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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 20

SALVATION AND THE CHURCH

An Agreed Statement by ARCIC II (Church House Publishing and Catholic Truth Society, 1987, 65p)

This is a remarkable document. It is the first publication of the second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, and its basic subject is Justification. The new commission, as the note on the back cover points out, has more evangelicals among its Anglican members than ARCIC I did (it could hardly have had less!), and the subject is one on which evangelicals have expressed special concern. There are now four evangelical members instead of one - about a third of the Anglican membership. However, it was not only evangelicals who asked that this subject should be put on the ARCIC agenda: the Anglican church in South Africa did so (as well as that in South America), and the General Synod in this country followed suit. So, although ARCIC I considered that, in its 'Final Report', it had covered all the topics of doctrinal controversy between Canterbury and Rome, it is now clearly recognised that it had not, and the new commission has not only made this subject its first task, but has gone out of its way to emphasise its own sense of the importance of the task. As the co-chairmen say in their preface, 'We have spent more than three years on this task... we believe that the world, now as much as ever, stands in need of the Gospel of God's free grace' (pp. 6-7).

The status of the document should not be misunderstood. It is not the commission's last word on the subject. Like ARCIC I, they invite anyone to send in constructive criticisms at this first stage of publication, and will use these in 'improving or completing' the statement (p. 5). Either they will amend it, presumably, or, in the manner of ARCIC I, they will add an 'elucidation'. In the meantime, any consideration given to it by Anglican synods will be provisional, and the 1988 Lambeth Conference will not be able to sum up the responses of the Anglican Communion to this statement, as they are intending to do in the case of the statements in the ARCIC I report.

Rather than treating the doctrine of justification alone, the commission deals with it as part of the doctrine of salvation, which is quite helpful, as they do not allow this to blur the issues. Moreover, since they judge that the Reformation controversy took place in 'a framework of discussion that concentrated too narrowly upon the individual' (para. 3), they bring in the doctrine of the church (para. 7). Hence their title 'Salvation and the Church'. They do not, however, succeed in showing equal relevance in the doctrine of the church, and the section 'The Church and Salvation' (paras. 25-31) could really have been omitted without impairing their argument, except perhaps for para. 25.

The statement does two things. First, it reviews the history of the controversy, especially in the Reformation period, and as it affected Rome and Canterbury (paras. 2-8). Then the statement addresses the actual issues of the controversy, and attempts to resolve them (para. 9 to the end). The fourth and last of these issues is 'The Church and Salvation', of which we have just spoken, but the other three are 'Salvation and Faith', 'Salvation and Justification' and 'Salvation and Good Works' (together occupying paras. 9-24).

The Report's Account of the Historical Controversy

The account of the history seems to be open to some criticism. The impression given is that the disagreement was a matter of mutual misunderstanding, by two churches engaged on the same enterprise and quite probably in actual agreement. This, of course, is a typical ecumenical mode of approaching historical controversies between the churches, and is very implausible. It implies that the theologians of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century were either such bad theologians, or were so blinded by hostility, that they could not see that they were agreed when they really were. No Roman Catholic theologians of the Reformation period are actually named except the participants in the Council of Trent, but on the Anglican side the report names Cranmer, Hooker, Field, Davenant, Forbes, together with the 39 Articles (footnotes on pp. 10, 17, 20), and it is hard to think that the commission regards them all as bad theologians, which would be a very presumptuous judgement. However, the alternative, that they were blinded by hostility, seems to be ruled out by the impression, given in the report, of mutual forbearance between the Roman Catholics and Anglicans of the period (para. 2). The Church of England, we are told, adopted principles expressed in 'moderate Lutheran formulations'. Trent's decree on Justification 'was not directed against the Anglican formularies, which had not yet been compiled'. 'Anglican theologians reacted to the decree in a variety of ways, some sympathetic, others critical at least on particular points'. There is no hint of hostility here. So how does one explain the mutual misunderstanding which the commission supposes?

