

6-1-1969

The Gospel and the Ecumenical Movement

Robert P. Scharlemann
University of Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Scharlemann, Robert P. (1969) "The Gospel and the Ecumenical Movement," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 40, Article 40.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol40/iss1/40>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

The Gospel and the Ecumenical Movement

ROBERT P. SCHARLEMANN

The first conference on "Life and Work," held in Stockholm in 1925, appealed to Christians to repent the divisions among them and to make the gospel the decisive power in all areas of life. This conference—the "Nicea of ethics," as it came to be called—was not summoned to discuss the theological or dogmatic questions which divide the churches; it was called to address the churches' task of working together in the public life. The invitation declared the world situation to be so serious that Christians could not afford to await the reunion of churches before setting "hearts and hands" to the common effort of letting the will of God be done on earth as in heaven. Thus a connection between the gospel and the ecumenical movement was explicitly drawn near the start of the 20-century ecumenical movement, since the World Council of Churches, formally established in Amsterdam in 1948, grew out of these conferences on Life and Work (1925, 1937) and those on Faith and Order (1927, 1937). For the conferences on Life and Work the gospel meant fundamentally the power of God's love to transform all the areas of life. More specifically, it had to do with rebuilding the world that had been ravaged by the First World War.

If one wanted to be sophistic one might, in retrospect, wonder how it was ever possible to appeal to the gospel as if the gospel

Robert P. Scharlemann is professor of Protestant theology and contemporary religious thought at the University of Iowa.

were something on which there was universal agreement in contrast to doctrine, in which there was diversity and division. The invitation to Stockholm in 1925 does suggest, by its being issued at all, that all Christians know what the gospel is but that differing doctrines keep them from acting on that common faith. Perhaps it sees as the chief difficulty the fact that Christians do not let the gospel be the decisive power in life, even though they know what it is. To these suggestions a critic might object that the problem is not that the churches are unable to act upon the gospel which they in common understand, but that they do not have a common understanding of what the gospel even is and of what should be done in the name of the gospel. As valid as such objections might be in the abstract, however, they are pointless to raise at this late moment because they have already been answered by the course of the ecumenical movement itself, in the sense that the movement no longer depends, if it ever did, on such questions being answered.

Yet it is worth considering how the gospel in its different interpretations bears theologically on the phenomenon of ecumenism in the present century. To what extent is the gospel, however interpreted, a positive theological foundation for ecumenism, and to what extent might it be a hindrance? For purposes of such a consideration one must, obviously, make a distinction between a broader and a narrower use of the term itself. Broadly taken, "gos-

pel" means the whole content of the biblical message which culminates in the New Testament. Narrowly taken, it is that aspect of the biblical message which declares man's liberation from bondage to the law, a declaration which, if effective, brings about the freedom it announces. These two meanings of the term will guide the discussion in the present essay.

I

Theologians involved in the ecumenical movement have made explicit appeal to biblical material as warrant for uniting the churches. One of the most important of such references is the 17th chapter of the Gospel According to John, the "high-priestly prayer" of Jesus. "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me" (John 17:20-21). Thus, in *The Pressure of Our Common Calling* Visser 't Hooft appeals to this prayer in defining the common calling of Christians and in reiterating the exhortation of the Letter to the Ephesians: "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love" (Eph. 4:1-2). Next in prominence to the high-priestly prayer of Jesus is the picture of the church as the body of Christ. "We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5; compare 1 Cor. 12:12-28; Eph. 4:4,25; 1 Cor. 10:17). Other passages from the New Testament which come into consideration, though not with the same degree of promi-

nence, are such texts as John 10:16, which speaks of the "one flock, one shepherd."

The use of such biblical references shows how the gospel broadly understood has motivated the ecumenical movement from the beginning. The movement was sustained not so much by the conviction that the church needed a larger power base to be effective in the world as by the conviction that God's will for the church was to exhibit the unity which it has in Christ, its Head. Motivation by the gospel means here that one's aim and desire are to manifest to the world the will of God; it means doing something solely on the grounds that the action in question is a way of witnessing to the grace of God in Christ for the world. The other side of this motivation is an opposition to sectarianism on the grounds that it is a form of disobedience to God's will. Sectarianism makes it unnecessarily difficult to attest the unity the church has in Christ. The divisions in the church deny the message the church tries to proclaim. Men have been reconciled with each other because they have been reconciled with God.

