Salvation and the Church: A Review Article

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Salvation and the Church (London: Church House Publishing and Catholic Truth Society, 1987, 65pp.) is the first report issued by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. As such it commands attention if only for the expertise and eminence of its authors and the confidence placed in them by their respective communions. Evangelicals in particular should give the report their close consideration. Their standpoint is singled out for attention in the publishers' remarks and the doctrine of justification is twice mentioned in the same context. Clearly the Statement was targeted to them as a particularly interested party. This impression is confirmed in the 'Preface' to the Statement. There it is stated quite explicitly that A.R.C.I.C. II was acting on a request made to it by the Anglican Consultative Council (1981).

> This request sprang out of a widespread view that the subject of justification and salvation is so central to the Christian faith that, unless there is assurance of agreement on this issue, there can be no full doctrinal agreement between our two Churches. (p. 6)

The Preface acknowledges the help A.R.C.I.C. II received from the Statement 'Justification by Faith' agreed in 1983 by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Consultation in the U.S.A. That document provides an instructive comparison with the Statement of A.R.C.I.C. II (hereafter: 'the Statement'). 'Justification by Faith' is more than twice as long; it gives more than thirty pages to a careful historical description of the problem, inclusive of contemporary developments; and most importantly it attaches the majority of papers presented to the group by its members. This adds immensely to any understanding of the Statement and provides an authoritative index of the thinking which underlies its formulation. It is a matter of real regret that A.R.C.I.C. I and A.R.C.I.C. II did not adopt this method of presenting their Statements. While the text-only method forces us to give the Statement our attention in its own right, it means inevitably that the assessments of such Statements are more dependent on theological detective work than is desirable.

The Statement given in numbered paragraphs has an introductory section followed by four others which correspond to the areas of past difficulty identified in the Introduction. The description of the past

disagreements is given in mild and muted terms. Areas not in dispute at the time are pointed out, whilst the doctrinal difficulties are said to have been 'compounded by a framework of discussion that concentrated too narrowly upon the individual' (para. 3); an assertion made without further comment or evidence. In its short anticipatory paragraphs dealing with the areas of difference the positions of the two sides are described with the utmost restraint. So dispassionate is the description that there is no suggestion that what was (and is) at issue was a matter of truth and error, rather than a matter of alternative doctrinal judgments the outcome of which was a thing indifferent.

Four areas of difficulty are specified: faith; justification and its associated concepts; good works; and the rôle of the Church in the process of salvation. Before turning to these areas directly the Statement appeals to the renewal of biblical scholarship, the reassessment of historical scholars and the experience gained through mission and ecumenism as the sources of their conclusions. Here they have an important point. The transformation of Roman Catholic attitudes towards Luther and (to a lesser extent) Calvin has been little short of astonishing.[1]

The Statement is almost impossible to summarize or paraphrase. It is a carefully nuanced and highly condensed document. Even to make extracts as has been already done is precarious, let alone to pick out sentences here and there. Nevertheless quotation must be made but it is hoped not unfairly, nor with the intention of ignoring the delicate and deliberate balance that the Statement set as its aim.

Salvation and Faith

The preliminary remarks relating to this topic address themselves primarily to the question of assurance of salvation. Does and should justifying faith lead to such assurance? There was more to the argument than that as the Council of Trent made plain.[2] The Statement handles the issue in a positive way and paragraphs 9 and 10 should be welcomed. Two small points might be mentioned:

(a) In paragraph 10 it would be more accurate in the context to say, 'The Gospel . . . calls *sinners* to faith in the mercy of God and thus brings them assurance of salvation'. *Christians* already have responded to the Gospel.

(b) Faith is seen, correctly, as involving assent and repentance and obedience. But surely it is misleading to appeal to James 2 verse 17 (as Trent also did, immediately following the passage cited in note 2). The primary form of faith is obedience or sheer trust in God's mercy in Christ. The permanent form of such faith issues in works, lacking which it was never alive in the first place. The dispute concerning assurance of salvation relates to the *first*-mentioned character of faith.