In reality, of course, the Roman Catholics and Anglicans of the period were much more sharply opposed. It would be difficult to think of one Anglican theologian (certainly none of those named in the report) who could properly be described as 'sympathetic' to Trent's decree on Justification. Undoubtedly, the Anglicans did tend to be 'moderate', and William Forbes was extraordinarily so, but this did not prevent even him from seeing a great many errors in the teaching of Trent on this subject. It is true that the decree of Trent was published before the Anglican formularies of faith, and so could not be criticising them; but how do we know that they are not criticising the decree of Trent? In all probability they are. And this is not because they have lost their normal moderation, but because they are not in fact engaged in the same enterprise at Trent, and hence differ on the very principles of procedure. The Anglicans are attempting to state the teaching of the Bible, and are criticising mediaeval deviations from that teaching, due to neglect of the Bible. Trent, on the other hand, is belligerently reasserting mediaeval teaching, and attempting to rebut the biblical objections to that teaching made by the Reformers. In other words, the Anglicans are proceeding from the authority of Scripture, and Trent from the authority of Tradition. Their disagreement is therefore inevitable, and real. The only hint that the report gives of this fundamental difference of procedure is in para. 14, where it tacitly concedes that Trent, unlike the Reformers, uses the word 'justify' in a non-biblical sense ('make righteous' instead of 'reckon righteous'). Even here, however, the report is much too kind to Trent, saying that it follows 'the usage of patristic and mediaeval Latin writers'. Actually, this non-biblical use of the term was by no means universal among the Latin Fathers, or even among the Latin writers of the Middle Ages. As the Anglican theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries well knew, there are passages in Ambrose, Cassiodorus, Sedulius and even writers as late as Bernard, where the Latin term justificare is used in the Pauline sense. What is more, Trent understands the word 'justify' in a non-biblical sense even when it is quoting the Latin Bible itself, as in ch. 8 of its decree, where it is quoting the fundamental teaching of Rom. 3. There was therefore misunderstanding in the Reformation period, as the commission says; but it was not so much a misunderstanding of each other, as a misunderstanding of the New Testament, on the part of Trent.

The theory of mutual misunderstanding is of particular importance to Roman Catholics, because it allows them to correct the mistakes of the past, without having to abandon the claim that their church is infallible. It was applied to this doctrine in Hans Kung's famous book Justification (1957, English translation 1964), where, having concluded that the Reformers were essentially right on this matter, he argued that Trent had been misunderstood, and really agreed with the Reformers' doctrine. The Reformers had also been misunderstood, however, which explains how Trent could condemn their teaching while really agreeing with it'. Obviously, so tortuous a hypothesis will not be permanently satisfactory, and Rome will have to face frankly the choice of either reaffirming all its old errors, or admitting that it is not infallible. But this is a matter of the doctrine of Authority and the doctrine of the Church, rather than the doctrine of Justification; and if Roman Catholics, with Kung, now want to move in the direction of the Reformers' doctrine of Justification, one can only be thankful.

The Report's Treatment of the Issues Themselves

King's book has been well received by other Roman Catholics (unlike some of his subsequent books), and the Roman Catholic members of the commission give every sign of wanting to move in the direction of the Reformers' teaching on Justification at least as far as Kung does. They have, of course, on this occasion

evangelical Anglicans to help them along'. Whether the Holy Office at Rome will approve of their moves, or whether its response will be as unbending as its Considerations on the moves from Trent that it detected in the report of ARCIC I, we have at present no means of knowing. However, if the Roman Catholics on the commission want to make such moves, this in itself is a significant fact, and it appears that they do.

Consider, for example, the following definition : 'The term justification speaks of a divine declaration of acquittal, of the love of God manifested to an alienated and lost humanity prior to any entitlement on our part' (para. 18). This is a deliberate adoption of the Pauline and Anglican use of the term, and a departure from the usage of Trent. It is underlined by the cautious adoption of the Lutheran principle simul justus et peccator : 'This insight has sometimes been expressed by the paradox that we are at once just and sinners' (para. 21). Consider also the constant link in this statement between the word and the sacraments (paras. 1, 9, 11, 30), a link very reminiscent of the Reformers. One of the clearest differences between Trent's decree and Reformation teaching is its assertion in ch. 7 that baptism is the instrumental cause of justification, without any reference to the ministry of the word or personal faith (indeed, personal faith seems to be excluded by Trent's canons on Baptism, except for those baptized as adults). In the new statement, on the other hand, para. 30 comes very close to saying that the instrumental cause of justification is the word and baptism : 'Those who are justified by grace, and who are sustained in the life of Christ through Word and Sacrament . . . ' Similarly, in paras. 12-13 the statement says that in baptism, as 'the sacrament of faith', justification and the whole of salvation 'comes to each believer'. This too is more biblical than Trent, and since, according to the New Testament, it is the word that evokes faith (Jn. 17:20; Rom. 10:17; Eph. 1:13), is another way of saying that justification comes through the word and baptism. We should note also what is said in para. 9: 'Salvation is the gift of grace; it is by faith that it is appropriated'. This too refers to personal faith, presumably, and if so, directly involves the ministry of the word, while not excluding the ministry of the sacraments.

