

St. Albans Sub-Commission

JUSTIFICATION

I

1. In discussing the salvation of humanity, Scripture employs a wide variety of images. Among them the language of reconciliation and forgiveness stresses the restoration of broken relationships (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:18; Eph. 2:13-18; 4:32); that of adoption, our restoration as children of God, made and renewed in his image (e.g. Rom.8: 15-17, 23, 29); that of regeneration or rebirth, a work of recreation and the beginning of new life (e.g. 1 Pet. 1:23). The language of new creation speaks of radical renewal (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:17); that of redemption or liberation, of rescue from bondage and freedom bought for a price (e.g. Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:18f); that of justification, of a new standing in the eyes of God (e.g. Rom. 5:1; 1 Cor. 6:11). The language of sanctification underlines the fact that God has made us his own and calls us to holiness of life (e.g. John 17:17; 1 Cor. 3:17; 6:11); while passages which speak of the giving of the Spirit tell us that God, in claiming us for his own, has given us a share in his own life (e.g. Rom. 5:5; 8:9-11; 1 Cor.12:13; Gal.3:2; Eph. 1:14).

2. These and other terms are employed in Scripture both of the society of the People of God and of the individual to express different facets of God's work of salvation which is itself one and indivisible. They each suggest, with differing emphasis, both a once-for-all divine act and a process requiring time for development and maturity. God calls us once for all,

but his call is worked out in the process of our journey through life. Although the image of justification refers to salvation primarily under the aspect of act rather than process (which is why baptism is properly described as "the sacrament of justification", cf. Augustine, Sermo 152.3), none of these biblical images of salvation can be exclusively associated with one or other of these emphases. Misunderstandings have occurred in the past through attempts at such categorization, notably when the antithesis between act and process has been associated with an over-sharp distinction between justification (as act) and sanctification (as process).

3. This misunderstanding has been compounded when the act of justification has been seen not so much as God's eschatological decision to justify the ungodly as the beginning of a temporal process continued by sanctification. The term Justification speaks of a divine declaration of acquittal, not so rigidly forensic as to be impersonal, nor divorced from Christian life in the Spirit. For the remission of sins is also a renewal, a rebirth to newness of life. This new life begins from the moment the believer receives the forgiveness of sins, and to that forgiveness he contributes only the will (or willingness) to be delivered. The culmination of the process of sanctification is salvation; that is the making in the believer of that righteousness and holiness without which no man may see the Lord.

II

4. In the sixteenth century discussion of these issues was confused by a misunderstanding between Protestants who followed the New Testament in referring justification ($\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$) primarily to the act of salvation and Catholics who followed medieval usage in referring justification (justificatio) also to the process.

5. The problems in understanding justification in a way which does justice to the diverse passages of Scripture are not inherent in the confessional division between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, but became caught up in the wider disputes of the sixteenth century. In 1547 the Roman Catholic church's Council of Trent published a long Decree on the doctrine of justification, accompanied by censures of condemned propositions. The Church of England's Thirty Nine Articles, published in 1571 on the basis of earlier drafts, also contained statements about Justification.

What these documents say on this subject is not in fact mutually exclusive.

6. The Council of Trent, in so far as its doctrine was polemically formulated, was directed against propositions associated with Luther, not against Anglican language. The fathers of Trent were anxious at hearing that human works cannot really be good at all, and wished to reaffirm the strong biblical emphasis that we are judged by our works, whether they be good or bad. Not that the believer can have

merits other than by Christ's merits. The believer is indeed justified on condition of faith, but not a faith evacuated of any element of moral resolution or credal assent. Unless joined to hope and love, the assent of faith is dead and does not unite the believer to Christ. On the other hand, true faith is not identical with that certitude which is one of its fruits. Trent's decrees are concerned to avert both the denial of free will and the assertion of irresistible grace. They also seek to exclude the potential, or indeed in places actual antinomianism that could be read off protestant denials that good works are a condition of entry to the kingdom of heaven.

7. The Anglican articles of 1571 emphasize (1) that we are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of Christ by faith, and not for our works or deservings: (2) that good works after justification are the fruits of faith, and though unable to put away our sins, are nevertheless pleasing to God and spring necessarily out of a true and living faith.

III

8. It has therefore never been in dispute between Roman Catholics and Anglicans that all human beings stand in need of justification, not only because of their personal or actual sins, but also because all are born into an inherentl

sinful condition. Our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel of God's gratuitous and merciful action in him. The prerequisite of final salvation is righteousness, which is both a judgment made by God in favour of the sinner declaring him righteous, and at the same time a gift which God bestows on him making him righteous. God's judgment is therefore not to be seen as a mere legal fiction: God's grace effects what he declares. On the other hand the sinner can do nothing to merit justification, which is the free gift of God's grace. He retains the human freedom to make choices among created goods, but without God's help is unable even to begin to turn to him. Even the very first movements of the soul, such as repentance and desire for forgiveness, which lead to justification, are God's work in us touching our heart by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. "What have you that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4.7).

9. The Christian receives the grace of justification through faith which is obedience to the word of God. Baptism is the sacrament of justification by which the sinner is made a member of the Church, which is the body of Christ and the Community of the redeemed.

10. Faith, itself a gift of grace, is our response to the gospel by which we receive the effects of Christ's action on our behalf. This response is not merely intellectual acceptance of credal propositions, but the obedient assent by which adult man freely offers up to God his whole self, intellect, feeling and will. Such faith is inseparable from hope and

charity. It unites the believer with Christ, makes him a member of Christ's body, and issues in good works, which are pleasing to God. It is in this sense that we are justified by faith, or to put it more precisely, by grace through faith.

11. Nevertheless the believer cannot rely on his good works as though these were not entirely the fruit of God's grace, or boast of his own merits as though he were not still in need of mercy. Sin no longer reigns in one who is justified, yet he remains liable to sinful inclinations, continues to fall repeatedly, and may even depart from the grace God has given. The Christian, even though he actively participates in the life and worship of the Church, may never presume on the gift of final perseverance, yet he should live his life with a sure confidence in God and with the firm hope that God will bring him to final salvation.

12. Although the justification of the sinner is a gift to which the sinner contributes nothing of his own, Scripture speaks of the good works of the justified performed in grace as recompensed by God, the righteous judge (Matt.25). This eternal reward promised to the righteous, is also a gift, depending wholly on God's grace. It is only with this understanding that following St. Augustine we can speak of the believer's merits: 'When God crowns our merits it is his

own gifts that he crowns" (Ep.194.5). He is true to his promise to "render to everyone according to his works" (Rom. 2:6). At the same time the New Testament also sees that eternal life is the consequence of faith, while judgment is a consequence of unbelief (Jn. 3:18; 5:24).

NOTE

In preparing this Statement we have been greatly helped by the Agreed Statement of the US Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue, Justification by Faith (1983). However, while making use of this material, where appropriate, we have also taken note of the fact that the issues between Anglicans and Roman Catholics are not identical with those between Lutherans and Roman Catholics.