

**The Church of the Triune God: The Cyprus Agreed Statement of the International Commission for  
Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue 2006  
An Evangelical Anglican Response**

This response is a personal one, and cannot claim to be comprehensive; it focuses on points where Evangelicals might wish to stress different aspects from those stressed in the statement, not denying the value of the exposition offered but conscious of the need for brevity.

*Approach*

Overall, I would sound a note of caution regarding the approach adopted, for the following reasons:

- (1) To the extent that the kind of approach to ecclesiology espoused by John Zizioulas represents the ground on which the discussion has been conducted, one must ask whether in fact the document represents a bilateral reflection on one form of Orthodox ecclesiology rather than a convergence between Orthodox and Anglican ecclesiology. Linked with this is the risk that the presentation of Anglican ecclesiology is, from some angles at least, tendentious and fails to reflect internal debate on this topic; it has been noted that the authorities cited here include the Greek Fathers (who are, admittedly, the heritage of the whole Church) but few expositions of Anglican theology; perhaps it is significant that Anglican sources cited are modern committee reports or liturgical books.
- (2) Evangelicals are certainly benefiting from such an approach, but it is not always easy to relate it to the categories in which they have tended to think about ecclesiology. (Neither, for that matter, would Orthodox see this as the only way of thinking about the subject.) Many would prefer an approach which explores the biblical models / metaphors for the church,<sup>1</sup> and which is rooted in the story of God's dealings with a people whom he has called to be his own possession. These approaches are not incompatible, however, and perhaps the very unfamiliarity of that adopted here is an indicator that Evangelicals have traditionally been somewhat weak in their understanding of the relationship between belief in the Trinity and Christian spirituality, both individual and corporate.
- (3) Related to this is the way in which the document appears to use Scripture. Rather than building up a biblically-rooted picture of the aspect under discussion, texts appear to be cited as proofs of a position reached by other routes (e.g. the presentation of the new humanity in II.23-37). Such a problem is not unique to this dialogue, as has been recognised elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> but Evangelicals would find it problematic.
- (4) For all these reasons, Evangelicals are likely to feel that the document does not 'speak their language'. This is where a 'convergence' approach, going behind our respective positions to consider the Scriptures, might have served the dialogue well.

*Content*

Whilst what follows focuses on areas of divergence, I think this statement also challenges Evangelicals at large regarding the relatively undeveloped nature of their thinking on certain major themes, such as the relationship between the nature of God and the nature of the people of God, or the relationship between gospel and culture. It follows that Evangelicals (and in particular Anglican Evangelicals) have much to gain from building substantive relationships with Orthodox.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thus they would find the ground covered by Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church* more familiar.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Paul Avis, ed., *Paths to Unity: Explorations in Ecumenical Method* (London: Church House, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> A new round of Evangelical-Orthodox dialogue has begun in the UK under the auspices of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, in which Anglicans are strongly represented.

A basic but vital question is: which comes first, Christ or the Church? Is an individual incorporated into Christ by means of incorporation into the Church, or *vice versa*? At times this document appeared to endorse the former, whereas Evangelicals have usually held to the latter, seeing incorporation into the church (at any rate, the 'invisible church' of all true believers<sup>4</sup>) as a corollary of incorporation into Christ.

Related to this is the way the document handles the question of faith. As a Baptist I used to feel that this was stressed to the exclusion of the sacraments; reading this document the opposite appears to be the case. Fuller discussion of the relationship between faith and sacrament in the ecclesial context would have been welcome.

Two linked issues touch on the heart of distinctively evangelical beliefs: the nature of sin, and document's tendency to focus on incarnation to the neglect of atonement. Much is said about the way that sin estranges human beings from one another and from the environment, but Evangelicals would wish to give primary place to the conviction that sin estranges from God first of all, and that other estrangements follow from this. This impinges on their thinking concerning such issues as the sacraments, faith, and the role of the Church in salvation, among others. However, this should be qualified by due acknowledgement of the extensive Scriptural exposition of Christ's priesthood offered in section VI.

For many Evangelicals, the question of mission cannot be divorced from that of ecclesiology, since they often see this as *a*, if not *the*, primary reason for the Church's existence.<sup>5</sup> Considerably fuller discussion of this than that provided in section III on culture and inculturation would have been welcomed, useful though this section is as a corrective to what I see as a recurrent failure to ground Evangelical adaptability (culturally speaking) in a sufficiently solid theology. Like the statement, this approach risks failing to take account of the way in which culture may hinder reception of the gospel as much as prepare the way for it.

Although the relationship between ecclesiology and understandings of ministry is a major theme of this statement, I am not competent to comment extensively on sections V-VII, except to say that (i) Evangelicals will welcome the biblical exposition offered in section VI, 'Priesthood, Christ and the Church'; (ii) they would wish to see more account taken of understandings of ministry rooted in Reformational traditions; and (iii) some would be troubled by an implicit denial of any priestly character to lay ministry (VII.2).<sup>6</sup>

From an ecumenical perspective, it was surprising that little if any reference was made to relevant documents such as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* or the more recent *Nature and Mission of the Church*, although participants were clearly aware of, and trying to relate their thinking to, contemporary ecumenical realities.

### *Representation*

I do not know all the names listed, but one might have expected one or more North American Orthodox to have been involved. By contrast, the Anglican representation was overwhelmingly weighted towards the North Atlantic and Australasian constituencies; it would be good to see this imbalance corrected as far as is practicable in the next round of dialogue. It is also to be hoped that Evangelicals will have an involvement commensurate with their strength as part of the Anglican

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<sup>4</sup> The 'invisible – visible' approach to ecclesiology is not without serious problems, but historically it has been widely held among Evangelicals, Anglicans included.

<sup>5</sup> Again, such an approach is open to serious question, but it represents that of many Evangelicals.

<sup>6</sup> Here they might find common ground with Orthodox who say, 'One is a priest; some are priests; all are priests.'

communion;<sup>7</sup> certainly Metropolitan Kallistos, the incoming Orthodox co-chair, is interested in getting to know this part of the Western Christian constituency better.

### *Reception*

A valuable exposition of the theology of reception (IX) nevertheless left me looking for something more. Having been involved in Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue since 1997, I have learned that reception is crucial to the success of any bilateral agreed statement in moving relationships forward. Reception does not usually 'just happen' but needs to be actively encouraged. It is therefore essential that the work of this commission receive a high profile, and not be sidelined as something for experts in that field. Furthermore, this statement ought not to be seen as an end in itself but as a means to an end, and especially as a resource for clergy wishing to develop ecumenical relationships where they minister. It is therefore to be hoped that attention will be given to fostering the reception process in practical ways, especially given the document's stress on the primacy of the 'local church', although this may be hindered by the fact that the model of reception offered here is predicated on the statement's particular approach to ecclesiology. In considering this statement, therefore, the question must be asked, 'how can it be used to help us to build closer relationships with one another?'

Tim Grass

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<sup>7</sup> CMS is developing a range of partnerships with Orthodox in various countries which offers a contrast to the oft-criticised insensitivity of Western missions in Orthodox areas. Could its input be sought as part of the dialogue?