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The Meaning of 'Ecumenical' in the Context of a 'Theology of the World'

The task of theology is the attempt to achieve not only understanding but also integrity – that is, wholeness – in Christian thought about God. Today many believe that a crisis has arisen in the ecumenical movement precisely because the churches have either lost or have not yet attained sufficient wholeness in their theological understanding of the church and its mission in the world. It is contended that the ecumenical movement has been, and continues to be, far too 'churchy' in the orientation of its thought and life. A prime example of this failing, according to some, is to be found in the meaning given to the term 'ecumenical' itself. That term is generally thought to refer only to the being and mission of the church, and not at all to the universal history of mankind within the world. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, after carrying out a scholarly inquiry into the biblical and historical uses of the term, speaks of its quite recently acquired meaning in the ecumenical movement: 'ecumenical,' he says, has come to mean 'that which concerns the unity and world-wide mission of the Church of Jesus Christ.' He quite obviously approves of this definition, and thinks that it has a good chance of establishing itself permanently.¹ Some hold, however, that it is precisely in this way that the churches have lost a certain integrity in their Christian thought. For, central to God's concern – so the argument runs – is not really the church, its being and mission. His concern is rather with the whole of his creation and with the universal history of mankind. It is of God's love for the world, expressed in creation and redemption, that the Bible speaks. The church must therefore be seen as derivative in relation to this love for the world and as purely instrumental to its fulfilment. Consequently, the term 'ecumenical' must be restored to its original New Testament and secular meaning and made to signify the whole creation and, at its heart, the whole inhabited world of mankind. Only in a very secondary sense does 'ecumenical' bear upon the church – if indeed it bears upon the church at all. Today in fact, some Christians go so far as to contend that the ecumenical fulfilment of God's purpose for the world really needs no such instrument as the church provides. They argue that the movement away from the church into the world is itself a part of the modern ecumenical movement, inspired by the Spirit of God.

Undoubtedly there is some truth to be mined from positions such as these.

1. For a good account of Visser 't Hooft's view of the church's mission in the world, see the report of an interview, 'Confessing our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour: The Basis of the World Council of Churches,' *International Review of Missions*, 57 (1968), 441–7. Cf. also W. A. Visser 't Hooft, 'Pluralism: Temptation or Opportunity,' *Ecumenical Review*, 18 (1966), 123–49.

But I am convinced that some of the ways in which such truth is expressed lack that integrity which it is theology's service to seek and preserve. Any attempt simply to substitute a theology of the world for a theology of the church seems to me to do much less than justice to the proper subject of theology – which is God in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, as witnessed to in Scripture and heard in the tradition of the church. Of course, it is wise and good that we should re-examine our understanding of the ecumenical movement, and reconsider the theological meaning of the word 'ecumenical,' which expresses the movement's purpose and goal, in the light of that 'theology of the world' which has been so marked a feature of Christian thought and action in recent years. There is a sense in which all living theology is 'answering theology.' Theology remains alive, vigorous, and growing only when it endeavours to rethink the perennial truth of the gospel in terms of the questions addressed to it out of the contemporary situation in which the believing community lives. This statement is not intended to suggest that somehow the church possesses the eternal gospel as some fixed corpus of true belief, to which it addresses questions like someone programming a computer. But it is meant to say that God, in a gracious fidelity of self-giving, continues to bestow on his church, through the gospel of Jesus Christ, ministered in word and sacrament, that reality and truth which is the a priori of the church's life and mission. I am convinced that, in the church, a normative theology, grounded in the church's self-understanding in the light of the gospel, and comprising both the perennial truth of the eternal gospel and the meaning of that truth as expressed in terms of the actual situation in which the church lives, is both possible and necessary.

Let me now state the thesis of this paper. It is my conviction that the definition of the word 'ecumenical' in terms of 'that which concerns the unity and world-wide mission of the Church of Jesus Christ' is a valid definition, but that our understanding of the church's unity and world-wide mission should be rethought in relation to a so-called 'theology of the world.'

I frankly admit that the term 'ecumenical' could suitably be used to signify a right theological understanding of God's relation to the world. It is true, for instance, that God has made of one blood all who dwell on the face of the earth, and consequently that there is a real unity of mankind which in some ways transcends the *koinonia* of the church of Jesus Christ. It is true that the purpose of God's own mission to and in the world is the reconciliation to himself of all men – and indeed of the whole creation – in Jesus Christ. It is true that God has already poured forth the mystery and wonder of his divine love over the whole earth, and has made every creature the object of his care. Thus the words 'unity and mission to the world' need not be restricted theologically to discussion of the unity and world-wide mission of the *Church*. Nevertheless, I believe that there are good reasons for thus restricting them, provided that we do not lose from our theology those understandings of God's relation to the world which we have just tried to express. Some of the reasons for such a restriction are practical, and some theological.

