ABSTRACT

Many critics and supporters alike of the World Council of Churches (WCC) contend that it has shifted from its original Christocentric and Trinitarian “Basis.” Some, especially conservative evangelicals, see this shift as a movement away from Christian evangelism and the uniqueness of Christ to the unification of all humanity in a syncretism of religions in which the gospel is replaced by social work. Others have identified the shift to be a movement away from Christology to cosmic pneumatology, or from an eschatological vision of human unity to a narrow vision of church unity, or from a Christocentric universalism, which did not allow for the wider vision of the unity of humankind, to a fuller Trinitarian vision encompassing all of life and all of creation in one grand view.

The argument of this dissertation is that the shift in understanding of twentieth-century ecumenical church-world relation is not from Christology to pneumatology, or from Christological universalism to Trinitarian universalism, or in a loss of eschatological vision. Ecumenical theological thinking has consistently remained within its Christological and Trinitarian “Basis” and has been consistently eschatological. The shift is from an understanding of the church as the sphere of redemption to that of the world as the sphere of redemption. The proposal in this thesis is that this shift is best understood by a contrast between two interpretive models which may be described as “the Church as Winner of the World” (the Winner model) and “the Church as Sign to the World” (the Sign model). In the former model, the church understands itself as called to win the world for Christ by means of the gospel and in that way to realize the unity of humankind. In the latter model, the church does not consider itself as standing over against the world in order to win it for Christ, but rather, in solidarity with it, as a sign to it of God’s reconciliation of all things in Christ. The shift in the twentieth-century ecumenical understanding of the church-world relation is the result of a move from the Winner model to the Sign model.