

# REPORT OF THE ORTHODOX-EVANGELICAL MEETING

8-12 FEBRUARY 1993

BERNHAUSER FORST, STUTTGART, GERMANY

## Introductory note

The following document is the report of a first encounter between Orthodox and Evangelicals, which took place in the framework of a wider cooperation of the Orthodox churches with representatives of the Evangelical movement.

It goes without saying that many are the theological and ecclesiological differences separating the two! Yet, during various ecumenical gatherings in the past years, Orthodox and Evangelical participants had recognized a number of common concerns and identical views on a variety of issues present in today's ecumenical agenda. Hence the projection of the idea to find ways of closer cooperation and concertation, with the clear purpose of furthering the ecumenical dialogue and assisting the World Council of Churches (WCC) and any other ecumenical organizations in the implementation of their multifaceted programmes.

Informal soundings at the Hannover Central Committee (1988), the San Antonio Conference on Mission and Evangelism (1989), and in particular the Seventh WCC Assembly in Canberra (1991), led to the idea of organizing an Orthodox-Evangelical Consultation in order to enable the further acquaintance of the two churches and work out the framework of their cooperation. It should be noted that in planning such a meeting, the very term "dialogue" was used, not to confuse this type of meeting with the existing official theological dialogues between the Orthodox Church with other churches and denominations.

A planning committee met twice in Geneva (in January and August 1992), worked out the general framework of the encounter, and established its main theme: "Proclaiming Christ Today." (What faith do we proclaim? Who is the proclaimer? How do we proclaim?)

Following the above meetings of the planning committee, the late Walter Arnold (one of the protagonists of the Orthodox/Evangelical rapprochement), and the Rev. Dr Vinay Samuel, accompanied by the undersigned, visited the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios in November 1992, and had an extended working session with the Synodical Commission on Ecumenical Affairs, in order to begin the process of convoking the Orthodox-Evangelical Consultation. The Stuttgart meeting in February 1993 enters precisely in the framework of this preparatory process.

Presently, the Orthodox and Evangelical Task Forces of the WCC, in cooperation with the Office on Church and Ecumenical Relations and in consultation with the Orthodox and the Evangelically-oriented members of the Executive Committee of the WCC, are making plans to call the projected consultation early in 1995.

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## Historical background to the gathering

We have come together as Orthodox representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

tinople; and as Evangelical theologians and missiologists from nine countries, who were invited by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Württemberg and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians. Our gathering grew out of previous encounters of the ecumenical movement. In particular these were the San Antonio meeting of the CWME in 1989 and the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991.

During the Canberra Assembly both Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox on the one hand and Evangelical participants on the other published responses to the assembly in which they discovered areas of common sensitivities, concerns, and sometimes agreement. This gathering follows conversations between Orthodox and Evangelical members of the Central Committee of the WCC and the visit of an evangelical delegation to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It is part of a continuing process to explore further those areas of common concern and possible agreement and gain deeper understanding of one another as a contribution to the unity of the church and the worldwide ecumenical movement. The gathering was facilitated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Württemberg, for whose hospitality and encouragement of the process we wish to express profound thanks.

We share this report of our gathering particularly with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Evangelicals committed to the ecumenical movement and those who presented the responses in Canberra in 1991.

### The gathering

The focus of our meeting was on the discussion, "The Bible, Early Confessions and Tradition." We shared in common worship, using on alternate days prayers from each tradition. We shared in community life over five days, and in particular in an evening reception given by the host church. Through this common experience of living together we found the opportunity to discover and appreciate one another's faith.

We received presentations that introduced Orthodox to Evangelicals and Evangelicals to

Orthodox, and we received papers on the main focus from each of the two traditions represented.

The Evangelicals present represented various churches — Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, and Presbyterian — who stand in the Reformation tradition as renewed by later pietistic, evangelical and revival movements. Some came from the churches of the Northern Hemisphere, others from the southern world where evangelicalism is a growing phenomenon, whose faith and practice is renewing the life of the whole Evangelical movement.

The Orthodox participants were delegated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the framework of its ministry within the Orthodox world to promote mutual understanding, inter-church dialogue, cooperation and Christian unity.

### Common convictions

Our discussion and exchange enabled us to identify common convictions for future collaboration and a common contribution to the ecumenical movement.

- a) Faith in and worship of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as expressed in the Nicene/Constantinopolitan Creed.
- b) Faith in Jesus Christ, as Universal Lord (Pantokrator) and Unique Saviour; in his full deity and humanity as expressed in the Nicene, Ephesian and Chalcedonian definitions; in the finality and all sufficiency of his work of salvation. There is no other Saviour.
- c) Acceptance of Holy Scripture as authoritative for faith, life and practice.
- d) The Gospel revealed by God, as expressed in the early credal affirmations (in particular the Nicene/Constantinopolitan, the Apostles' Creed and the "Athanasian" or "Quincunque Vult"); may not be altered.
- e) Such fundamentals of the faith as the Virgin Birth, the Sacrificial Death of Christ

the Bodily Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the final return of our Lord.