No doubt this theology reflects a historical trend, noticeable throughout Western culture, as much as it reflects exegetical research. I refer, of course, to the trend designated by such terms as the "worldliness" of the gospel and the "secularity" of reality. Previous ages in the church certainly were not ignorant of the biblical references that ecumenical theologians employed as warrant for the movement. But the importance of witnessing to the world by means of an actual unity which the Christian church can display did not play an important role—at least not for several centuries—because the yearning of men

for unity, for a reconciliation of the human race, was not the determining force it became in the 20th century. That theological considerations reflect such cultural and historical trends should neither surprise nor alarm one. It suggests only that for ecumenical theology the specific form in which the gospel is to be witnessed in this century is that of a united church in which the fact of reconciliation becomes visible to mankind. It does not suggest or imply—contrary to the more virulent critics of ecumenism—that theologians have subverted the gospel by making it a tool for humanistic aims.

Taken in this broader sense, the gospel, as the will of God for man today, has continually been the guiding motive of the ecumenical movement. Secondary motives—the ambitions of church men, for example—may indeed have played a role, as they always do, but it is difficult to regard them as the chief or fundamental motivation of the movement itself. The aim of achieving a united church has been based on the conviction that such a unity was the will of God, for through that unity the church could give effective witness to the world that in Christ God has indeed reconciled the world to Himself.

Of course, this is not meant to say that a desire to do the will of God in the present world leads one inescapably into ecumenism. Such an obedience to the gospel has indeed been a direct motivation for the movement, but not unambiguously so. Obedience to the gospel might also result in resisting ecumenical efforts on the grounds that they contradict the will of God that man maintain himself separate from the world. A reading of the Scriptures might as well lead one to regard the

ecumenical movement as only one more exhibition of man's pride—not that the men who support it are by psychological makeup or character prideful, but that any effort to act on the assumption that the grace of God in this world can be made more visible or manifest is a repetition of the basic error which theologically defines man's distorted relation to God. Accordingly, even in this broad sense of the term, the gospel has been understood not only as a warrant for ecumenism, on the ground that a unity of the church is an obedience to the will of God for the church in the world, but also as warrant for opposition, on the ground that a united church is a Tower of Babel. One can cut through this ambiguity only by a conception of the will of God which transcends this contradiction between obedience and disobedience and between the two forms of obedience as well as of disobedience. To do so would, however, take us beyond the aim of the present essay.

II

The gospel has played into the ecumenical movement in another sense. Not only has it meant that exegetical warrant can be adduced for thinking of the church as an actual unity manifesting to the world the reconciliation accomplished in Christ; it has also been connected to man's exposure to the unknown, which he must face either with fear of the God of law or with trust in the God of grace. In this sense too the gospel, as the ground for trust, has been a continuing motive power in ecumenical theology.

According to the interpretation Elert and others have given it, Lutheran theology has from the start been characterized by

the fundamental distinction between law and gospel. Whatever may be the historical merits of such interpretation, the tradition of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was originally shaped by C. F. W. Walther, a teacher for whom the distinction between law and gospel was quite basic in doctrine and practice, at once the most difficult and the most important distinction to make and realize. In this context a consideration of how the gospel affects ecumenism may appropriately take the more specific form of how the gospel presupposes and breaks the binding power of the law. "Law" here refers to all of the fixed structures in which a man is caught and by which he is held in bondage. "Gospel" refers to the power that breaks the bondage, liberating man who is in the structure without setting up new structures alongside of them. Thus the gospel does not free man from having a specific calling or ranking or place in the world of political and social relations. However, it frees him to perform his service through that calling because it makes known to him that his acceptance before God does not depend on his work. He is free to live in the orders of creation because the declaration that he is accepted not on account of what he does but on account of what Christ has done for him is a power that converts the created orders from a law of bondage to an occasion of service. According to this understanding the difference between a man who has heard the gospel and one who has not heard it is not the difference between being in one kind of structure (secular society) and being in another kind of structure (church). It is the difference between being in a structure as a prisoner, for whom the structure is a perpetual judgment and

threat of damnation, and being in it as a willing servant, one for whom the structure is the means by which he performs his service to other men.

