

Five Views of ARCIC II

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Whenever representatives of one of the Churches of the Reformation sit round an ecumenical table with their counterparts from the Roman Catholic Church, their conversations dare not evade the task of coming to terms with that fateful sixteenth-century divide. If they fail to do so, it is sure to haunt their protestations of agreement, like an unexorcized ghost. If this holds true whatever the subject on the agenda, it is overwhelmingly the case when justification is under discussion. Every schoolboy knows how fundamental this question was in the Reformation conflict. None other received such extended attention at the counter-reform Council of Trent as this one.

So when the teams who comprise the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II) tackled the contentious issue of justification, during three years of joint study (1983-86), they were attempting to lay one of the most potent Reformation ghosts. They believe they have been successful, affirming 'that this is not an area where any remaining differences of theological interpretation or ecclesiological emphasis, either within or between our Communion, can justify our continuing separation' (*Salvation and the Church*, para. 32). What they have achieved is the recovery of 'the balance and coherence of the constituent elements of the Christian doctrine of salvation' which 'had become partially obscured in the course of history and controversy'. The report's historical discussion is largely confined to the 'Introduction' (paras. 1-8), which identified four difficulties that arose over the doctrine of salvation in the age of the Reformation:

1. the nature of justifying *faith*: did it include *assurance* of one's salvation?
2. the nature of *justification*: was Christ's righteousness *imputed* or *imparted*?
3. the bearing of *good works* on salvation.
4. the *role of the church* in the process of salvation.

**Why the Church?**

The inclusion of the fourth question is surprising. It is even prominent enough to determine the title of the document in a rather misleading fashion. The section which deals with this difficulty (paras. 25-31) adds nothing to the elucidation of salvation itself, is neither related closely to the preceding discussion of the first three issues nor directed explicitly to Reformation disagreements on the role of the Church in the economy of salvation, and hence gives the report a somewhat lame ending. Trent's decrees and canons on justification did not find it necessary to venture into this territory.

Furthermore, the title leads one to expect something quite different, *viz.*, some consideration of the cluster of critical issues raised in a world of religious (let alone ecclesiastical) pluralism by the patristic axiom (reaffirmed on all sides in the sixteenth century) 'outside the church no salvation'. These are nowhere even alluded to.

ARCIC II could have integrated the topic of the church into a discussion of justification along lines which would have had considerable relevance to its whole enterprise, and in particular would have provided a theological handle for getting to grips with the Reformation divide. The report largely places the church on the divine side, as it were, of the saving economy of God. It is depicted as a *sign, steward, instrument* and even *sacrament* of the way of salvation (paras. 26-29). Although it reminds us of the sinfulness of the church's members, and its constant need for repentance and renewal (para. 29), and speaks of the church as 'the community of the justified' (para. 30), it never touches on the *justification of the church itself, by grace through faith*. We miss the acknowledgement that the church itself is always 'both sinful and justified' by grace, in the celebrated formula of Luther (which is noted in para 21, together with Vatican II's reference to the church as 'holy and at the same time always in need of purification').

There is no healthier antidote to the tendency of the Catholic tradition to divinise the Church than to recognise that, like its members severally, it is radically sinful and has its standing before God (*coram Deo*) only by grace. This recognition enables us to admit the corruption of the church in history without casting doubt on its status as the people of God. The integration of ecclesiology and soteriology in this manner – by setting both under grace – should undermine any inclination to minimize the church's errors and misdemeanours, past or present. As it is, the report probably reflects the ascendancy of traditional Catholic ecclesiology, which views the church more as an agent of salvation than as the sinful recipient of saving grace, in its approach to the 'difficulties' of the sixteenth century.