Paragraph 11 states clearly that Christian assurance is not presumptuous. There is however a somewhat fretful anxiety to distance assurance from presumption. One wonders if it is significant that no biblical text is summoned to underpin evangelical assurance whilst two are adduced to reinforce the call to evangelical obedience. Equally important and welcome is the affirmation that God supplies all that is needed for salvation, but one wonders how this squares with the Tridentine assertion that 'no one can know with a certitude of faith which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained God's grace'.[3]

Salvation and Justification

Although the authors of the Statement make no distinction as to the importance of any particular section of it, those paragraphs which deal with 'Salvation and Justification' are its biblical heartland. Baptism is taken as the formal starting point in the believer's life. It is the sacrament which stands at the entry of the Christian's new life in Christ. The term *salvation* is a wide one which includes within its reference both God's work in Christ, and His work in us. Paragraph 13 notes that the New Testament employs a 'wide variety of language' to denote the meaning of salvation. Some terms 'are of more fundamental importance than others: but there is no controlling term or concept; they complement one another'. The paragraph then gives a catalogue of these predominant concepts. Justification is mentioned last, though the list is not presented in a hierarchy of importance. Weight however should be attached to the concluding sentence: 'Salvation in all these aspects comes to each believer as he or she is incorporated into the believing community.'

It would seem a fair inference that baptismal incorporation into Christ has been given an (unargued) controlling status. This is a debatable procedure and will require further comment in the section 'The Church and Salvation'.

Some of the disagreement in the sixteenth century reflected a confusion of terms and talking at cross-purposes. The Statement draws this out, but makes the theological division sound like a tragic misrepresentation and misinterpretation.[4] The Statement is reluctant to adjudicate between the different usages of justification found in the sixteenth century, but linguistically it is beyond dispute that the Greek term denotes 'to account as righteous'. The Statement's description: 'Thus the Catholic understanding of the process of justification, following the Latin usage . . . ' unwittingly concedes the point in the wrong direction. It would be more accurate to put it: 'The Catholic understanding of justification as a process, following the Latin usage . . . ' This is more than a quibble. Wording is of the essence in a cautiously phrased document of this nature.

It is not until paragraph 18 that an extended definition of

justification is given, although there are clues to the Statement's understanding of it (especially in paragraphs 5 and 15). Paragraph 18 reads:

> 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. Through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, God declares that we are forgiven, accepted and reconciled to him. Instead of our own strivings to make ourselves acceptable to God, Christ's perfect righteousness is reckoned to our account.

This is well said and clearly said. Taken as a whole the paragraph expresses many evangelical convictions. Two items however call for amendment:

(i) It is unhelpful to speak of 'the juridical aspect of justification'. The phrase 'the juridical character of justification' is more exact.

(ii) The statement allows that 'the juridical aspect of justification' expresses 'an important facet of the truth'. But it denies to this *aspect* any exclusive value in the light of which all other biblical ideas of salvation must be interpreted. That may be true, but the question is whether the juridical character of justification is pivotal. If we err in this point do we not endanger the Gospel by consequence? Paul's language in Galatians 1: 6–9 must be allowed its full impact and its uncompromising character may not be weakened nor set aside.

The treatment of sanctification precedes that of justification. Taken as they stand the contents of paragraph 17 read acceptably, but the order of priority of paragraphs 17 and 18 reflects an unhappy blurring of the distinction between justification and sanctification found in paragraph 15. It is a legitimate concern to insist that there can be no uncoupling of our new standing before God in Christ from the new life in Christ. But the final two sentences of paragraph 15 weaken the value of those which precede them. 'By pronouncing us righteous, God also makes us righteous. He imparts a righteousness which is His and becomes ours.'

To speak in this way is to confuse our standing before God which is grounded upon what Christ is for us ('imputed righteousness') and has done for us ('made atonement'), with our condition and our character. These latter (imparted righteousness) are initiated at the point of justification and remain imperfect in this life. The quotation given above echoes the language of Trent when it states: 'Thus not only are we considered just, but we are truly called just and we are just'. This point of difference is obscured by the language of paragraph 15. Furthermore, the quotation from Hooker designed (presumably)

to substantiate the Anglican acceptability of this way of speaking does not sustain the point it was intended to make. Significantly Hooker was dealing with the wider issue of participation in Christ, not the core issue of justification as such. More particularly Hooker disclosed in the next section[5] what exactly he understood by imputation:

> Again a deed done must either not be imputed to any, but rest altogether in him whose it is, or if it is at all to be imputed, they which have it by imputation *must have it such as it is whole.*
> (Emphasis mine.)

In other words the corollary of imputation is completedness. How this bears on the point at issue, namely the essential distinction between justification and sanctification, was made clear beyond question elsewhere in Hooker[6]:

> The righteousness, wherewith we shall be clothed in the world to come, is both perfect and inherent. That whereby here we are justified is perfect but not inherent. That whereby we are sanctified inherent but not perfect.

The Statement blurs but does not bridge the classical Catholic-Protestant disagreement in this matter.