To speak first of practical concerns, we cannot help noting, here and there, a tendency to escape a good deal of the burden of our divisions by adopting the wider view of 'ecumenical' as referring to world no less – or even more – than to church. By that change of emphasis (to put it no more strongly) the spotlight is shifted from the church to the world, with the result that the scandal of our disunity does not appear in so clear a light. From the standpoint of a 'worldly' view of 'ecumenicity' we can readily think that we are serving the ecumenical cause well and truly when we co-operate with one another in common service to the world – whereas the 'churchly' view of 'ecumenicity' insistently reminds us that God has really called us to be one in the body of his Son. The wider view does indeed recognize a distinction between 'interchurch' and 'ecumenical.' But since the locus of the *oikoumene*, in this view, is the world, and the churches are simply servants of its cause, all interchurch activity as such will be supposed to serve an ecumenical end (in the worldly sense). Thus the broader understanding of 'ecumenical' may all too easily allow us to escape the scandal of our life in separate churches, whereas the narrower view compels us to recognize that God has called the church to manifest, in its total life and service, an ontic unity of faith and love – a unity which the New Testament describes as a *koinonia* in Jesus Christ and his Spirit.

It may well be true that vitality has gone out of the ecumenical movement because of the introverted character of the churches' concern for their own life. But I believe that vitality has seeped out of the ecumenical movement no less because our churches have failed to give concrete expression in worship and life to that unity in Jesus Christ which we have so often acknowledged verbally as God's will for his church. If we will not *do* the truth which we know and confess, we must suffer the consequence of our refusal – a loss of vitality and growth. I am afraid that at least some expressions of the wider view of 'ecumenicity' tend to spare the churches the necessity or urgency of confessing their failure to hear and do God's will.

There are several theological reasons for wishing to reserve the term 'ecumenical' for 'that which concerns the unity and world-wide mission of the Church of Jesus Christ.' Owing to limitations of space, I can touch on only one or two of those reasons in this brief essay.

In the first place, the restriction helps to safeguard the truth that the church is uniquely called to be the place and the servant of God's saving presence in the world. Undoubtedly the boundary-line between the community of faith and the communities of unbelief has been – and still is – too rigorously and too self-assuredly drawn by the Christian churches. There may well be those – and more than a few of them, at that – who are 'of the world' and who nonetheless bring the charity of Christ to expression in their lives of love and service, in ways which surpass much that is seen and known within the churches. Yet these 'outsiders' have no immediate relation to the institutions of the church. In the light of the test set out in Matthew 25:31-46, these men

must be recognized as brethren of Jesus Christ, who in some way are knit into fellowship with him. Nevertheless, however blurred our drawing of the boundaries may have to be, the distinction must be maintained between those who, in penitence and faith, respond to, and share in, the calling to a life of witness, service, and fellowship in the gospel, and those who do not accept that calling. I make no assertion here concerning the ultimate destiny of men – including Christian believers themselves – beyond expressing the hope, which has its roots in faith and love, that in the end all men will know the salvation of God. But I do assert, in fidelity to the apostolic witness, and as a humble and penitent reminder of our Christian calling, that God wills to create, through the proclamation of the gospel in preaching and sacraments, a people, a household, a body of Christ, which will be a unique locus of his presence in the world and a unique servant of the reconciling mission of his Son. It is the reality of the church's unique calling that makes the scandal of division so intolerably great.

A second theological reason for the restricted use of the term 'ecumenical' is that such a restriction may serve as a normative check on the exuberance of those Christians who, in their desire to do away with all distinctions, theological or otherwise, which in principle separate men from men, seem to me to ride roughshod over Christian truth in the name of Christian love. Here we approach a series of difficult subjects which cannot be explored with sufficient care and in sufficient depth in this paper. Yet these issues must be investigated if we hope to make any real progress in our understanding of 'ecumenicity.' I shall devote the rest of this paper to brief comments on them.

The following are some of the questions that present themselves to me. Is it right to speak of the whole history of mankind as salvation-history? If so, precisely in what sense? Is God not revealed as much in the historical movements of our time as in any message which the church believes itself commissioned and empowered to bear? Does not the encounter between God and man in the conscience of the individual constitute a kind of fellowship which makes all men who say 'Yes' to God fellow-members with those who belong to the body of Christ? If it does, then are not the sincere believers in a non-Christian religion also members of the true community of faith? It is questions such as these that I must try to answer, if only in a summary way.

My present view is that a distinction must be drawn between salvation-history and general history, even though, eschatologically speaking, these histories have a common origin and end. That love of God for man which issued in the world's creation, restoration, and fulfilment in the Son, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ our Lord, is common to both histories, but God's love is expressed in the two histories in different ways. General history is not only a locus for salvation-history; it is also a locus for that gracious presence of God with man which preserves man in being and enables him to bring forth the fruits of creation's goodness, despite the fallenness of nature and the sin of man. It is true that in the grace of God these fruits of human goodness are

given an eternal destiny. Thus, if salvation means the fulfilment in the end, in the Kingdom of God, of all that is humanly good, it must be admitted that universal history, as the continuing source of things humanly good, contributes to salvation. It will follow that all good men who serve the human good are, in this sense, servants of God and his Kingdom. It is for this reason that our Lord says: 'He that is not against us is for us' (Mark 9:40). But if salvation essentially means, not the penultimate good to which all good men contribute, but that ultimate good which is Christ's victory over sin and death, then those others do not contribute to salvation, and indeed, apart from Christ, know nothing of what God knows of, and wills for, them. That is why our Lord says: 'He who is not with me is against me' (Matt. 12:30). If the good fruits of man's life and labour in humanizing the world which God has made man's home have an eternal destiny beyond death, and if these men, in spite of the sin which perversely destroys communion between themselves and both God and their fellow-men, have a destiny of fellowship with God and with one another in the end, that is because, at the heart of universal history, God has accomplished his saving work in Jesus Christ.