The gospel in this sense too has an ambiguous relation to the ecumenical movement. On the one hand it has worked against efforts for a concrete ecumenism. For if it is true that the gospel is not a new structure of things but the knowledge of the Word of grace that pervades all structures, then it follows that efforts to unite the existing Christian denominations are a matter of sociological or political concern but not directly a theological concern. The question in which the gospel is implicated is not whether the church can provide a sociological picture of reconciliation but only whether the gospel can be heard in the existing structures. One united church is neither any better nor any worse for an effective proclamation of the gospel than a multiplicity of denominations, so long as in each of those denominations the gospel is preached and the sacraments administered. On this account, attempts to justify the ecumenical movement by reference to biblical passages, such as the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, might be taken as potentially dangerous because they confuse theological and social concerns. They seem to imply that a unified structure of the church is closer to the gospel than is the existence of multitudinous denominations. But if, as the distinction between law and gospel contends, the gospel has no independent structure because it can inhabit all structures, then efforts to build a united church in the name of the gospel can even be regarded as seditious for the gospel.

It is hard to judge the actual extent to

which the gospel understood in this way has been an inhibiting force on the ecumenical movement because in concretely empirical terms it is difficult to distinguish between one who proposes this argument out of genuine theological insight and one who proposes it out of fear of the new or out of a vested interest in the existing structures. Since this is a question that could be answered only by detailed sociological, psychological, and theological investigation, which, as far as I can ascertain, has not been conducted at all, one can leave the matter with having noted the two possibilities that this understanding of the gospel contains, one of which aids while the other restricts ecumenism.

The restricting effect depends on seeing how a concern for the gospel argues against concrete ecumenism. If it is true that the gospel does not call forth independent structures, but only pervades and uses existing structures, then it is wrong to assume that the existence of the gospel has any stake in ecumenism. A visibly united church would not of itself be any clearer a proclamation of the gospel than a church split into a multitude of denominations and sects.

Those theologians who consider the law-gospel distinction fundamental in the sense described may hold aloof from ecumenical efforts to prevent a misunderstanding of the gospel as a new law. But—and this is what makes the argument ambiguous—the same claim can be used as a “theological” cover for personal or political aims.

Quite apart from possible misuse, a theological position has been formulated on the basis of a distinction between law and gospel that might naturally lead to a nonparticipation in the ecumenical move-

ment. For such a position the gospel would inhibit rather than foster concrete ecumenism. I might add incidentally that I am not trying to assess the validity of basing a theological position on this distinction. This has been a subject of vigorous debate even among Lutherans, and I think it is sufficient for this essay to ascertain that the consequence of such a position might legitimately be an indifference to the ecumenical movement.

On the one hand, therefore, the gospel can inhibit ecumenism. On the other hand it has also worked for the ecumenical movement insofar as the *courage* to break down existing divisions, even when the outcome is not clear in advance, is ultimately a *trust in the gospel* of grace—a trust that man is justified by God and not by his own deeds of trying to be loyal. The relation between the gospel and the ecumenical movement is equally subtle here if one tries to distinguish between proper theological use of theological reasons and covert use of theological reasons for personal or political aims. But again one does not need to go into that phase of the problem. Instead, one needs only to see how the gospel as the antithesis of law can be enlisted to support the ecumenical movement. The argument in this case is based on a recognition that the existing structures of the church can become a substitute for the true gospel, which both blunts the law and obscures the true gospel. There is a familiar distinction between *securitas*, or complacency, and genuine trust in the gospel. Complacency treats the gift of forgiveness as if it were self-evident—“forgiving is God’s business.” If the existing church fosters this, rather than confidence in the gospel, the church’s existence

is a false gospel. It then falls prey to the same critique which might be leveled against confusing a unified church with the form of the gospel. That is to say, it confuses the gospel with a structure of *securitas* because it blunts the law and inhibits the true gospel. In this setting the emergence of an ecumenical spirit is a new proclamation of the gospel directed to those for whom existing ecclesiastical structures, instead of liberating men from the law, confirm the law in the form of a pseudogospel. The question of obedience to the gospel then turns into the question of whether one can regard present denominational patterns as unessential for the gospel in the world. One who believes that the denominations *must* be preserved, or that loyalty to the gospel is a matter of law, of what one *must* do, has turned the gospel into a law as much as has a man who believes a united church is a *conditio sine qua non* of the gospel in the world.

The dialectic of law and gospel implies that there is a constant temptation to turn the gospel into a law, and consequently a continuing temptation to make of the institution or word or idea through which one has first heard the gospel an essential condition for the gospel. If the actual institutions are such that the proclamation of the gospel is heard as a continual, easy, and self-evident reassurance and never as the breaking in of God's assurance after self-assurance has disappeared, then the willingness to let go of those institutions in the interest of something new and as yet unknown (but accepted as the gift of God's grace) is the willingness to live by the gospel instead of the law or a pseudogospel. The argument for the ecumenical movement here is, in other words, based

on the contention that what has happened in the denominational churches is a contradiction of the gospel. Instead of presenting a proclamation which frees the existing order of things, the denominations have become additional orders. Instead of letting the gospel be heard as the real liberation from law, the institution of a pseudogospel hides the radical threat of the law. After all, the belief that it is we who are loyal to the gospel, rather than God who is loyal to man, is as much a subversion of the law-transcending gospel as is the belief that the realization of an institutional unity in the church would automatically be a clearer exhibition of the divine reconciliation than is the fragmentation of Christendom. And in such a setting hearing the gospel would have to mean being freed from the pseudogospel of *securitas* and from its institutionalization in the existing ecclesiastical order.