**Disappointing history**

If the report's section on the church remains marginal to its central concern, the historical paragraphs are merely disappointing. They certainly do not prepare the reader for the sharpness of the main expository thrust of the document. Their account, admittedly quite brief, of the doctrinal disputes of the Reformation era places Anglican theology somewhere between Reformation theology and Catholic theology. This is clear in the very structure of the

paragraphs on the second and third of the four difficulties listed above, which speak first of 'Reformation theologians', then of 'Catholics' and finally of 'Anglican theologians' (paras. 5,6). On the other two difficulties, the beliefs of 'Protestants' (not now 'Reformation theologians') and 'Catholics' are summarized, with no indication of where Anglicans stood (paras. 4,7).

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It will be helpful to have the text of paragraphs 5 and 6 before us:

5. A second difficulty concerned the understanding of justification and the associated concepts, righteousness and justice. Fearing that justification might seem to depend upon entitlement arising from good works, Reformation theologians laid great emphasis on the imputation to human beings of the righteousness of Christ. By this they meant that God declared the unrighteous to be accepted by him on account of the obedience of Christ and the merits of his passion. Catholics took them to be implying that imputed righteousness was a legal fiction, that is, a merely nominal righteousness that remained only external to the believer. They objected that this left the essential sinfulness of the individual unchanged, and excluded the imparted, or habitual and actual, righteousness created in the inner being of the regenerate person by the indwelling Spirit. Anglican theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw imputed and imparted righteousness as distinct to the mind, but indissoluble in worship and life. They also believed that, while we are made truly righteous because we are forgiven, we know ourselves to be in continuing need of forgiveness.

6. A third difficulty concerned the bearing of good works on salvation. Reformation theologians understood the Catholic emphasis on the value of good works and religious practices and ceremonies to imply that justification in some degree depended upon them in such a way as to compromise the sovereignty and unconditional freedom of God's grace. Catholics, on the other hand, saw the Reformation's understanding of justification as implying that human actions were of no worth in the sight of God. This, in their judgement, led to the negation of human freedom and responsibility, and to the denial that works, even when supernaturally inspired, deserved any reward. The Anglican theologians of the Reformation age, taking 'by faith alone' to mean 'only for the merit of Christ', also held good works to be not irrelevant to salvation, but imperfect and therefore inadequate. They saw good works as a necessary demonstration of faith, and faith itself as inseparable from hope and love.

These statements raise a difficulty of quite a different kind, that of distilling a single Anglican theology from a wide range of theologians who span not only 'the Reformation age' (para. 6) but 'the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' (para. 5). A short list is given of the principal Anglican sources up to 1661 (para 2, n.1). The earliest is Cranmer's *Homily 'Of the Salvation of Mankind'* (1547), which belongs much more readily with the 'Reformation theologians' of these paragraphs than with their 'Anglican theologians'. The latest is William Forbes, the first bishop of Edinburgh, who died in 1634 and whose treatise on justification was not published until 1658. It is the work of a 'high' Anglican, zealous for reconciliation with Rome and unwilling to regard transubstantiation and propitiation as heretical notions about the eucharist. His *Calm Considerations* (Engl.tr., 1850) on justification is an extremely erudite exercise in scholastic theology, almost casuistical in the fertility of its distinctions and qualifications. It is light years away from Cranmer, the *Book of Homilies*, the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-nine Articles. It makes for confusion if Forbes is counted among 'the Anglican theologians of the Reformation age'.

#### Puzzling Distinctions

In the light of the questionable basis on which 'Anglican theology' seems to be determined, it may be a futile exercise to attempt to assess whether the report paints a fair picture of Anglican Reformation teaching. Nevertheless, some comments may be made, if only to illustrate how strange some of the distinctions drawn in paragraphs 5 and 6 appear on closer examination.

