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THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH AT WAR

THE title over this article gives its limitations. As data are lacking to give a full review of the spiritual developments in the Netherlands as a whole, I have had to restrict myself to the Dutch Reformed Church, which is by far the largest Protestant Church in the Netherlands, omitting reference to the struggle of the Christian Reformed Church and to the Roman Catholic Church¹ except where the Churches acted jointly.

The second aspect is: the Church "at war". The Church has a struggle of its own in defence of God's commandments in the life of the State, which in many ways runs parallel to the secular strife, but is in no way identical with it. Therefore a number of consequences of the secular war which affect the Church have been excluded.

Thirdly the Church is still "at war" and so the picture I will have to give is shifting and dynamic. It is a picture of trends rather than facts.

I

It might seem a curious statement, that the Church thrives on warfare. Still it is an old truism that the Church should be an *Ecclesia militans*. During a secular war other elements are added. The insecurity of all things material shatters the trust men put on earthly belongings and security. It becomes easier to understand the Psalmist who was hunted in the desert of Judah and the Son of Man Who had no place to lay down His head. Both these states of war were present in the Netherlands and they played their part in the work God intended to do to that part of His Church which we call Dutch Reformed.

To many an observer the vitality of the old Dutch Reformed Church had been a miracle and very often the description suggests the dead stick that suddenly came to blossom. But I believe this picture is inaccurate. The Dutch Reformed Church

¹ These two Churches are named explicitly on account of their very strong stand. Neither of them admits National-Socialists to communion. The Dutch Reformed Church, however, did not decree a similar measure.

never was as dead as that, and during the last years of peace God prepared the ground for its strength during the war.

During the 'thirties new currents were breaking their way. Renewed interest for Bible study was spreading and there was a movement for a thorough overhaul of Church-organisation. The latter movement had no success, it is true, but its existence is more important than its success. Other changes were coming, very slowly, too slowly for their fiery protagonists, but coming all the same. Some complained that the Church was losing its place in the life of the people and that it had no message. Again there was some truth in this but more often than not it was a loss of traditionalism and a lack of that particular message the complainers wanted the Church to bring. God, however, did more than make these general preparations; almost at the last minute some important changes in the personnel of the organisation of the Dutch Reformed Church were made.

When the storm broke and shook the old oak of the Church, that seemed so lifeless, breaking some dead twigs and tearing off the dead leaves, the heat of the strife simply forced out the budding life.

II

On May 10th, 1940, the peace that God had granted to the Kingdom of the Netherlands for more than a century was broken. After five days of struggle the enemy was established in the country.

The reaction of the people was that of a man who has been sleeping and is woken up by a blow on the head. It was dumbfounded, bewildered, completely at a loss about its present situation. Still less did it know how to react.

The German occupiers started by behaving very decently indeed, contrary to the expectation, and only a few farseeing men recognised that this was part of the Nazi system. "Never put all your demands at once. Begin by treating the vanquished lightly and they will think they have come off well. This will slacken their will to resist. Then put your next demand and they will no more have the energy to start the struggle again for the little extra. And go on in that way, bit by bit, until the victim has lost his will to resist and his self-esteem, becoming your slave." It sounds like Uncle Screwtape, the senior henchman of the devil, writing to his underling Mr. Wormwood,

but it is Hitler in the last chapter of *Mein Kampf* writing to the German people.

This the Nazis tried to do in the Netherlands. The programme was to nazify the country, including the Churches, bit by bit, and to incorporate it as a pure Aryan part in the glorious Third Reich.

But things were not to go according to plan. The blow of May 1940 had not broken the Dutch people. The people had been stunned, but it was still full of fight. By September it was quite clear that hope was not lost, and those brave men who from the beginning had never faltered in their resolution to continue the fight till the end slowly but surely swung public opinion to their side notwithstanding a beginning reign of terror and a drumfire of Nazi propaganda.

During those first months a number of churchmen played a great part in confirming the determination of the people to resist the annihilation bit by bit of all they deemed good and holy. Some of them were imprisoned or put in concentration camps to be broken in body and if possible in spirit. One very popular preacher from the Hague was put in gaol and when he sang psalms in his cell the Nazi gaolers beat him. When he sang again a second beating followed and so on. He was transferred to the concentration camp in Amersfoort. There God allowed his body to be broken under the "treatment" and granted him to go on praising the Lord with the Church triumphant.¹

I believe this preacher was the first to die. Others suffered imprisonment but were not called to lay down their lives. The fortitude with which they stood their ordeal, however, was a source of strength to the other prisoners.

III

Though many Christians bore testimony to their faith from the beginning, the voice of the Dutch Reformed Church as a body was not so clear from the start. There were various reasons for this lack of clarity. First of all, the Dutch Reformed Church had no representative body to speak for it. There certainly was the General Synod, but under the constitution and practice of the Church, this was rather an administrative than a representa-

¹ It is estimated that up to October 1944 some thirty preachers of the Dutch Reformed Church died in Nazi camps. Other Churches suffered similarly, but exact figures cannot be given.

tive body. Second, the Germans had not attacked the Church and they left it more freedom than to any other institution. Then, of course, there were many timorous people who thought that the Church was very vulnerable and that care should be taken not to endanger the many Church institutions, the schools and the welfare work. Last of all, like every Dutch association, the Church was not united on the issues.

