

REFORMED-ORTHODOX DIALOGUE
5TH SESSION: ABERDEEN, 9-15 JUNE 1996

Summary of Discussions on the Identity and Unity of the Church

The Joint Commission of the Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches held its fifth meeting at the Department of Divinity, King's College, University of Aberdeen, from 9 to 15 June 1996.

The main theme of the meeting, specified by the preparatory committee, was "The identity and unity of the Church" in the context of the respective article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and in the light of the patristic tradition of the ancient Church.

There were three sub-divisions to the main theme: (1) The Mystery of Christ and the Mystery of the Church; (2) The Nature of the Church; and (3) The Unity of the Church ("The Church and the Churches", and "The Limits of the Church"). All these subjects were examined from both the Orthodox and Reformed points of view by means of presentations and discussions of relevant papers, with a view to understanding the ecclesiological positions of the two traditions and to establishing points of convergence.

The discussions made clear that there are important differences in the understanding and interpretation of the nature of the Church in the two traditions, which derive from historical and theological developments and make difficult a common description of the nature and mission of the Church. Nevertheless, the necessity of reaching convergence on the question of the unity of the Church was recognised, because it became apparent in the discussions that this unity is a matter of faith on which no compromise is possible. On this basis, the discussions examined existing divergences in the ecclesiologies of the two traditions, and then affirmed together the following points:

Both traditions converge on the belief that the Church is the gift of the triune God, a divine creation. Both affirm that the divine foundation of the Church is Jesus Christ, in accordance with God's eternal, free and gracious will and desire to have communion with God's people and to bring them into communion with God. They understand this *koinonia* as based upon and as being an expression of the *koinonia* which is in the triune God.

Both traditions affirm that in creation and in the history of salvation God the Holy Trinity has acted graciously in establishing this *koinonia*, God's holy Church. They acknowledge that in the fullness of time in the birth and human life of God's eternal Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, God acted decisively in fulfilling in a consummating way the divine will for all creation. The advent of Christ marks the full manifestation and establishment of the Church.

Given this divine action in Jesus Christ, both traditions recognise that the Church towers above any merely historical, human institution. The Orthodox express this by speaking of the Church as supreme Mystery and by stressing the sacramental character of the Church, which includes both the divine and the human dimensions. The Reformed express this in their distinction between the Church invisible and visible, and hold together an ecclesiology "from above" and "from below", reflecting the two natures of Christ.

Both traditions agree on the basis of the teaching of the Bible and the Fathers that the Church could in no way be divided from Jesus Christ, and that her true being lies in the fact that she is his Body. That the Church is the Body of Christ is fundamental to both ecclesiologies, although this is

understood differently. The Orthodox tend to understand this primarily in sacramental terms, but they also refer to the apostolic foundation and the uninterrupted sacred history of the Church. The Reformed emphasise the true preaching of the Gospel and the right celebration of the dominical sacraments, believing that where this occurs, there the Body of Christ is manifested.

Both distinguish between the undivided Body of Christ and the believers who are incorporated into it through baptism. The neglect or sinfulness of the believers does not threaten the reality and integrity of the Body of Christ, but puts the believers' relationship to it at risk. This means that through their divisions Christians stand under the danger of being separated from the Body of Christ which is the Church.

Given that incorporation of the believers into the Body of Christ takes place through baptism both sides explored the possibility of using baptism as a starting point for moving towards convergence in ecclesiology and eventually church unity. Nevertheless it became clear that baptism is not understood or practised in the same way by the two traditions. Therefore both traditions recognise that they need to explore further the meaning of baptism and its relation to the Church as the Body of Christ. It was suggested by both sides that the next session should be devoted to the crucial issue of Church and sacraments.