Salvation and Good Works

The basic New Testament teaching finds lucid and well-organized expression in the opening paragraphs of the section. It is well stated that 'God's recreating deed originates in himself and nowhere else'. Paragraph 20 points to the social existence which is inseparable from our personal Christian existence. The inner character of a Christian's good works is less satisfactorily handled. That believers have failings and their good works are sometimes flawed is pointed out. But is it sufficient to say that such works can be flawed by self-centredness? Surely the major question is whether all good works, that is those of positive moral worth, are less than perfect before God. The Anglican Articles speak of our ingrained propensity to sin as remaining after regeneration. This is more than the inclination which Trent affirmed. It is a taint. From the Catholic standpoint works done in the Spirit may stand the scrutiny of God's judgment, having nothing in them requiring His mercy. As the Statement notes (para. 6) Anglicans have not stood on this ground. Nor can they to-day. To cite Hooker, 'The best things we do have somewhat in them to be pardoned . . . our continual suit to him [God] is, and must be, to bear with infirmities, to pardon our offences.' Such a division may seem little more than a hair-line crack, but it is deep and crucial as the whole theology of merit and its attendant abuses is intimately related to it.

Consequently it is not surprising that the treatment of repentance and penitence in the Christian life is confused and confusing. True, paragraph 24 decisively rules out any hint of merit contributing to our justification. We must however ask whether merit has *any* place in our final acceptance before God. For the Evangelical justification, once granted, is *not* open to reassessment; it is secured by Christ's work and God's word. For the Catholic justification once granted is sustained by truly meritorious works done under grace. The moral pattern of a Christian life prompted by these two ways of viewing good works may not vary to any identifiable degree, as the lives of countless Catholic and Evangelical Christians bear witness. Yet there is an obligation to conform to the truth for its own sake, and there is the sad and distressing phenomenon of pious Catholic practices which display anything but the assurance of sins forgiven or the glad joy of eternal life now freely bestowed upon the believer[7].

The Church and Salvation

This section of the Statement will be most difficult for Evangelical Anglicans to assimilate. Throughout, it highlights the tension between taking justification as the point of entry into the Christian life and taking incorporation into Christ, via Baptism, as the primary reality. This unease manifests itself clearly in paragraph 25. There we find the Church described (in language taken from A.R.C.I.C. I) as 'the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ and are justified through God's grace'. this community is also designated thus: 'those who respond in faith to the Gospel come to the way of salvation through incorporation by baptism into the Church'. It is of a piece with the understanding of salvation as being essentially incorporation that the Church is seen as 'a sign, steward and instrument of God's design', leading on to the assertion that 'it can be described as sacrament of God's saving work'. Such a description is a very far cry from that of the New Testament. Its meaning is unclear though the term 'sacrament' has come greatly into vogue in Roman Catholic theology[8]. The phrase seems to mean that 'in the life of the Church, its dominical sacraments and its ecclesiastical ordinances Christ communicates Himself wholly and unsullied'. The difference of understanding between this essentially 'Catholic' view of the Church and an Evangelical one is succinctly put by another ecumenical report[9].

> In the one case (the Evangelical view), the gospel reconciles us to God through Christ and thus makes us a part of His people; in the other (the 'Catholic') the gospel is found within the life of His people, and thus we find reconciliation with God.

It would be churlish to overlook many fine and challenging things which are said in this section. The language of paragraph 30 may be

somewhat idealistic but the challenge to Christians to live as the community of the justified needs to be taken to heart by Evangelicals whose splinter group mentality has all too often rent the Church asunder when far less than the Gospel of God's free grace was at issue. A careful and humble reading of paragraphs 30 and 31 could be a salutary experience. Nevertheless the section as a whole disappoints. It illustrates a basic fact made clear when Catholics and Protestants previously produced a document containing an agreed position on justification. A historian of the dialogue at Regensburg (1541) put it quite bluntly: 'The acid test of one's appreciation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone is, after all, one's interpretation of the nature of the Church and the sacraments'[10]. Similarly a doctrine of justification which is grounded in a faulty doctrine of the Church is bound to produce the theological discomforts noted in the Statement's presentation.

A careful reading of the Statement raises some important questions about its relation to Scripture and its use of it.