On the first Sunday after the conquest the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church sent a message to the people. It was a confession of sin and an assurance of God's comfort amid the many sorrows. This message, perhaps, did not mean very much to the people, but it meant something to the leaders of the Church, for this was the first sign that the hitherto silent Church desired to speak. This was even more clearly voiced in a message of July 1940 where the Synod said: "May the Reformed Church, which God in His great mercy has given to be a mother to our people, be able once more to become true to its calling on behalf of the whole nation."¹

The turning point came on October 27th, 1940, when two declarations of great importance were read from the pulpits. The first was a message from the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to the nation, stating the causes the Church would have to defend. The second was a letter which the Protestant Churches (the Dutch Reformed Church, the Christian Reformed Church, the Reunited Reformed Church, the Brotherhood of Remonstrants and the Society of Mennonites) had sent to the Reich-Commissioner for Occupied Holland protesting against the enforced dismissal of Jewish officials. I give the text of the first document in full as it clearly shows the spirit and the aim of the action:

The General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, assembled on October 16th and 17th, 1940, has acknowledged with thankfulness the work of the Commission on the problems of the Church, which it had set up.

In deep penitence the Synod, with the Church, confesses its sin before its Head and Lord. It recognises with great thankfulness God's special grace in the fact that to-day so many are called to pray and to work for the Church in our country.

It asks with deep concern that, by God's gracious leading, it may become manifest in the visible Church, that the Church has one Lord, one Faith and

¹ This and other quotations of documents are taken from a booklet of documents collected and edited by Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft on *The Struggle of the Dutch Reformed Church for the Maintenance of the Commandments of God in the Life of the State* (S.C.M. Press, Ltd.). This book covers a number of important documents with a very interesting introduction by the editor.

one Baptism, so that gathered round bread and wine it may remember the death of the Lord till He come.

It declares that the Church has been called through home and foreign missions to deliver the message which has been entrusted to it, the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that our people and all peoples may praise Him.

From this message it follows that the Church has been entrusted with the education of the young and the care of the sick.

In the light of the Word of God it will follow its path through this earthly life. May this Word alone direct its conduct towards the authorities by whose hand it has pleased God to rule us. By the Word the Church knows itself protected ; it knows that it is in its trust.

The Church thanks God that it is able to say what it must say with emphasis even in these days.

The Synod desires :

First to remind the Church of the great heritage of spiritual freedom to which the Bible refers so expressly. The Reformation, which we remember with thankful hearts on Reformation-day, stood up for it and affirmed it anew against everything and in everything.

Secondly, to direct the attention of the Church to the position and the value of the Christian family and the education of youth, keeping in mind the significance of the covenant of grace and the calling of the parents to help in the fulfilment of the vow made at baptism.

Thirdly, to awaken the Church so that it may again honour the day of the Lord. The Church must insist on sanctifying the day of remembrance of the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the preaching of the Word of the Lord.

Faith comes through the preached word and the preached word comes from the Word of God.

May God's blessing be on the country and the people.

" Yea, in the way of Thy judgments, O Lord, have we waited for thee " (Isaiah xxvi. 8).

" Be not slothful in business ; be fervent in spirit ; serving the Lord ; rejoicing in hope ; patient in tribulation ; continuing instant in prayer " (Romans xii. 11-13).

Wait for the manifestation of the everlasting kingdom.

With these documents the Protestant Churches entered the war, a war, as the message of the Synod states explicitly, for the Kingdom of God ; for it was not the task of the Church to participate in the war of the Kingdom of the Netherlands against Nazi Germany. It must be conceded that some confusion between the two wars existed. Those who preached from the pulpit did perhaps not always separate the two wars sufficiently in their own minds and often the listening congregation certainly did not catch the difference. To the Nazis the difference was not clear, either. They saw the Church merely as an opposing secular power that was scheduled to be attacked last of all and in this stage only to be sapped. They complained that they had not attacked the Church, but that the Church had attacked them. Taking the task of a Church as conceived by the Nazis, there was a shadow of truth in this contention. The

question who attacked first was a question as to what was considered the task of the Church; and the Church of the Netherlands was, in accordance with a longstanding tradition, as emphatic in affirming the task of the Church in the maintenance of the commandments of God in the life of the State as the Nazis were in denying it. The dismissal of Jewish officials was deemed by the Nazis to be outside the scope of the Churches, but the Churches declared the regulations on this dismissal contrary to Christian mercy and to the Holy Scriptures. Tactically this point of view forced the Churches to counter-attack before their energy had been sapped.

Important though these points may be in the actual struggle, the real importance of the declarations was that the Church, having overcome all checks in its midst, had clearly stated its message to the nation and had witnessed before all men, together with the other Churches showing that there were no longer six religious associations but One Holy Catholic Church.

