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SALVATION AND THE CHURCH: An Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican—Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II)¹

A Response

GEORGE CURRY

Introduction

1. In considering the status of this Report the word '*provisional*' comes to mind.

First, because the Commission states that it:

will be glad to receive observations and criticisms made in a constructive and fraternal spirit.

The authorities who appointed the Commission have allowed the statement to be published so that it may be discussed and improved by the suggestions received.²

This being so it means that any considerations given to it by anybody in any context must be, for the time-being, provisional too. And secondly, because it is not an:

authoritative declaration by the Roman Catholic Church or by the Anglican Communion.

It is simply a joint statement by the Commission.³

2. In view of this *misleading claims have been made for the report*. Consider, first, for example, Clifford Longley's comments in *The Times* on January 22nd 1987. The headlines and first paragraph of his article give the distinct impression that the differences between Rome and Canterbury [on this subject] are now resolved. The

headline reads 'Churches heal their 400 year old rift', whilst in the first paragraph we are told that

An historical breakthrough in relations between the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, said to solve the basic dispute which led to the Reformation in the 16th century, is announced today.

I see why Mr. Longley speaks in this way, but he overstates the case. Moreover, the Report's conclusion⁴ cannot be used to substantiate his assertion. All it says is:

we believe that our two Communion are agreed on the essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation and on the Church's rôle within it.

Secondly, George Carey wrote on this subject in the *Church of England Newspaper* on January 23rd 1987. My criticisms of that article, entitled 'Salvation and the Church', are three.

(1) Dr Carey says 'Here is a clear and unambiguous statement on a doctrine that has separated Catholics and Protestants over 400 years'. This too is an overstatement. The reasons why will become apparent as we proceed.

(2) He glosses the quotations he cites from the Report, appearing to do so to support his own thesis.⁵

(3) It remains to be demonstrated that *Salvation and the Church* really '... is a document which will gladden our hearts and reassure us that the heart of the Gospel has not been lost'.

3. *Our attitude to the report is likely to be coloured by our perception of the Commission itself.*

A lot has been made of the fact that Evangelicals asked for this subject to put on the ARCIC agenda. However they were not alone in this. The Anglican Churches in both South Africa and South America as well as our own General Synod also issued similar requests. Even more is made of the fact that 'a higher proportion of Anglicans of an evangelical emphasis'⁶ made up the membership of the Commission. In fact ARCIC II has four evangelical members (there was only one on ARCIC I). This being so some are prepared to say, let alone think, that its findings and reports are bound to be of a 'sounder' nature. Also it is recognised that the Roman Catholic members of the Commission are much more sympathetic to Reformation theology than some of their contemporaries or forebears. They have imbibed Küng (on Justification) and are more open to Biblical Theology!

4. *This report is, in many respects, an extraordinary document.*

There appears to be—especially by the Roman Catholic members of the Commission—a shift in the direction of the Reformation doctrine of Justification and other related doctrines. Note, for example:

(1) *The definition of justification*. It says:

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.⁷

Here we have what appears to be a departure from the teaching of the Council of Trent and an acceptance of the Pauline [and Anglican] understanding of the term. This is a most encouraging development. We hope that Rome will build upon it. However we should not get things out of proportion. It needs to be remembered that the sixteen Decrees on Justification produced by the Council of Trent at its sixth session in 1547 were, to quote James Buchanan:

purposely, and perhaps unavoidably, expressed in vague and ambiguous terms.⁸

The thirty-three Canons denouncing the 'errors' opposed by the Roman Church at the time are much more explicit and definite in character. The reason why the decrees are somewhat vague and ambiguous is because there was such a diversity within the Council itself. Marinarus, for example, accepted the forensic meaning of the term justification and objected to the doctrine of 'faith informed with charity'. Pighius and Vega accepted the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ, whilst the Bishop of Cava favoured justification by faith alone. The decrees, therefore, were inevitably somewhat vague so that each could interpret them in support of his own opinion. Moreover it should be remembered that Trent does not represent a full and frank exposition or defence of the doctrine of justification as generally taught in the Roman Church at that time. This only goes to show that 'Rome in practice' is frequently worse than 'confessional Rome'.