(i) Anglican theologians, we are told, took "by faith alone" to mean "only for the merit of Christ". This has to be judged an amazingly loose statement, for as Richard Hooker pointed out in *A Learned Discourse of Justification* (1586), Catholics and Protestants were agreed 'that unto justice no man ever attained, but by the merits of Jesus Christ' and that Christ as God is the efficient and, as man, 'the meritorious cause of our justice'. ARCIC II has already recognised this agreement in more general terms (para. 3). But, as Hooker went on to say, the two sides were also agreed that 'Christ hath merited to make us just: but as a medicine which is made for health, doth not heal by being made, but by being applied; so, by the merits of Christ there can be no justification, *without the application of his merits*'. It was about the applying of Christ's merits that they disagreed. Hence 'by faith alone' was not reducible to 'only for the merit of Christ', because it spoke about the applying of that merit. Hooker made the point repeatedly: 'It is true, they (the church of Rome) do indeed join other things with Christ, but how? Not in the work of redemption itself, . . . but in the application of this inestimable treasure . . . We ourselves do not teach Christ alone, excluding our own faith, unto justification.' As Cranmer's *Homily* put it, three things must go together for our justification - God's mercy, Christ's justice and 'upon our part true and lively faith in the merits of Jesu Christ'.

(ii) In so far as, behind the loose wording, an acceptable interpretation can be assigned to 'taking "by faith alone" to mean "only for merit of Christ"', was it in any sense distinctively Anglican? Were not all the mainstream Reformers agreed that true reliance on the merits of Christ

alone was secured only 'by faith alone'? Was this not the very heart of the Reformation gospel in Luther and Calvin?

(iii) But perhaps ARCIC II implies a different emphasis when it couples the assertion we have just examined with another: Anglican theologians 'also held good works to be not irrelevant to salvation, but imperfect and therefore inadequate'. The Commission's mind is difficult to read at this point. Does it intend, by translating 'by faith alone' into 'only for the merit of Christ', to make an opening for good works at the point of justification? Does its use of 'imperfect' and 'inadequate' suggest that the inadequacy of good works for salvation can be, or needs to be, topped up by something else? What is the force of 'not irrelevant to salvation'? One is left wondering whether the Anglican theologians in question were really as obscure as their modern ecumenical epitomizers.

Cranmer's *Homily*, by comparison, is crystal-clear: 'faith doth not shut out repentance, hope, love, dread, and the fear of God, to be joined with faith in every man that is justified; but *it shutteth them out from the office of justifying*', and the same goes for good works too. On this we may listen again to Hooker:

We by this speech (faith alone justifieth) never meant to exclude either hope or charity from being always joined as inseparable mates with faith in the man that is justified; or works from being added as necessary duties, required at the hands of every justified man: but to show that *faith is the only hand which putteth on Christ unto justification*.

A similar explanation of 'by faith alone' is given by another of the Anglican authorities listed in the report, Richard Field, in 1606:

In this sense, faith only is said to justify; that is, the only mercy of God, and merit of Christ, apprehended by faith: and then the meaning of their speech is, that only the persuasion and assured trust, that they have to be accepted of God for Christ's sake, is that that maketh them stand in judgment, without fear of condemnation. And in this sense all the divines formerly alleged, for proof of the insufficiency of all our inherent righteousness, and the trust which we should have in the only mercy of God and merit of Christ, do teach as we do, that faith only justifieth. For neither they nor we exclude, from the work of justification, the action of God as the supreme and highest cause of our justification; for it is he that remitteth sin, and receiveth us to grace: nor the merit of Christ, as that for which God inclineth to show mercy to us, and to respect us: nor the remission of sins, gracious acceptance, and grant of the gift of righteousness, as that by which we are formally justified: nor those works of preventing grace, whereby, out of the general apprehension of faith, God worketh in us dislike of our former condition, desire to be reconciled to God, to have remission of that is past, and grace hereafter to decline the like evils, and to do contrary good things. For by these we are prepared, disposed, and fitted for justification; without these none are justified. And in this sense, and to imply a necessity of these to be found in us, sometimes the Fathers and others say that we are not justified by faith only. And we all agree that it is not our conversion to God, nor the change we find in

ourselves, that can any way make us stand in judgement without fear, and look for any good from God, otherwise than in that we find ourselves so disposed and fitted as is necessary for justification; whence we assure ourselves God will in mercy accept us, for Christ's sake.

