CHAPTER 2

Christian Ecumenism and Its Internal Historical Contradiction

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Ecumenism is a fundamental principle of Christian thought, which marks the transformation of Christianity from a primitive religion as one branch of Judaism to a worldwide one. Ecumenism has two levels of meanings from two different perspectives. First, from an ecclesiastical perspective, Ecumenism means the universality of Christianity, that is, the establishment of the church is not restricted by the differences of culture, race and social class, and furthermore, all national and local churches merge into a single ecumenical unity. Secondly, from a soteriological perspective, ecumenism also refers to the salvation for everyone on the ground. Jesus Christ will provide redemption for all humanity, embracing every mortal soul. The latter is called “universal salvation”, or simply “universalism”. Since this doctrine has generally been rejected by many orthodox Christian churches, this paper, henceforth, will discuss the origin and development of Ecumenism, and its contradictions from an ecclesiastical perspective instead of soteriological one.

Part One

Ecumenism first appeared as a concept in the Hellenistic period without any religious connotation. The word “ecumenism” is derived from Greek (oikoumene), meaning “the whole inhabited world”. Its derivative meaning refers to the “whole world” under the influence of Greek and Roman civilizations. It is generally acknowledged that ecumenism derived from the Stoic philosophy of natural law, that the cosmos is like God’s body, immersed in universal reason, or “logos.” Therefore, where there was the reason-based Greek civilization brought by the sword of Alexander the Great, there were also other citizens of the world-state, with no more existence than “barbarians.” The phrase “People feel and think alike” is the concise expression of ecumenism. Yet, as Tillich explained, ecumenism, or universalism of the Roman Empire, meant something negative and positive at the same time. “Negatively it meant the
breakdown of national religions and cultures. Positively it meant that the idea of mankind as a whole could be conceived at that time.  

During the Hellenistic period, ecumenism was promoted as expanding in one direction only. All the “savages” outside Greece had no alternative but to embrace Greek culture, resulting in the assimilation and extinction of diverse local religions. The period of Roman Empire saw a further development of ecumenism. According to the research of Roland Roberson, a renowned modern American sociologist, the universalism of the Roman Empire is similar to the modern idea that “the global is linked to the local,” that is, there is a dialectical relation between the universal and the individual, between unity and diversity. Roberson’s point can be supported by the appearance of early Christianity itself. A peasant coming from a remote corner in Palestine was sentenced and executed by the Roman procurator, whereas “the Movement of the Kingdom of God” (A. Schweitzer says), initiated by him, eventually conquered the whole empire. This illustrates that a marginal, non-mainstream culture can affect a mainstream culture, a perfect manifestation of the Roman idea of universalism. As a result, a number of ecclesiastical historians consider the ancient Roman Empire to be a giant cultural melting pot. For example, as W. Walker clearly pointed out, “The diversity in the empire was scarcely less remarkable than its unity. This variety was nowhere more apparent than in the realm of religious thought.”

The Christian idea of ecumenism adhered directly to Roman universalism, stemming from the development of church doctrine as well as the biblical teachings itself. According to church doctrine, all churches in the early Christian period were equal and possessed free will. Due to the ruin of Jerusalem in 70 AD, it was virtually impossible for the local church in Palestine to function as the home church or central authority for all churches. Accordingly, churches were maintained in a “horizontal” relationship. Ecclesiastical authority had no alternative but to resort to the apostolic writings including Gospels and the correspondence or to the so-called “Holy Spirit inspiration.” After Christianity became an open and legitimate religion, the Council of Nicaea in 325 and Council of Constantinople in 381 were confirmed by the Church as its first and second ecumenical council, of which the core product was, on one hand, the