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SALVATION AND THE CHURCH

In the foreword to the first of the Agreed Statements of ARCIC II, a welcome is promised to "criticisms and observations made in a constructive and fraternal spirit"; and this short comment is made by way of response. In the Agreed Statement's Preface, the members of the Committee state that "we have addressed ourselves to the doctrine of justification, which at the time of the Reformation was a particular cause of contention". While this doctrine has been very properly treated within the larger doctrine of Salvation, yet it must be admitted that "Salvation and the Church" contains very little indeed about the doctrine of Justification itself. Out of 32 numbered paragraphs, only paras. 14, 15 and 18 attempt any exposition of the doctrine. Such compression has, I fear, led to inadequate analysis of the reasons for the historical divergences in the interpretation of the doctrine in different Churches.

In para. 14 this explanation is given to these differences:

Roman Catholic interpreters of Trent and Anglican theologians alike have insisted that justification and sanctification are neither wholly distinct from nor unrelated to one another. The discussion however has been confused by different understandings of the word justification and its associated words. The theologians of the Reformation tended to follow the predominant use of the New Testament, in which the verb dikaioun usually means "to pronounce 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 dikaioun) signified "to make righteous".

In previous Agreed Statements of ARCIC I, it has been the genius of the Commission to go behind Reformation controversies to the early Church, and indeed to the New Testament Church; and this method could have been employed with advantage over the doctrine of justification.

In this case it is helpful to go behind the New Testament to the meanings of Hebrew words in the Old Testament. In particular the use of the Hebrew tsedek and its correlatives have been explored in such works as N. Snaith, Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament (Epworth 1944) and C.H. Dodd, The Bible and the Greeks (Hodder and Stoughton 1935). Norman Snaith wrote:

We have seen the eighth century prophets use the word tsedek-tsedegah (righteousness) in an ethical sense, but with a tendency to shade off into a salvation sense. In Second-Isaiah we find a further stage of this development, for here the word means "vindication" and even "salvation" to a far greater extent than "ethical righteousness". The meaning now is chiefly soteriological, and only to a slight extent ethical. The word forms part of Second-Isaiah's salvation vocabulary (op.cit., p.87).

C.H. Dodd compared the Hebrew usage of tsedek and its correlatives in the Old Testament with their translation by dikaios and its correlatives in the LXX. He pointed out that tsedek often means "in the right" rather than "righteous" (op.cit., p.47), and that in the Old Testament tsedegah could mean vindication, and that in Second-Isaiah it was the virtual equivalent of deliverance or salvation. Dikaioun, which in classical and Hellenistic Greek could mean "to do a person justice", was used in the LXX to translate hitsdik, to redress or vindicate. Dodd brought his technical study of Hebrew and Septuagintal language

in the Old Testament to bear on the problem of justification:

It is evident that this study of the Greek renderings of tsedek has an important bearing on the uses of dikaiosune, dikaios and dikaion in the New Testament. In particular, the Pauline usage of these terms must be understood in the light of Septuagintal usage and the underlying Hebrew. The apostle wrote Greek, and read the LXX, but he was also familiar with the Hebrew original. Thus while his language largely follows that of the LXX, the Greek words are for him always coloured by their Hebrew association (op.cit., p.57).

So far as the doctrine of Justification is concerned, it is of particular interest to take note of Dodd's remarks on Paul's use of dikaion:

As a Greek he no doubt understood the term in the sense fixed upon it in the LXX, which, as we have seen, is a combination or confusion of two senses but in neither case identical with it: "to do justice" and "to acquit". Thus in forensic metaphor it means "to acquit". But Paul is well aware that in using such an expression as dikaion ton asebe (Romans 4.5), he was uttering a daring paradox, since the LXX uses precisely that expression in censure of unjust judges. The paradox was justified only because for Paul dikaion was haunted by the ghost of hitsdik in its wider sense of to "vindicate", to "redress"....It is to be observed that Paul does not mean by dikaion to "make righteous"; for this he uses, as a good Greek writer should, dikaion kathistanai. While the act of vindication or deliverance has already taken place, the actual attainment of "righteousness" (dikaiosune in the true Greek sense) is still future - "the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5.19).

A perspective such as this would have produced a rather different context for the work of ARCIC II on the doctrine of Justification. Reformation controversies seem stale today, but it is illuminating to go behind both Catholic and Protestant concepts to the nuances of the New Testament itself. In such a case justification could be described neither primarily in terms of imputed righteousness, or ontologically in terms of imparted righteousness but rather in the more original dynamic categories of Jewish thought reflected in the New Testament. Justification is, when seen in this light, primarily God taking action to help humanity, vindicating us, coming to our help. Because God has put us in the right despite our unrighteousness, two consequences follow. Since God has forgiven us in Christ, we are "justified through faith" (and this corresponds to imputed righteousness). Because God has put us in the right, we are in a new relationship to him. He has opened us up to the riches of his grace so that we are radically changed in our inmost being, inwardly renewed and reborn to newness of life (and this corresponds to imparted righteousness). In this sense, it is right to say (para.15) that "Justification and Sanctification are two aspects of the same act".

In the same way there need be no quarrel with the statement (para.18) that "the term justification speaks of a divine declaration of acquittal", because it is true that Paul's thinking about justification usually does topple over into forensic metaphor, and in such a context it is true, as Paul often tells us, that God has pronounced our acquittal. Although he knows us to be sinful, he pronounced us righteous, because he looks on us not as hateful sinners brought to the tribunal of justice, but

as his beloved sons and daughters brought into the presence of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But such language does not bring us to the heart of the doctrine of Justification. Controversy about the doctrine did not arise primarily because Catholics used the Latin word justificare, however much this may have added to the difficulties. The trouble arose because neither Catholics nor Protestants appreciated the dynamic force of the Hebrew word translated into Greek as dikaioun and into Latin as justificare. True reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants in this matter lies in a return to the original biblical foundation. God does not primarily account us righteous or make us righteous: he puts us in the right.

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