(iv) These quotations not only place beyond doubt their conviction that, as regards the receiving of justification itself, 'faith alone' is a critical confession, but also bear out the validity of the last sentence in para. 6 of *Salvation and the Church*, which is as lucid as the preceding one is elusive. But again it must be asked whether Anglicans were in any way distinguished from other Reformation theologians in insisting on 'good works as a necessary demonstration of faith'. Luther himself had no hesitation in saying that, although faith alone gives life, 'works are necessary for salvation', and that there is no faith where there are no good works.

(v) By the same token, the understanding ascribed in paragraph 6 to 'Reformation theologians' was shared wholeheartedly by the theologians of the Anglican Reformation. Hooker spells out at length the 'maze the Church of Rome doth cause her followers to tread, when they ask her the way of justification'. 'The doctrine which addeth unto [works] power of satisfying, or of meriting, addeth unto a thing subordinated, builded upon the foundation, not to the very foundation itself; yet is the foundation consequently by this addition overthrow'n.' And 'salvation by Christ is the foundation of Christianity'.

(vi) In the same way, the emphasis on imputation attributed to Reformation theologians by paragraph 5 was precisely that espoused by Anglican teachers of the Reformation period. The point is so obvious that it needs no illustration.

(vii) It is, however, highly doubtful whether the likes of Cranmer and Hooker 'saw imputed and imparted righteousness as distinct to the mind, but indissoluble in worship and life' (para. 5). Hooker maintains a clear distinction between justifying righteousness ('perfect, but not inherent') and sanctifying righteousness ('inherent, but not perfect'). 'St Paul doth plainly sever these two parts of Christian righteousness one from the other', but 'God giveth us both the one justice and the other: the one by accepting us for righteous in Christ; the other by working Christian righteousness in us'. Since 'the efficient cause' of the latter is the Spirit of adoption, Hooker goes on to distinguish 'two kinds of sanctifying righteousness, Habitual and Actual. Habitual, that holiness, wherewith our souls are inwardly endued, the same instant when first we begin to be the temples of the Holy Ghost; Actual, that holiness which afterwards beautifieth all the parts and actions of our life. . . . The Spirit, the virtues of the Spirit, the habitual justice, which is ingrafted, the external justice of Christ Jesus which is imputed, these we receive all at one and the same time; . . . but actual righteousness which is the righteousness of good works, succeedeth all, followeth after all, both in order and in time.'

Hooker thus would not agree with ARCIC II that 'the imparted . . . righteousness created in the inner being of the regenerate person by the indwelling Spirit' was 'habitual and actual'. The righteousness of sanctification is inherent in that 'unless we work, we have it not'.

(viii) Did Anglican Reformation theologians hold that 'we are made truly righteous because we are forgiven' (para. 5)? In the context of this discussion does 'truly' mean 'actually', and is 'made' to be contrasted with 'declared', and in what precise way is being 'forgiven' related to being 'made truly righteous'? Listen again to Hooker's explanation:

Although in ourselves we be altogether sinful and unrighteous, yet even the man which in himself is impious, full of iniquity, full of sin; him being found in Christ through faith, and having his sin in hatred through repentance; him God beholdeth with a gracious eye, putteth away his sin by not imputing it, taketh quite away the punishment due thereunto, by pardoning it; and accepteth him in Jesus Christ, as perfectly righteous, as if he had fulfilled all that is commanded him in the law.

He proceeds to cite 2 Corinthians 5:21 - 'God hath made himself the sin of men, . . . and men are made the righteousness of God'. Hooker, one feels, would have wanted a sharper clarity from the Commission than the last sentence in paragraph 5 provides.