(2) *The frequent mention of 'The Word' and 'Faith'*. Invariably the references to the Word are coupled with a reference to the sacraments.⁹ This may represent a step in the direction of the Reformation position but it needs to be demonstrated that the Commission believes that the instrumental means of justification is 'through faith *alone*'. It asserts:

salvation is the gift of grace; it is by faith that it is appropriated¹⁰

and that:

faith . . . not only includes an assent to the truth of the Gospel but also involves commitment of our will to God in repentance and obedience to his call.¹¹

It describes, quite rightly, baptism as 'the sacrament of faith',¹² and it speaks of being 'justified by grace.'¹³

These assertions we do not gainsay, but the Report leaves one with the distinct impression that justification is through the word *and* sacraments.¹⁴

This is different from Trent, which states that 'the instrumental cause . . . of justification is the sacrament of baptism',¹⁵ but it is not in itself a clear exposition of the Biblical position.

However, in so far as we have here a shift towards the Reformation position we welcome it.

(3) *The sovereignty of grace.*

With regard to *God's grace* The Council of Trent acknowledges the necessity of prevenient grace¹⁶ but it also asserts that the powers of free will have not been extinguished by the Fall¹⁷ and that man can cooperate with or reject God's grace, which only assists us, to turn to God.¹⁸ In contrast, this Report states that man's 'response to God's initiative is itself a gift of grace.'¹⁹

Later we read:

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 . . . from the divine work follows the human work . . .²⁰

the very 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.²¹

This shift we also welcome.

(4) *Assurance*

With regard to *assurance* the Report is more positive than Trent. Correctly, we are warned against presumption, but we are also told that 'Christian assurance is not presumptuous'²² and that 'The Word of Christ and his sacraments give us this assurance.'²³

These statements we welcome too, but strangely absent is any reference to the assurance that comes from resting on the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to all who believe. Of this the Reformers spoke much, and rightly so.

(5) *Penitential Disciplines and Works*

With regard to *penitential disciplines* we recognise that the Report treads cautiously. There is no reference to the necessity of absolution for salvation;²⁴ nor to penances making satisfaction to the justice of God for the temporal penalty of sin;²⁵ nor even to merits being transferred from one person to another. Instead we read that 'penitential disciplines, and other devotional practices, are not in any way intended to put God under obligation.'²⁶

In a document entitled *Salvation and the Church* these are significant omissions. Do they represent a shift away from Trent toward the Reformation and Biblical position by the Roman Catholic members of the Commission? We certainly hope so and would value clarification of this by the Commission in due course.

We recognise, then, that there are grounds for saying that *Salvation and the Church* is an extraordinary document. Yet even this statement must be qualified for it is not possible to give unequivocal support to this Report. It is deficient in a number of important respects. Certain specific criticisms can and should be made of it.

Specific Criticisms

1. *The report oversimplifies the reformation controversy.*

In the Introduction²⁷ the Report reviews the history of the controversy between Rome and Anglicans on the subject of Justification. It then proceeds to examine the issues of Salvation and Faith;²⁸ Salvation and Justification;²⁹ Salvation and Works;³⁰ and, Salvation and the Church;³¹ A conclusion is also offered.³²

With regard to the Reformation controversy the Report appears to distance Anglicans from it.

It may well be true, to assert with the Commission, that 'Trent was not directed against the Anglican formularies'³³ for Trent was published first, and that 'the Church of England substantially adopted the principles expressed in the moderate Lutheran formulations . . .'³⁴ but to go on and say that 'Nevertheless in the course of time Anglicans have widely come to understand that decree [Trent] as a repudiation of their position'³⁵ is, at the best, to oversimplify the situation or, at the worst, to mislead us deliberately. The Articles—and especially number 11 on Justification—represent a succinct summary of the Biblical teaching that they address. They criticise, both explicitly and implicitly, the mediaeval deviations from it and, as they post date Trent, they represent at least an implied, if not an explicit, criticism of that Council. As James Buchanan says:

Both before and after the date at which the Articles of Religion were framed, and repeatedly revised, the Protestant doctrine of Justification had taken a firm hold on the convictions of Englishmen . . . At the era of the Reformation . . . the Church of England formed no exception to the unanimity which then prevailed in regard to the ground and method of a sinner's acceptance with God.³⁶