The report also seems to go beyond Trent on the matter of the sovereignty of God's grace. It clearly teaches that repentance, faith and justification are all of grace : 'Even the first movements which lead to justification, such as repentance, the desire for forgiveness and even faith itself, are the work of God as he touches our hearts by the illumination of the Holy Spirit' (para. 24). 'The human response to God's initiative is itself a gift of grace, and is at the same time a truly human, personal response' (para. 9). 'In restoring us to his likeness, God confers freedom on fallen humanity. This is not the natural freedom to choose between alternatives, but the freedom to do his will' (para. 19). Trent indeed teaches the necessity of prevenient grace (ch. 5, canon 3), but it also teaches that free will has not been extinguished by original sin (ch. 1, canon 5) and that prevenient grace can be rejected, only assists and must be co-operated with (ch. 5, canon 4). The new report is at least much clearer than this, and much more obviously in harmony with Augustinian teaching.

Another issue on which the report is clearer than Trent is assurance. What Trent says on this subject is almost wholly negative : it properly rejects self-induced confidence of one's justification (ch. 9), presumption of one's personal predestination (ch. 12) and presumption of one's personal perseverance in grace (ch. 13, canon 16), but has often been taken as denying that there is any difference between presumption and assurance. The most positive thing it says is that 'all ought to place and repose the most firm hope in the help of God' (ch. 13). The new report (paras. 10-11) does not neglect to give warning against presumption, but is altogether more positive about assurance.

On the vexed question of absolution and penances (para. 22) and on the equally vexed question of merit (paras. 23-24), the new report speaks with great circumspection. It does not, like Trent, say that absolution is necessary to salvation (ch. 14, canon 29; also Trent's decree on the Sacraments), or that penances make satisfaction to the justice of God for the temporal penalty of sin (ch. 14, canon 30; also decree on the Sacrament of Penance, chs. 8, 9, canons 13-15), or that merits can be transferred from one man to another, as when a man gives alms for a soul in purgatory (decree on Purgatory) or when the church dispenses the merits of the saints through an indulgence (decree on Indulgences, as interpreted by earlier papal bulls). One is therefore left in doubt what attitude is taken to these unbiblical teachings of Trent, and can only assume that, once again, the commission wants to move away from them, despite the new directives in favour of the sacrament of penance and indulgences that are still issuing from Rome.

All in all, then, the theological material in the report is much better than the historical. The whole treatment of the crucial issues of 'Salvation and Faith', 'Salvation and Justification' and 'Salvation and Good Works' is impressive, and invites criticism only on points of detail. The curiously worded sentence which begins para. 14 is one of these points, and creates a fear that a confusion between justification and sanctification is being

introduced. The following paragraph, however, explains the meaning very adequately and removes the fear. The last sentence of para. 20 is obscure, and so are two references to the eucharist, in the last sentence of para. 16 and the first sentence of para. 27 (read in their context). On the whole, however, the report is clear.

The report has, with some reason, been criticised for omissions. It says a lot about sin, but not much about law and judgement. What it does say is in para. 18, which could well be expanded, since it is only in this context that the awful necessity and utter wonder of justification becomes apparent.

A friend recently remarked to me that, when the Reformers realised the truth of justification by faith, it turned their world upside down, as truly as it had for Paul himself. For thirty years now, many Roman Catholic theologians have been admitting that the Reformers were essentially right about justification by faith. If the Church of Rome as such is now to accept the Reformers' doctrine, she will need to count the cost first. There will be no possibility of conceding that the Reformers were right, and then going on exactly as before. The whole of Roman Catholic theology, the whole of Roman Catholic practice, the whole of Roman Catholic claims, will have to be rethought if the door is to be opened to this doctrine. But if the doctrine is known to be true, how can the door any longer be kept closed?

Roger Beckwith