### Overcoming history

But if ARCIC II's sketch of the doctrinal cleavages of the sixteenth century leaves something to be desired, not least in lucidity, the core of *Salvation and the Church*, in which it spells out its agreed statement of the matter, unambiguously demonstrates that it has faced up squarely to one of the profoundest disagreements and resolved it. Paragraph 14 records that, while Reformation theologians followed the New Testament meaning of 'justify', viz, 'declare or pronounce righteous', Catholic theology, especially at Trent, interpreted the Latin verb in terms of 'make righteous'. The Commission does not at this point adjudicate between the two, but it does so, tacitly but nevertheless unmistakably, when its own understanding plumps for a straightforwardly declarative and forensic explanation of justification:

*The term justification speaks of a divine declaration of acquittal . . . Through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, God declares that we are forgiven, accepted and reconciled to him . . . Christ's perfect righteousness is reckoned to our account. God's declaration is sometimes expressed in the language of law, as a verdict of acquittal of the sinner. (para. 18)*

In the light of this remarkable agreement between Anglican and Catholic commissioners, the document's historical fuzziness pales into relative insignificance. My criticism of the latter yields to admiration of the former.

### Sanctification without distinctions

Although the report distinguishes plainly enough between justification and sanctification, its treatment of the latter is inadequately differentiated and is in danger of undermining its marvellous consensus on justification. In brief, the *Commission* fails to signal the difference between the once-for-all sanctifications of 1 Corinthians 6:11 ('you were sanctified, you were justified') and the progressive sanctification of 1 Thessalonians 5:23 ('May God . . . sanctify you through and through'). On the basis of the former, it may be entirely correct to affirm that

'Justification and sanctification are two aspects of the same divine act' (para. 15), but this cannot apply to the latter, if only because a single 'divine act' is no longer in view. Sanctification as 'the work of God which actualises in believers the righteousness and holiness without which no one may see the Lord' (para. 17) is not restricted to the moment of justification. The damaging implications of this undifferentiated exposition become evident in the statement, 'By pronouncing us righteous, God also makes us righteous' (para. 15), where 'In addition to' is needed in place of 'By'. What is called for is something akin to Hooker's distinction between 'habitual' and 'actual', or even a different rendering, such as 'consecration', for the once-for-all sanctification of 1 Corinthians 6:11. Hooker is quoted in support of assertions such as God's creative word imparts what it imputes, but the quotation is isolated from its context which makes it plain that participating in Christ by imputation and participating by habitual and real infusion belong to different time-scales (para. 15, n.2). Hooker immediately goes on to draw the distinction which, in his treatise on justification, as we noted above, he spelt out in terms of 'habitual' and 'actual':

The first thing of his so infused into our hearts in this life is the Spirit of Christ whereupon because the rest of what kind soever do all both necessarily depend and infallibly also ensue, therefore the Apostles term it sometime the seed of God, sometime the pledge of our heavenly inheritance, sometime the handsel or earnest of that which is to come.

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The participation of Christ's infused grace', unlike participation in Christ by imputation, is essentially a matter of 'degrees and portions', although 'the first beginning of life, the seed of God, the first-fruits of Christ's Spirit is common to all. Later evangelical theology would call this 'regeneration', and this is close to what ARCIC II calls God's 'sanctifying recreation of us in grace' (para. 15). 'The remission of sins is accompanied by a present renewal, the rebirth to newness of life' (para. 18) - a statement in which 'accompanied by' avoids the confusion of 'By' in paragraph 15.

### A notable document

We have found it necessary to be critical of some of the contents of *Salvation and the Church*, but we must in conclusion reiterate our delighted appreciation of the Commission's breakthrough on justification itself. For justification by grace alone through faith alone cannot remain one article among many. It must judge and renew the whole corpus of Christian doctrine (as we have suggested above with regard to ecclesiology). If contemporary Roman Catholics and Anglicans are able to receive this agreed statement without reservation, we may expect to see an ever-widening renewal of the Church in the goodness and mercy of God.