The Statement has many references to the Bible and although the term 'the Scriptures' occurs but once (para. 12) there has been a serious attempt to allow Scripture to speak. Despite this, the Statement never makes clear where the final court of appeal for its content really is. This emerges from two examples. In paragraph 11 we read 'Throughout the Christian tradition there runs the certainty of the infinite mercy of God, who gave His Son for us'. This fact is true but the reason for accepting its truth is the scriptural attestation which undergirds it. Anglicans do not accept doctrine on the basis of *tradition*. Secondly, the Statement makes appeal to the writings of Augustine. Unlike references to Richard Hooker or the Council of Trent, the citations from Augustine are embedded in the text (paras. 12, 19, 23). In each case they are used to underpin statements which lack either direct Biblical support (para. 12) or are devoid of it altogether (para. 23) or whose Biblical support is contingent upon Augustine's comment. Augustine has perhaps the greatest claim of all the Fathers to be heard on justification and grace. In addition he speaks from the period of the undivided Church. But he is not Scripture and his utterances no matter how venerated should not be presented alongside Scripture without any discrimination.

The character of the Statement rules out any attempt to support its contents by a detailed exegesis of the Biblical passages to which it makes appeal. We have had occasion to note that its application of James 2.17 in paragraph 10 is open to serious doubt. A similar misgiving attends its appeal to Colossians 1.22 ff., cited in paragraph 11, as a warning against presumption. The reference is apt, as the immediate context most likely refers to the presentation of men and women at the Great Assize[11]. It is misleading however to take the verse as indicating *doubt*. In fact it most probably expresses

confidence[12]. It is in this area especially that the working papers of the Commission would have assisted understanding of the Statement and opened the doors to a more precisely targeted debate.

Finally, we may comment in passing on the complete absence of any mention of the wrath of God. This concept is fundamental to Paul's exposition of the Gospel in Romans which is also the most extended disclosure of his understanding of justification.

In general the following conclusions suggest themselves:

1. *Salvation and the Church* is a serious and informed attempt to bring together the Roman Catholic and Anglican positions on justification by faith.
2. *Salvation and the Church* has laid to rest officially and finally all rancour and wilful distrust surrounding this issue.
3. *Salvation and the Church* has removed misunderstandings and left behind much excess baggage from the past.
4. *Salvation and the Church* has made substantial comment in the area of Salvation and Faith.
5. *Salvation and the Church* has contributed to real but incomplete progress in the area of Salvation and Good Works.
6. *Salvation and the Church* has made progress, but this has been limited due to a marked lack of clarity, in the central area of Salvation and Justification.
7. *Salvation and the Church* has challenged Christians deeply in its contemporary concern but is seriously flawed in its understanding of the Church and Salvation.

Whilst gladly acknowledging the positive and encouraging elements found throughout the Statement and expressing gratitude to its eminent compilers, it is nonetheless unsafe and untrue to affirm its conclusion:

> This is not an area where any remaining differences of theological or ecclesiological emphases either within or between our Communions can justify our continuing separation.

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NOTES

1. See P. Manns *Martin Luther: Ketzer oder Vater in Glauben* (Hannover 1980) and Gottfried Maron: *Das Katholische Lutherbild der Gegenwart* (Göttingen 1982). For Calvin, see Hans Scholl: *Calvinus Catholicus* (Freiburg 1974).
2. *Decree on Justification* Chapter 7: 'For faith without hope and charity neither unites a man perfectly with Christ, nor makes him a living member of His body.' cf. *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* J. Nevner and J. Dupuis edd., (London 1986) p. 559.

3. *Ibid.* p. 560 (para. 1936).
4. Cf. G. Rupp: *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (London 1951) p. 104: 'The controversy between Catholic and Protestant is more than the Great Misunderstanding . . . '
5. *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* V. lvi 12.
6. *A Learned Discourse of Justification* (referred to as footnote 1 in the Statement). The quotation given here is from Section 3.
7. Non-Roman Catholics are surely entitled to ask what place a collection box in Brompton Oratory labelled 'For the Holy Souls in Purgatory' could have in the piety of one who is freely justified and secure in Christ.
8. The phrase 'Christ the Sacrament' is associated with H. Schillebeeckx and Kevin McNamara's work *Sacrament of Salvation* (Dublin 1977) which has the sub-title *Studies in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.*
9. *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission* (1986) Basil Meeking and John Stott edd., p. 44.
10. Cf. Peter Matheson *Cardinal Contarini at Regensburg* (Oxford 1972) p. 179.
11. Cf. P.T. O'Brien *Colossians* (Texas 1982) pp. 68–69.
12. See M. Thrall *Greek Particles in the New Testament* (London 1962) p. 87 f; J. Lightfoot *Colossians* 1879 (reprinted 1961) p. 163. O'Brien *ad. loc.* says 'the Greek construction . . . does not express doubt.'