- f) Baptism in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, with credal affirmations of the same.

### Exploring common ground

*I. We identify common ground where further exploration would be valuable:*

- a) The importance of the seven ecumenical councils (325-787 A.D.).

Evangelical participants recognize that the teaching of these councils is substantially present in much evangelical thought.

- b) The implications of the missionary vocation as essential to the life of the church.

Further exploration of the understanding of evangelism and evangelism methodologies would be helpful to all, and of how our respective understandings of the church and its mission lead us to respond to contemporary social issues such as injustice, poverty, racism, ecology, abortion, euthanasia, and human sexuality.

- c) The nature of the Christian tradition that we have received and seek to hand on.

We welcomed the following statement from an Orthodox presentation: "The Word of God witnessed to by the prophets and apostles, incarnate as Jesus Christ, attested by Scripture and expressed in the teaching of the Church, professed by the early creeds, received by the believers in baptism and in the eucharistic supper, lives in the Church, the body of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This life of the Word of God, who is the light of the world, is proclaimed in the Bible and embodied in the Church for God's mission to the world."

Orthodox recognize the above as a formulation of the ongoing "Tradition" of the church. Evangelicals understand the above

as the Christian faith and life they receive and hand on, but do not speak of it in terms of tradition. But they have sought to achieve the same ends of guarding and faithfully transmitting the biblical and apostolic faith to future generations through covenants and confessions as grounded in scripture and reflecting the witness of the Spirit in the history of the believing community.

Evangelical participants recognize the treasury of the early fathers as their treasury as well. Orthodox participants see in the faith and life as represented in the Evangelical movement also a sign of what the Holy Spirit is doing.

We need to work further on clarifying what each partner means by tradition. Evangelicals have had a more restricted definition of tradition and enquire about the relation of tradition and authority, and the contribution of the experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church today to the ongoing tradition.

*II. We affirm our common participation as responsible members of the ecumenical movement.*

In our desire to strengthen the ecumenical movement worldwide in its various expressions we want to state our common concern as Orthodox and Evangelicals that:

- a) The unity of humankind should not be confused with the unity of all who confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, even though the unity of humankind under the Lordship of Jesus Christ is the ultimate goal of the unity of the church;
- b) The affirmation of the integrity of all creation should not lead to neglect of the biblical truth that persons alone are created in the image of God;
- c) Dialogue with people of other faiths, notwithstanding its importance, should not be confused with nor take the place of the Christian obligation to witness to the Gospel to all people.

*III. Both partners recognize the vocation of the church to call people to faith in Christ.*

We need to undertake further work on the nature of the church and the relationship between the nature of the church and the issues of proselytism, evangelism and common witness. Further issues concern the content of the Gospel, the identity of the evangelizer and of the evangelized, how evangelism should take place in different contexts, religious liberty and the accountability of Christians to one another.

We recognize that martyrdom is a supreme expression of witness (marturion) and therefore in humility we give thanks to the Triune God for the witness of the various Christian communities, whose journey was and is through suffering, martyrdom, and pain.

*IV. Common ground between Orthodox and Evangelicals is not to be taken for granted. There has been too little contact between us, many misunderstandings and some occasions of tension. We ascribe the common understanding we have achieved in our conversations to the work of the Holy Spirit. We intend to continue listening attentively and in humility to one another, for we have found an affinity we had not known before.*

**Future intentions**

- a) We recommend that the plans for an encounter between Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox on the one side, and Evangelicals on the other, be pursued along the lines

drawn up by the preparatory meeting of January 1992.

- b) We seek to strengthen the World Council of Churches in its service to churches:

Noting our respective responses to the Canberra Assembly, we underline the need for the WCC to ensure that all its programmes fall clearly within the mandate provided by the basis and aims of the WCC, and in particular the need to continue to give attention to promoting the goal of the restoration of the unity of the church and to enabling local churches to fulfil their missionary vocation.

The membership of the WCC and its many-faceted programmes represents the rich diversity of the modern ecumenical movement. But we believe the basis of the WCC requires it to state clearly the boundaries of legitimate diversity.

- c) We seek to further Christian unity

- by making the apostolic faith as taught in the scriptures and early creeds central to the work of the ecumenical movement;
- by strengthening both evangelism and work for peace, justice and the integrity of creation through deepening the biblical and theological foundations for holistic mission;
- by encouraging more people to have the same experience of meeting and encounter that we have enjoyed in this gathering, for which we heartily thank God ascribing glory to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.