Secondly, the *Report presents an 'absurd' view of the controversy.* This is nowhere more obvious than in paragraph fourteen where we are told that the Reformation controversy about Justification centred on a misunderstanding of terms. The Protestants, we are informed:

tended to follow the predominant usage of the New Testament, in which the verb *dikaion* means 'to pronounce and treat as righteous'. The Catholic Theologians, and notably the Council of Trent, tended to follow the usage of patristic and mediaeval Latin writers, for whom *justificare* (the traditional translation of *dikaion*) signified 'to make righteous'.

But, we must ask, was it really as simple as that? Is it not the case that many of the patristic writers such as Irenaeus, Cyprian, Basil, Ambrose, Origen, Chrysostom and Bernard, not to mention Anselm, held a 'forensic' as opposed to a 'moral' doctrine of Justification? And, do not Ambrose and Bernard both use the term *justificare* in the Pauline sense?³⁷ As has been said, this theory of mutual misunderstanding, whilst not a new one, is really nothing less than a distraction.³⁸ It obscures the fact that the two parties at the Reformation (Protestant and Roman) had different objectives. The Reformed Churches sought to state the Biblical teaching whilst Rome, somewhat dogmatically, strove to reassert the mediaeval doctrines. Moreover, the authority for the former was Scripture alone, whilst for the latter it was tradition. For these two reasons, then, it can be argued that this Report oversimplifies the Reformation controversy.

2. The report tends to obscure the distinction between justification and sanctification.

To some extent, at least, this must be the result of methodology. The Commission chose not to deal with Justification by itself. Instead it approached this subject as part of the doctrine of Salvation. Whilst this has some value it can be argued that this way of proceeding deflects us from the essential features of the Reformation dispute. There are certain elements of the Biblical doctrine of Justification that the Reformers, both Anglican and Continental, were careful to guard. The Reformers, for example, were most careful to assert that the justification of an individual in no way rests upon any inward change in that individual. Unfortunately, Rome has traditionally confused the distinction between Justification and Sanctification with the result that historically she has offered a different method of Justification, and therefore of Salvation. Down the years she has taught Justification by an inherent righteousness, by the personal obedience of the believer, and by the unfinished work of the Holy Spirit within men. Protestants, on the other hand, have always held that Justification is by the imputed righteousness of another, by means of the vicarious obedience of Christ, and by his finished work for us. Nobody questions or doubts that the person who trusts in Christ is changed and renewed by grace. The Report itself affirms this³⁹ but by 'persistently' mentioning Sanctification in the same

breath as Justification the distinctive features of the two doctrines in question are glossed over and even lost. In Scripture there is a logical distinction between the two. This the Reformers jealously maintained. Rome, however, obscured it. If we are to believe that Rome and Canterbury have now resolved their differences then we must be clear on this point. The section entitled 'Salvation and Justification' does not, alas, provide the necessary reassurance.

3. The report nowhere asserts that justification is by grace through faith alone.

No doubt I will be accused of being wedded to Reformation formulae and shibboleths. I trust I am not. I want to be Biblical. As a result I recognise that, to a large extent, the controversies of the Reformation revolved around the little words 'alone' and 'only'. I also recognise that the essence of Biblical faith and Evangelical Religion (as Bishop Ryle called it) is encapsulated in the same two words. Evangelicals hold to Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone and Scripture alone. Few people object to mention of grace, faith, Christ and Scripture. But some find any exclusive reference to or emphasis upon them offensive. Each is mentioned in the Report, yet nowhere do we read that we are justified by the imputed righteousness of Christ *alone*. Nor is it affirmed that we are justified by grace through faith *alone*. This being so we must ask the Commission, On what does our justification rest? Does it rest on Christ's righteousness alone or on our's *and* Christ's? We must also ask, What is the means of our justification? Are we justified through faith alone or by 'faith informed with charity' [filled out by love and good works]? These issues demand clarification for, far from resolving the Reformation controversy, the Report leaves the essential problems unresolved.