III

The ambiguous relation of the gospel to the ecumenical movement which has just been outlined seems to me to be more than a description of how a theology centrally based on the distinction between law and gospel has in fact interpreted the ecumenical movement. The ambiguity resides in this theology itself. The distinction between law and gospel does not by itself yield a decision concerning the ecumenical movement, for participation as well as nonparticipation in the ecumenical movement can be interpreted as a failure to trust the gospel. An antagonist of the movement can argue that the concrete unity of the church is God's responsibility, not man's; man's only business is to proclaim the gospel. A protagonist can argue that preservation of the purity of the gos-

pel is God's business, not man's; man's only business is to act on the freedom the gospel proclaims. The first can argue that to make the achievement of actual unity in Christendom an aim is to confuse the gospel, which has no structure of its own, with the law, which determines all structures. The second can argue that to emphasize the need to preserve the gospel from confusion with specific structures is to confuse the warranty of the gospel with the warranty of the law, for if the gospel is really God's free grace freely proclaimed, its existence does not depend on whether men intend to be loyal to it or not; it will be heard, regardless of man's intentions, and consequently the human task is not to be concerned with whether the gospel is purely proclaimed but to work at putting man's response into a better form. The first bases his argument on an identification between the *existing* structures and the divine order; the second bases his argument on an identification between the *changing* structures and the divine order. The first need not be alarmed by the fact that the existing churches are not what they should be because, after all, nothing is; and the gospel can be heard equally well in all existing orders because they are all fallen orders anyhow. The second need not be alarmed by the possibility that he might be disloyal to the gospel because the warranty for whether the gospel is heard is, after all, the divine Spirit and not the intentions or aims of men; to assume that one can preserve the purity of the gospel by doing or not doing anything is to confuse the freedom of the gospel with the bondage of law.

If this kind of ambiguity resides in the theological position itself rather than in the

use made of it for nontheological purposes, it follows that some principle in addition to the distinction between law and gospel is needed for deciding whether or not to participate in the ecumenical movement. The decision itself seems to have been made already by all the major denominations in favor of the movement rather than against it. To the extent that there is any development at all in the positions of those church bodies which have held aloof from the movement, it seems to be toward rather than away from participation. This raises the question of what reasons led to that decision.

What seems to have happened is that an increasing mutual trust among Christians and a recognition of problems that are greater than the questions which divide the various denominations have shifted the whole decision from a distinctly theological to a more ecclesiological context. It may sound strange to say so, but the ecumenical question seems to have lost significance as a theological question and to have become a question of ecclesiastical policy, of determining whether a different kind of church is more in accord with present human ideals than a divided church. Denominational divisions are felt to be dehumanizing, and that is the chief reason for espousing some form of ecumenical participation.

In addition to this, a new force has recently appeared on the scene. I am referring to the "radical" or "revolutionary" spirit in that corps of Christian people who are now asking whether the church in any institutional form at all is really necessary or whether perhaps it is only unnecessary baggage carried over from the cultural past. Of course, that question has been asked be-

fore, and the reasons given for supporting or, as the case may be, not supporting an institutional church have also been given before. Yet the question seems at the moment to possess an urgency out of proportion to the lack of novelty with which it is raised or answered. What may therefore have happened, without anyone's really noticing it, is that the ecumenical movement has changed from a theological to a technical concern and that the theological concern with which it was long identified is now located elsewhere. It now resides in the problem of the present and the future, of the sacred and the profane, of the life and death of the world itself—and the

question is not whether one church or a multiplicity of denominations is a better witness to the gospel but whether civilization can even survive, or, to put it theologically, whether the gospel can break through the law of the future as fate. To the extent that articles in theological and religious journals are any indication, such a shift seems indeed to have taken place: the ecumenical question has become a question of ecclesiastical policy, and the theological question of the gospel has become the quest for something that can free man from current abuses of power and from the sure destruction that political power as now exercised forebodes.