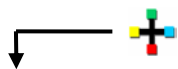
one side of them. We Christians are also deeply involved in and perplexed by these conflicts. There does not appear to be any reason to think that it will ever be otherwise, until that day when we shall know as we have been known.

### **III. The Divine Message**

What then? Are we to conclude sorrowfully that we can give no common message? We must certainly accept the fact that we shall disappoint some expectations as to what can be hoped for from a coming-together of the Churches. But that may be the necessary pre-condition for the hearing of the message which the Churches in fact have to deliver together. The message which the Church has to give to the world is a message from beyond the boundary of the world. It is the message concerning One who died and rose again, and who will come again to judge the quick and the dead. It does not affirm one trend in world history as against others, but brings the whole world, the whole of human life, under judgment and mercy. It deals with issues much vaster than even the survival of civilization on this planet, with issues which would remain even if the most perfect human society conceivable were established. It concerns that which was before the world and that which will be when the world is no more. It meets and overcomes the ultimate self-contradictions of human nature and human history of which all our "problems" are but symptoms, and which would remain if every "solution" for which we labor had been achieved. It can move the world precisely because it is not of the world but has its center of gravity beyond the world. It is summed up in the single sentence with which the Church first faced the world – "Jesus Christ is Lord."

### **IV. The Lordship Of Christ**

The whole of Christian theology is the effort to explicate that confession. Here four things only will be said about its meaning in the context of our present task. It means, firstly, the abandonment of the belief that man can ultimately plan his own history. It is Jesus who is Lord. The tower of Babel will not reach to heaven. Man cannot storm the throne of God. But when he accepts Christ's Lordship and becomes incorporate in him, then the humblest intercessor is a sharer in his kingly and priestly power.



It means, secondly, that there is a radical discontinuity between all human manifestations of power and the ultimate power by which history is shaped toward its end. He who is Lord is he who was decisively rejected by men, crucified, dead, and buried. Human history is not projected in a straight line toward its end. The first among men may be last with God, and the last first. The weakness of God is stronger than men, and the foolishness of God is wiser than men. A cup of cold water may have more ultimate significance than an army-not in the judgment of history-but in that final judgment which lies beyond history, at the other side of death and resurrection.

It means, thirdly, therefore, that our hope is fixed on that which is beyond history. He who is Lord is he who was dead and is alive and has the keys of death and hell. He reigns from beyond that limit which is the ultimate boundary of all human history, and it is he who will bring history to its close. There is no evading the radical other-worldliness of Christianity. That is precisely the secret of its power to change this world. The attempt to tone down this drastic other-worldliness in the interests of this world is a betrayal of this world. Nothing can really move the world except that which has its center of gravity outside the world.

Fourthly, to say that Jesus Christ is Lord is to acknowledge that he alone is to be obeyed here and now. When the other-worldliness of the Gospel is used as a means of escape from the responsibilities of this world, the Gospel is misunderstood and betrayed. The fact that the man in Christ is related directly to the Lord of history who is both saviour and judge, gives him both the possibility and the responsibility of acting significantly in every situation. Our vast interrelated global society oppresses the individual with a sense of the insignificance of his own actions. He tries to escape from that sense of insignificance by losing his identity in some vast anonymous group. But by doing so he loses his humanity. The man in Christ knows that he is dealing in each day's business with the Lord of history and can therefore offer his obedience to him each day, whether it be in the small circle of home or in those vaster worlds of political and economic and cultural life in which the individual so easily loses his significance.

Christians have learned from the totalitarian movements of the past thirty years that belief in the significance of every human person can only be founded upon belief in God. It is no less urgent that



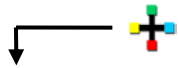
they should learn that belief in the possibility of significant human action can only be founded upon belief in the ultimate eschatological judgment of God. It has been commonly said during the past decades that we live a double life, half in the little world of home and friends, a world of personal meeting where words and deeds all have meaning; and half in the vast impersonal world of modern planned society where the individual is often simply a cog in the machine. What we must see is that the second world will inevitably engulf and destroy the first unless it be true that the final judgment upon human action is not its contribution to the progress of humanity but the final judgment of God.

Does this mean, then, that we are not to plan, not to trouble to calculate the effects of our actions upon the generations to come? No, we must certainly plan. There can be no evading of the responsibilities which God has placed in our hands by the modern developments of applied science. But it means that we must turn our backs upon the illusion that there can be one plan to which all human progress is to be geared, and with which all Christians can be summoned to cooperate. That is the illusion of the builders of Babel. Man is not God, and when he seeks to be as God he becomes the tool of the devil. When he understands the Cross, which shows him both how far he is from God and how near God is to him, he can begin in penitent and loving obedience to do God's will on earth, looking to him who is in Heaven. What the Christian can do and must do in this world, can only be done because he serves a Kingdom not of this world. He can truly serve his day and generation on earth because he loves and longs for Heaven.

## V. Common Witness

If these things are true, it follows that there are three things which the Churches must seek to do together, and the doing of them will be their common witness to the world. Firstly, they must set themselves as they have never yet done to make the Gospel known to every creature. Secondly, they must seek to make the unity which they have in Christ visible, articulate, effective. This is not in order that Christians may be a stronger, more effectively mobilized force among the forces

which shape world history. It is in order that the Gospel may be known in its fullness and truth, freed from the distortions of national and sectional interest, and that the world may see a unity



which is not of man but of God, and seeing it may believe the Gospel. Thirdly, they must seek together, sharing their experiences and uniting their prayers, to help every member to see and do God's will in his own place, his own job, his own nation, and to offer that obedience in every place, whether in success or in failure, whether in the light of fame or in the shadow of obscurity, to the Lord who is at the right hand of the Father, who shall come again to judge, and whose kingdom shall have no end.

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