4. The report compromises the biblical doctrine of justification.

First, *we ask why?* The answer is, because of the Commission's aim. The Preface⁴⁰ is most revealing:

The primary task of ARCIC II is to examine and try to resolve those doctrinal differences that still divide us . . . The purpose of our dialogue is the restoration of full ecclesial communion between us.

In other words the aim is to reach a consensus rather than to elucidate the Biblical doctrine of Justification. If you proceed in this way you are bound to fudge or compromise the issues. That is what this document does even though it represents a valiant attempt to combine elements of two contradictory theological systems.

Secondly, *we ask how?* This Report compromises the Biblical doctrine *by admitting things that are doubtful*.

(1) Is it really true that whilst the New Testament employs a

variety of language 'to describe salvation in all its fullness . . . there is no controlling term or concept'?⁴¹

I think not, because both Romans and Galatians illustrate that the very heart of the Gospel is nothing less than justification by grace through faith alone. There are solid grounds for asserting with Dr. Packer:

The doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas: it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace. The doctrines of election, effectual calling, regeneration, and repentance, of adoption, of prayer, of the church, of ministry, and the sacraments, have all to be interpreted and understood in the light of justification by faith . . . When justification falls, all true knowledge of the grace of God in human life falls with it, and then, as Luther said, the Church itself falls.⁴²

(2) Is it really true that 'God's grace effects what he declares: his creative word imparts what it imputes'?⁴³

That God's word is creative we do not doubt, but this truth has nothing to do with justification. In his discussion of this doctrine in Romans and Galatians Paul does not refer to God's creative word. Instead he speaks of a declaration made by God about the sinner who believes. In Scripture, to justify means 'to acquit'. Nothing more and nothing less. This the Report affirms.⁴⁴ Why, then, having made this point, do not the authors press home its implications?

(3) Is it really true that the Reformation debate on Justification was 'compounded by a framework of discussion that concentrated too narrowly upon the individual'?⁴⁵

All you have to do is read Calvin's *Institutes of Religion* to see that this was not so.

Thus, sadly, this Report admits things that are doubtful.

The Report also *omits things that are essential*.

(1) *There is only a passing reference to God's Law and Judgment within the Report.*⁴⁶ This is a major omission when you remember that, in Biblical usage, justification is the opposite of condemnation. It represents a fatal flaw and seriously undermines the Biblical view of Justification as acquittal. As a result the Biblical doctrine is compromised.

(2) *There is no definition of faith within the Report.* This is another glaring omission when you recall that the nature of saving faith was a question of fundamental importance at the time of the Reformation. Is faith 'assensus', à la Rome, or does it include 'notitia' and, most importantly, 'fiducia', à la the Reformers? It is to be regretted that the Report does not include any reference to 'trust' in paragraph ten where mention is made of living faith.

(3) *There is no explicit reference to the nature of the real controversy concerning Justification at the time of the Reformation.* We are told that the four main areas of difficulty:

concerned the understanding of the *faith* through which we are justified⁴⁷ . . . the understanding of *justification* and the associated concepts, righteousness and justice⁴⁸ . . . the bearing of *good works* on salvation⁴⁹ . . . the *rôle of the Church* in the process of salvation.⁵⁰

These were indeed areas of controversy but it is surely more accurate to say that the Reformation debate revolved around these four questions:

- (i) the *nature* of justification;
- (ii) the *ground* of a sinner's justification;
- (iii) the *means* of justification; and,
- (iv) the *effect* of justification.

Let us comment briefly on each in turn.

First, *the nature of justification*. Rome said (and still does) that justification has to do with the remission of sins and the renovation of our nature. The Reformers asserted the forensic and judicial understanding of the term, stating that it is external to the sinner [it is a declaration made about him] and that it does not consist in a moral or spiritual change, although these accompany and flow from it.

Secondly, *the ground of justification*. Rome said [says] that the merits of Christ are the procuring cause of regenerating grace by which we are made righteous but that our personal inherent righteousness is the ground of our justification. By way of contrast, the Reformers, in line with Scripture, taught that the righteousness of Christ alone is the ground of our justification. The Spirit works within us, they avered, to apply and not to secure his righteousness. It is he [the Holy Spirit] who enables us to receive and rest on the righteousness of Christ by faith.

