

THE ORTHODOX-REFORMED DIALOGUE

Agreed statement on Christology

Limassol, Cyprus, January 1994

1. In accordance with the Nicene Creed we affirm the basic interconnection between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ. Our common belief in One God, the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is bound up with our belief in Jesus Christ who reveals the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It affirms that the God of the Old Testament Scriptures who led his people Israel from oppression to new shores of freedom is the Father of Jesus of Nazareth who sends forth his Life-giving Spirit. He is one and the same God who encounters us in the resurrected Christ and in the Holy Spirit acting in his Church.

As regards the connection between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation, Orthodox and Reformed seem to follow two different kinds of approach which, however, are not incompatible. The Orthodox approach takes its beginning in the Mystery of the Incarnation which includes the whole saving economy as it is proclaimed in the Bible, confessed in the Patristic Tradition and experienced in the Divine Liturgy. The starting point of the Reformed approach to Christology and the mystery of the Trinity is the scriptural witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Both agree that their teaching about Trinity and Incarnation reflects the encounter with the reality of God as revealed in Christ.

2. Following the witness of the Gospel as it is declared in the second article of the Nicene Creed, Orthodox and Reformed confess that Jesus Christ is the eternal and Only-begotten Son and *Logos* of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, who became fully human, without ceasing to be God, by being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Both confess the apostolic faith that the Incarnation took place in the fullness of time, when God "sent his own Son to be born of a woman under the Law to redeem those under the Law and grant to us adoption as children" (Gal 4.4-5). Thus understood, the Incarnate Son is the manifestation of the Holy Trinity in the sphere of earthly human history. The Incarnate Son as a concrete historical person demonstrates that human nature is not fundamentally foreign to God. It reveals rather what was hidden in the primordial nature of the *Logos*. Through the Incarnation the life of God is manifested under the conditions of human existence. God assumes the human condition and nature in all their aspects and dimensions. All this takes place for us human beings and for our salvation, so that we may become participants in the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2.3) hidden in Christ.
3. The Incarnation of the Son of God belongs to the very same existence and life of God. As the divine will to create the world and humanity is connected with God's being, so also the will to save them was "a mystery hidden before the ages in God who created all things" (Eph 3.9). Creation and incarnation, then, belong together to God's original plan. Thus, Christ's redemptive work "was predestined before the foundation of the world, but was manifested in the end of time" (I Pet 1.20). Being the Head of all creation by whom all things were formed the Son who was by nature eternally of the same uncreated nature with the Father and the Spirit, received to Himself the created human nature and became fully human in body and soul so that through it he might unite himself with the entire creation.
4. In the language of the Fathers and the Councils of the early church, Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God unites human and divine natures in his own single person (*hypostasis*). The properties of each nature belong to the whole person in whom both natures are united without being confused or separated. So Jesus Christ acts both as divine and as human, exercising both kinds of properties as appropriate in communion with each other. In this sense there is a "communication of attributes" within the hypostatic union as the divine nature acts through the human and the human under the guidance of the divine. Strictly speaking, however, it is to the *person* of Jesus Christ as the

incarnate Word that the properties of both natures are correctly ascribed. The distinct properties of the one nature are not transferred to the other *nature*: the divine nature does not acquire human characteristics nor the human nature divine attributes. What can be said is that through the *perichoresis* or interpenetration of the two natures in the unity of Christ's person the human nature is restored, sustained and glorified as the *new and perfect humanity* of the last Adam, recapitulating the history of the first Adam. In the Orthodox tradition this is called *theosis* (commonly rendered as "deification"), but this does not imply that Christ's humanity ceases to be creaturely or becomes divine in essence. Reformed theology shares this understanding but avoids the language of *theosis*. It treats the theme more in terms of the *sanctification* of human nature in Christ. In both traditions this renewal of our common humanity in the person of the incarnate Word is affirmed and venerated as the decisive saving action of divine grace and the pledge of the renewal and restoration of all who are united to Christ as members of the Body of which he is the Head.

Speaking of the union of natures in the person of Jesus Christ is normative for both the Orthodox and Reformed traditions. However, the term "nature" should not be understood statically, or abstractly, nor as if the human and divine natures were two individual instances of a generic concept of "nature". What this language directs us toward is the reality of God assuming the reality of humanity in Jesus Christ, a movement of God to humanity and humanity to God in the unity of his person and history.

The divergent conclusions drawn by the Orthodox and Reformed traditions on the subject of iconography is a subject related to the above statement which might well form a point of entry for discussion at a future dialogue.

5. According to the Nicene Creed it was "for us and for our salvation" that the eternal Son of God became flesh, lived, died and rose again. The ontological ground of our salvation is the hypostatic or personal union of the Word and flesh, or divine and human natures, in Jesus Christ. Conversely, the hypostatic union is worked out in the economy of salvation. The New Testament presents this economy in terms of the three offices (*triplex munus*) of prophet, priest and king. This threefold office continues its activity in the Church. Each of these offices provides a particular model-witness, sacrifice, service-for the restoration of the divine image in humanity through participation in Christ. At the same time each office points us to the deity of Christ who is eternal Word, Son and Wisdom of God. All three offices thus show the unity of true historical humanity and true eternal deity in the person of Jesus Christ, and also how the divine calling should be exercised in all aspects of our lives from birth to death.
6. The Holy Trinity is presupposed by the Incarnation, but the Incarnation enables us to approach the Trinity at a deeper level. The Incarnation shows us, as nothing else, the nature and path, the range and depth of God's love. It shows us that God, though complete in himself in the loving fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, loved us so much that he sent his only-begotten Son to enter and redeem his creation. The creation is not part of the eternal nature of God. We understand it to be a deliberate act of God that he might share that love which he is with that which he is not. Creation is then rooted in the mutual love of the persons of the Triune God. Thus understood the incarnation is the key which opens to us the intention, plan, meaning and goal of the creation. In the incarnation of the Son the purpose of creation is fully revealed. The Spirit acting in Christ penetrates the *cosmos*. The Spirit groans with all creatures and leads them to the promised goal of their perfection. This is why the relationship between the world and God receives its true form in the incarnate son; from the incarnation it obtains its direction and identity. "In him all things have their being" (Col 1.17).

In Christ we understand that God cannot bear to be absent from his creation and through his Spirit constantly strives to bring it to share his freedom and joy. As the community of the redeemed, set free by the incarnation of the Eternal Son, we are caught up in that love, trust and freedom. We see the teeming creation with new eyes as God's bountiful world. We are summoned to share his purpose, to be liberated, healed and restored, to celebrate and rejoice, to worship and share creation's praise for its maker.

7. The understanding common to Orthodox and Reformed of the revelation of the three persons of the Trinity makes them crucially aware of the connection between Christology and Pneumatology and of the specific role of the Holy Spirit in the incarnation of the Word of God and in the history of salvation. Both Orthodox and Reformed recognize the Spirit's creative activity in the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary as the first fruits of the new creation. It is the Holy Spirit who glorifies Christ and through his sending at Pentecost bears witness to Christ in the world. It is the Holy Spirit who brings about the communion of all believers both with the Head of the Body of Christ and between themselves. It is the Holy Spirit who summons all Christians to the confession of the same Christ and communicates to us the very life of Christ through word and sacrament. It is the Holy Spirit who unites word and sacrament in the living experience of the Church and leads the Church to the realization of the kingdom of God in the *eschaton*. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to discern the authentic relationship between the Paschal and the Pentecostal

mysteries in the history of salvation, because “one can say Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12.3).

The text is available at:

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