

Anglican Oriental Orthodox International Commission

Agreed Statement on Christology

Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia, 5-10 November 2002

Introduction

In 1990 the second Forum of representatives of the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Churches of Anglican Communion, meeting at the Monastery of St. Bishoy in Wadi el Natroun, Egypt, was able to produce the following statement: God, as revealed in the life, teaching, passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ calls his people into union with himself. Living by the Holy Spirit, his own people have been given authority to proclaim this Good News to all creation.

The Forum was also able to suggest that an agreement on Christology between the Oriental Orthodox and the Anglican Communion was now possible, taking note of the detailed theological work done by representatives of the two families of Orthodoxy between 1964 and 1971, resulting in the agreed statement of 1989, the work done in the unofficial Pro Oriente conversations, and of the history of convergence in Christology between the Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. To this must now be added the agreed statement on Christology of the Reformed-Oriental Orthodox Dialogue (Driebergen, Netherlands, September 13, 1994).

Our first meeting as the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission, in Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia, November 5-10, 2002, following the meeting of the Preparatory Committee in Midhurst, England, July 27-30, 2001, has taken forward this work. This has been done in a spirit of service of the Risen Christ and of the human race whom He came to save. Our work recognizes the presence of Christ with those who suffer in the tragic history of humanity. It expresses both the hope of a new humanity and the hope of glory wherein we will partake in Christ's holiness. With the will for unity-in-Christ within us it has been our privilege in this work of exploration and collaboration to handle the person of Christ Jesus (1 John 1.1) together.

After hearing the papers presented in our meeting and studying relevant documents we have been able to agree on the following statement:

Agreed Statement on Christology

1. We confess that our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ is the Only-Begotten Son of God who became incarnate and was made human in the fullness of time, for us and for our salvation. God the Son incarnate, perfect in His divinity and perfect in His humanity, consubstantial with the Father according to His divinity and consubstantial with us according to His humanity. For a union has been made of two natures. For this cause we confess one Christ, one Son and one Lord. [Based on the Formula of Re-union, AD 433].

2. Following the teaching of our common father Saint Cyril of Alexandria we can confess together that in the one incarnate nature of the Word of God, two different natures continue to exist without separation, without division, without change, and without confusion.

3. In accordance with this sense of the unconfused union, we confess the holy Virgin to be Theotokos, because God the Word became incarnate and was made man, and from the very conception united to himself that perfect humanity, without sin, which he took from her. As to the expressions concerning the Lord in the Gospel and in the Epistles, we are aware that theologians understand some in a general way as relating to one person, and others they distinguish, as relating to two natures, explaining those that befit the divine nature according to the divinity of Christ, and those of a humble sort according to his humanity. [Based on the Formula of Re-union, AD 433].

4. Concerning the four adverbs used to qualify the mystery of the hypostatic union: "without commingling" (or confusion) (asyngchtos), "without change" (atreptos), "without separation" (achoristos), and "without division" (adiaretos), those among us who speak of two natures in Christ are justified in doing so since they do not thereby deny their inseparable indivisible union: similarly, those among us who speak of one incarnate nature of the Word of God are justified in doing so since they do not thereby deny the continuing dynamic presence in Christ of the divine and the human, without change, without confusion. We recognize the limit of all theological language and the philosophical terminology of which it makes and has made use. We are unable to net and confine the mystery of God's utter self-giving in the incarnation of the divine Word in an ineffable, inexpressible and mysterious union of divinity and humanity, which we worship and adore.

5. Both sides agree in rejecting the teaching which separates or divides the human nature, both soul and body in Christ, from his divine nature, or reduces the union of the natures to the level of conjoining and limiting the union to the union of persons and thereby denying that the person of Jesus Christ is a single person of God the Word. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8 NRSV). Both sides also agree in rejecting the teaching which confuses the human nature in Christ with the divine nature so that the former is absorbed in the latter and thus ceases to exist. Consequently, we reject both the Nestorian and the Eutychian heresies.