These two strains, the ever-renewed open witness of the Church against Nazi infringement of God's commandments and the growing unity of the Churches, are characteristic for the rest of the struggle. Co-operation was achieved even with the Roman Catholic Church and on several occasions Protestants and Roman Catholics protested jointly in the name of Christianity in the Netherlands. This was done for the first time on October 17th, 1942, when a joint committee of three members submitted a memorandum to the Reich-Commissioner stating that the Christian foundations of the nation were being attacked and begging him to take appropriate measures to retrieve the situation.

It is impossible in this article to do more than mention the questions which led to protests. They were made against the renewed legalisation of prostitution (October 1941), the deportation of Jews (July 1942), the labour service (November 1942), forced labour (February 1943), sterilisation of human beings (May 1943), etc. To state its policy the Synod issued some pastoral letters. These are the main battles of the war in which from a material point of view the success was next to nothing. The body of the Netherlands remained in the power of the enemy, and so it will remain till the allied armies bring liberation, but the battle for the soul of the nation has been won by the Church and that is the part of the battle that really matters to it.

IV

The battle of the Dutch Reformed Church against the enemy without gave a new impetus to the movement for rebuilding itself within.

“ In the distress of our people, we become clearly conscious of the distress of the Church, which was unprepared for what it had to do. At that moment many of us passed through great humiliation.” These words, taken from a report of the Synod, give the key-note of the “ movement for rebuilding the congregation ”. A Church divided, without real fellowship, could have no real message and therefore no strength. Those who felt this humbled themselves before the Lord, they confessed their sin, admitting their responsibility for this unhappy state of affairs and asked for a renewal of His grace.

Their prayer was heard. The Church acted, and they worked at the rebuilding of the congregations from within, impressing the members of the Church with the magnitude of the task the Church of Christ is bound by His Word to shoulder and stressing their own responsibility in this respect. They tried to bring home the lesson that the Church is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that faith, prayer and Bible-study have to be living realities in these hard days and that only a real living Church can wage war against the corruptor of Christianity.

It is difficult for anyone who has not lived in the country during the occupation to give an exact picture of this rebuilding of the congregation. The crop springing from the deepening of faith seems to be as diverse as the talents granted to those who have been touched by it. The only thing I can say for certain is that, to use Calvin's words, to live for the honour of God has to many become a new reality.

V

Having written about the inner circle of the Dutch Reformed Church, let us turn to the perimeter, for the results of a strengthening of the power at the centre should be seen most clearly at the forward positions.

These forward positions had been before the war what is called in military language “ forward defended localities ”.

The Church had been on the defensive; it had endeavoured to retain the claim it had had in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it was the established Church, to be the Church of all Protestants in the Netherlands. As an organisation it stood in some ways before the same dilemma as the League of Nations: either to be universal and weak or to be limited and strong. The choice was conditioned by history, and remaining universal in its aim the Dutch Reformed Church, drifting with the liberal tendencies of the nineteenth century, lost on the one side those who did not agree with this tendency and on the other side fought a losing battle against the encroaching materialist philosophy. In defence against materialism a battle was fought and ultimately won on the issue of education, but in the course of that struggle many churchmen got mixed up in politics. All progressive elements were against the Church in this battle and though it is true that the Church only won the struggle thanks to the help of the Christian masses, it is equally true that it lost all the side that claimed to be progressive.

Times were changing. During the last decades the hollowness of the materialist creed was increasingly felt. Less and less to be progressive and a Christian was felt as an incompatibility. The harvest was lying ready, but the old front-line barred the road to the harvesters. With the war the prevalent insecurity ripened more fields ready to bow the heavy head before their Creator, and at the same time the old barrier was broken down. When the Church boldly and clearly spoke its word, those outside wondered: "Is this the same old rusty organisation?"

When, thanks to the renewal within, the Church came out with an evangelising campaign, stronger than it had been able to launch for many decades, the response was impressive. During the first "week of the Church for every man" the churches were full as never before and sometimes more than half of those present were men and women who had stood outside the Church for all their lives. Not only those outside stepped over the fallen barrier, the Church did so too. If there were people who still hesitated to step over the barrier of the past, being reluctant to accept the message from a Church they still regarded with suspicion, but ready to accept the message of Jesus Christ, the Church came over to them and brought them that message in their homes and hearts.

The gain has not been a gain of the moment. The churches remained full and in the liberated parts they remain full to this day. Of course this is only an outward sign of enlarged interest. Only He Who knows the hearts can appreciate how large a gain has been made. But for all we know the perimeter has been widened and the Dutch Reformed Church has won a larger place in the heart of the people of the Netherlands.

Here my review of this war must end. The struggle of the Church on this earth is never won and the war of the Dutch Reformed Church described in these pages is just one of the wars it has to fight, a spectacular one, it is true, but just one of many. Those who are fighting this war are aware of this. They are trying hard to overcome internal differences in the Dutch Reformed Church that have been covered up during the major battles. Much remains to be done, but if it is God's will it will be achieved.

London.

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