Thirdly, *the means of justification*. For Rome the means is faith *and* works [love]. This faith is infused at baptism and renewed at confession and absolution. In essence it is 'assensus' and needs to be 'informed with charity'. The Reformers, on the other hand, said that we receive justification through faith alone. This faith includes 'notitia' and, most importantly, 'fiducia' as well. It rests on and receives Christ. It apprehends and appropriates his righteousness as the ground of acceptance with God. It is not merely 'assensus'.

Fourthly, *the effect of justification*. Rome says that it is neither complete nor secure, and that it does not exclude the necessity of works. The Reformers held the Scriptural view that its fruit is the free pardon of sin and a sure title to heaven and eternal life. They affirmed that it is a present privilege which is complete, final and irreversible.

Unfortunately these fundamental differences are not resolved in this Report. Inevitably, therefore, one must question the Commission's conclusion where it states, amongst other things, that 'We believe that our two Communion are agreed on the essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation and on the Church's rôle within it.'⁵¹

Conclusion

It only remains to say a word about our response to this Report. First, we can and should, welcome the apparent shift away from the full-blown teaching of the Council of Trent in this document. Secondly, we request an unequivocal reassurance that this shift is real rather than merely cosmetic. Thirdly, we lament that that which the Reformers made clear is now obscured. If they were Biblical, and therefore correct, we have no right to settle for anything less. Lastly, we recognise that it is our responsibility both to expose the unsatisfactory nature of deficient statements on the doctrine of Justification and Salvation and to preach with power from on high:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.⁵²

GEORGE CURRY is Vicar of St. Stephen's Church, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

NOTES

- 1 This paper was read at a meeting of the North East Dioceses Evangelical Fellowship in March 1987.
- 2 *Salvation and the Church: An Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission ARCIC II*, London, 1987 p.5.
- 3 *Ibid.* p.5.
- 4 *Ibid.* para.32.
- 5 See Dr. Carey's quotations from paras.9,18,19 of the report.
- 6 See the Back Cover of the Report.
- 7 See para.18.
- 8 *Doctrine of Justification*, Edinburgh, 1984 p.139.
- 9 See paras.1,9,11,25,30.
- 10 Para.9.
- 11 Para.10.
- 12 Para.12.
- 13 Para.30.
- 14 See paras.12,13.
- 15 *Council of Trent, Justification*, chap.7.
- 16 *Ibid.* chap.5.
- 17 *Ibid.* chap.1.
- 18 *Ibid.* chap.5.
- 19 Para.9.
- 20 Para.19.
- 21 Para.24.
- 22 Para.11.
- 23 Para.11.
- 24 Cp. *Council of Trent, Justification*, chap.14.
- 25 Cp. *loc. cit.* and *Council of Trent, Penance*, chaps.8,9.
- 26 Para.22.
- 27 Paras.1-8.
- 28 Paras.9-11.
- 29 Paras.12-18.

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- 30 Paras.19–24.
- 31 Paras.25–31.
- 32 Para.32.
- 33 Para.2.
- 34 Para.2.
- 35 Para.2.
- 36 *Op.cit.* p.198.
- 37 For an excellent summary of the teaching of the Fathers, see Buchanan *op.cit.* pp.77ff.
- 38 See Dr. D.N. Samuel's article in *The Church of England Newspaper*, 30th January 1987.
- 39 Para.15ff.
- 40 P.6f.
- 41 Para.13.
- 42 Introductory Essay to James Buchanan's *Doctrine of Justification*, pp.viii, ix.
- 43 Para. 15.
- 44 Para.18.
- 45 Para.3.
- 46 Para.18.
- 47 Para.4.
- 48 Para.5.
- 49 Para.6.
- 50 Para.7.
- 51 Para.32.
- 52 Romans 3. v.21f.

Editor's Note

Since the publication in our previous issue of the paper by Leon Litvack entitled 'All for Love: John Mason Neale and the Perth Deanery Refusal' (Vol. 101/1) we have been advised by the author (now Professor of English at Tokushima Bunri University, Japan) that it was published in the *Journal of the Church of England Historical Society*, Diocese of Sydney Vol. 32 No. 1, in March 1987.