6. In the Anglican tradition in the 16th century Richard Hooker witnesses to the continuing relevance of these concerns. In the fifth book of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, section 5e, he emphasizes the necessary mystery of the person in Christ. "It is not man's ability either to express perfectly or to conceive the manner how (the incarnation) was brought to pass." "In Christ the verity of God and the complete substance of man were with full agreement established throughout the world, until the time of Nestorius." The church, Hooker contends, rightly repudiated any division in the person of Christ. "Christ is a Person both divine and human, howbeit not therefore two persons in one, neither both these in one sense, but a person divine because he is personally the Son of God, human, because he hath really the nature of the children of men." (Laws 52.3) "Whereupon it followeth against Nestorius, that no person was born of the Virgin but the Son of God, no person but the Son of God baptized, the Son of God condemned, the Son of God and no other person crucified; which one only point of Christian belief, the infinite worth of the Son of God, is the very ground of all things believed concerning life and salvation by that which Christ either did or suffered as man in our belief." (Laws, 52.3). In the following consideration of the teaching of St Cyril, Hooker maintains, both the importance of St Cyril's insistence on the unity of the person of Christ while repudiating any Eutychian interpretation of that unity. Hooker quotes with approval Cyril's letter to Nestorius: "His two natures have knit themselves the one to the other, and are in that nearness as incapable of confusion as of distraction. Their coherence hath not taken away the difference between them. Flesh is not become God but doth still continue flesh, although it be now the flesh of God." (q. Laws 53.2).
7. We agree that God the Word became incarnate by uniting to His divine uncreated nature with its natural will and energy, created human nature with its natural will and energy. The union of natures is natural, hypostatic, real and perfect. The natures are distinguished in our mind in thought alone. He who wills and acts is always the one hypostasis of the Logos incarnate with one personal will. In the Armenian tradition in the 12th century st. Nerses the Graceful (Shenorhali) writes: "We do not think that the divine will opposes the human will and vice versa. We do not think either that the will of the one nature was different at different times, sometimes the will was divine, when He wanted to show His divine power, and sometimes it was human, when He wanted to show human humility."
8. The perfect union of divinity and of humanity in the incarnate Word is essential to the salvation of the human race. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16 NRSV). The Son of God emptied himself and became human, absolutely free from sin, in order to transform our sinful humanity to the image of His holiness. This is the Gospel we are called to live and proclaim.

9. We also note the concerns of the Oriental Orthodox Churches about the Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East as expressed in its official and unofficial dialogues with other churches. A particular concern of the Oriental Orthodox is that the Assyrians consider the persons and teachings of Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius as orthodox and thus venerate them in the liturgies of their church.

The Oriental Orthodox concerns were also addressed specifically to the report of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which made reference to the consent made towards the Christology of the Assyrian Church, based on the Lambeth Conference of 1908 and 1920 reports and resolutions 08.63/64 and 21. We have noticed that the report of the Lambeth Conference of 1930 was not addressed in 1998. While the Eastern Churches Committee of the Church of England did preliminary Christological work between 1908 and 1912 both in relation to the Oriental Orthodox Churches and to the Assyrian Church, this work was never brought to an agreed statement on Christology. With reference to the Assyrian Church, the 1930 Lambeth Conference reported "It has not been possible, owing to political and other conditions, to obtain the authoritative statement recommended in 1920 as to whether or not the present ecclesiastical authorities in the Assyrian Church adhere to the position of 1911". The Anglicans are therefore asking the Inter Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations (IASCER) to take into account these Oriental Orthodox theological reservations in any further Christological work with the Assyrian Church of the East, which, in accordance with the Lambeth Conference Resolution of 1998, will be in local and regional discussions. The result of any such discussions will have to be evaluated by IASCER and any future Lambeth Conference, in the light of this Christological agreement.

10. We submit this statement to the authorities of the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Anglican Communion for their consideration and action.

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