It is true that this saving work is already, as God's unique act of reconciliation, an objective fact, so that there is a sense in which all men are already reconciled to God. But the Scriptures never seem clearer to me than in their witness to the truth that man participates in this reconciliation, so that it becomes effective in human history, only through some kind of faithful hearing of, and response to, the gospel which announces it. It is in order that this gospel may bear its fruits of faith, hope, and love that the church is called to unity and mission in the world.

Again, my present view is that general history is not a medium of revelation, although it is a locus of God's presence and action in the creation and preservation of man. As I have said, universal history is the arena which God constantly gives to man, so that he may there accomplish a human work. Or perhaps it is better to say that nature is the gracious, constantly renewed gift of God to man, and that history is what man makes of that gift. I must confess that those modern Christian views which hold that universal history is *at one and the same time* a source of God's self-revelation *and* the desacralized sphere in which man holds a mandate from God to live a thoroughly secular life, contain a contradiction which I find it rationally difficult to comprehend. It is because God is found in that history which is uniquely his own that he does not need to be sought in that history which he makes man's own. Here too, 'if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36). The church, as the witnessing servant of the word of God's self-revelation in the history of Jesus, is the God-ordained instrument for making him known in the midst of the universal history of man. It is through that service that the church enables Christ to reign in the worldly life of man, by setting men free for an authentic human life and creative human achievement. As Bonhoeffer has affirmed: 'The purpose and aim of the dominion of Christ is not to make

the worldly order godly or to subordinate it to the church but to set it free for true worldliness.²

If these considerations are valid, it seems to follow that the fellowship of men in their encounter with God through his self-revelation in Jesus Christ is unique, and therefore different from that experience of ultimate mystery which some interpret as an encounter with God in the conscience of mankind. Of course, no one is excluded in principle from the unique fellowship which is founded on the universal call of the gospel, addressed to all men. Moreover, even those who respond do so only by virtue of the grace which is given to them to be ministers of faith, and also of love, on behalf of all men. Their persons are in no way favoured, even if their calling is unique – though it would be false and ungrateful for them not to acknowledge that they do receive, in the measure of their faith, gifts of peace and hope which God wills to bestow on all. I must add that it would also be false and ungrateful not to acknowledge that the members of the community of faith and love, the church, are beholden to all men, believing or unbelieving, who do good. They owe to them that fulfilment of their humanity which man achieves in his worldly life through the grace of God's creative and providential care. All men who seek the human good minister to me the wholeness of my being as their fellow-creature in this God-given world. And fellowship on the human level of secularity is a large part of the human good which is served by the universal ministry of man to his fellowmen. But the grateful recognition of this truth should not lead us to deny that God wills for us, here and now, a fellowship with himself and with one another as forgiven, renewed creatures in Jesus Christ our Lord – a fellowship which is the very essence of the restored image in which we have been made new.

Along somewhat similar lines we find our answer to the question of the relation of the church to non-Christian religions. Without attempting to develop more answers than I have room for, let me simply say that, at the moment, I can find no theological justification for asserting that these religions are a source for the saving knowledge of God, in the narrower sense of 'salvation' indicated above. But they are a source of 'salvation' in the broader sense, in so far as they contribute to the wholeness of our humanity as men. Religion, like art and science and morality – though at a dimension of depth greater than any that these others plumb – is man's creative account of his encounter with the world. It is a part of that humanizing of life in the world for which man has received God's mandate. We owe a great debt to the Hindu, to the Buddhist, and to many others for the illuminating account of man's encounter with creation in its depths which is given in the great literature of their religions and in the lives of religious men. But it is true of them, as it is true of all men – including ourselves – that they need to bring their thought

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Fontana Library Edition (London: Collins, 1964), pp. 328f. Cf. W. O. Fennell, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Man of Faith in a World Come of Age,' *CJT*, 8 (1962), 172–80.

and the life under the sovereignty of Christ. Therefore, in ways suited both to the gospel and to their humanity, they must be offered the renewing and fulfilling reality and truth of God and man which are to be found in Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, let me say that I agree with those who warn us that, at the present time, we are in danger of developing 'two cultures' of the ecumenical spirit – one world-centred and one church-centred. In my judgment, such schizophrenia is to be avoided at all costs. We ought not to be forced to choose, for example, between the Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* and its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, both of which are documents of ecumenical significance for all of us. For he who is Lord over both church and world has made the unity of the *church* our 'ecumenical' mission, so that the world may believe in him, and in believing find its true freedom to be *world*.