

Churchman Editorial – Volume: 117/3 (2003)

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

The Communion of Saints

Editor: Professor Gerald Bray

‘If at first you don’t succeed, then try, try and try again’ is an old saying which might well serve as a suitable motto for Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Having issued a first statement as long ago as May 1994, which dealt with the Christian mission in the third millennium (rather a long time to plan in advance!), a second one in 1997, on justification by faith, and a third one in 2002, called ‘Your Word is Truth’, the ECT group has now issued a fourth statement on ‘The Communion of Saints’. Those who have followed ECT’s progress will perhaps have noticed that the number of signatories has declined, probably because of a growing disenchantment (on both sides) with ECT’s aims and methods. What started as a brave and potentially worthwhile attempt to clear the air between Evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics now seems to have got bogged down in the usual rut of ecumenical activities and documents, with no end in sight other than disillusionment with the whole process. For the moment, the show goes on because nobody knows quite how to stop it, but the chances of success grow more remote as new and thornier issues come to the surface, and it is hard to see how the participants in ECT will be able to extricate themselves from the dilemmas which they are increasingly coming up against.

Before we look at the latest statement in detail, certain fundamental points are worth bearing in mind. First of all, the signatories to the various documents, including the latest one, are authentic representatives of their respective traditions. The Catholics are mainstream, Vatican-approved teachers who reflect, as well as anyone can, what the central Roman line on these matters is. The Evangelicals are likewise all highly-respected leaders within their community, and represent mainstream, conservative Reformed thought. Neither side has been asked to compromise its fundamental convictions, and neither has done so; the stated object of the dialogue is to test how far the authentic Evangelical and Catholic traditions can converge, not to absorb one into the other, and all the documents are careful to say just how provisional and limited their conclusions are. At the same time, Evangelicals and Catholics view ecumenical dialogue differently and have different expectations of it. Evangelicals are not a church but a spiritual movement, and what concerns them is the right understanding of the Gospel. They want to know whether Catholics can affirm that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, as this is taught by Scripture alone. Some Protestants will point out that any Catholics who can affirm this will be contradicting the official teaching of their church, though we must admit that Protestants are poorly placed to complain, since our churches are full of people, many of them in positions of leadership, who regularly do just that! Roman Catholics, on the other hand, view other Christians on a sliding scale. They give themselves one hundred percent—the fullness of the truth revealed in Christ—whereas others fall short of this to varying degrees. Their first concern in dialogue is to figure out where Evangelicals belong on their scale, and then to ask whether (and how far) they can

be nudged upwards towards one hundred percent—reunion with Rome. The two sides thus come to the table with different presuppositions and different expectations, so we must not be surprised to discover that each one interprets the agreed statements very differently.

The basic problem with ECT seems to be that it has specialised in making ‘common affirmations’ without bothering to consider how far these amount to substantial agreement. The latest statement offers an excellent example of this. When discussing the communion of saints, ECT could not ignore the thorny subject of purgatory, although both sides quickly realised that no agreement on this would be forthcoming. So instead, they opted for a ‘common affirmation’, which in this case means repeating 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, with its intriguing assertion that even if a believer’s work is destroyed, he will still be saved ‘as if through fire’. Since Evangelicals can hardly refuse to subscribe to Scripture, they are happy to go along with this affirmation, oblivious to the fact that no reputable biblical scholar (Catholic or Protestant) would regard these verses as a justification for the existence of purgatory. That inconvenient fact is glossed over, and the impression is left that there is some biblical basis for the doctrine after all, which Evangelicals need to ponder more carefully than they have done. This fits in perfectly with the Catholic approach to the whole dialogue. After having identified a point of Catholic doctrine which Evangelicals do not accept, the Catholics look for some aspect of it which they can assent to, and hope that if this approach is pursued, Evangelicals may gradually change their minds. This tactic tends to force Evangelicals into a position of agnosticism, since it is very hard to prove the non-existence of something, with the result that Catholics are left reaffirming the position which they started with, viz., that the Roman church knows something of which others are ignorant. Sharing this ‘knowledge’ with the less fortunate is both a duty and a privilege, whose outcome will redound to the great advantage of the recipients as they finally discover what a blessing reunion with Rome is!

Much the same procedure can be observed with the other issues which have been the subject of ECT’s dialogues. Some Protestants find it hard to believe, but it is possible for both Evangelicals and Catholics to make common affirmations about a wide range of subjects, including justification by grace through faith, which leave an appearance of unity but which do not constitute substantial agreement. For example, the classic divide between the Catholic notion of the ‘infusion’ (or ‘impartation’) of grace and the Evangelical assertion of ‘imputation’ can be overcome, on the Catholic side, simply by revising the nature of grace. Catholics can (and many do) admit that their sixteenth-century formulations depended on a view of grace which thought of it as a ‘thing’, a kind of liquid substance which could be poured into any given recipient. In the post-Vatican II world, this rather crude understanding can be dismissed as an outdated metaphor, and the claim can be made that what Protestants mean by ‘imputation’ is no different from what the Roman church ‘really’ teaches—once it is understood that grace is not a substance. In this way, a great deal of convergence between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics is possible, as long as one stays within certain carefully prescribed limits, which ECT generally tries to do.

But the sad fact remains that the series of ‘common affirmations’ which results from this approach does not amount to substantial agreement between the two sides. The main reason for this is that particular doctrines cannot be extracted from their context and studied independently; they have to be held together and interpreted accordingly. For example, in ‘The communion of saints’, we are told that ‘Evangelicals do not generally (sic) affirm the intercession of the saints in heaven, and do not ask for their intercession, because they do not find any explicit biblical warrant for such practice’. This is certainly true, as far as it goes, but it has to be pointed out that failure to find biblical warrant is not the only (or even the main) reason for evangelical rejection of this practice. Evangelicals are not merely agnostic about it—we are opposed to it, because our understanding of the church, of the communion of saints, and above all of the mediatorial role of the risen, ascended and glorified Christ, makes such a doctrine impossible. There is no room for the intercession of the saints in heaven on our behalf, and to suggest that there might be is to detract from the all-sufficiency of Christ and our direct relationship to him. But ECT does not get into such controversial waters; it is content to note a blank on the Evangelical page marked ‘prayers to the dead’ and to leave it at that—a blank, which Catholics may one day hope to fill in with their doctrine!

Similarly with justification, the crunch comes when we discuss the matter of assurance of salvation. Catholics do not believe that it is possible to know for sure whether we are going to heaven, whereas this is one of the pillars of Evangelical faith. To them, our assurance is presumptuous, because it either presupposes that we have somehow attained spiritual perfection, or that God does not care what kind of lives we lead, as long as we confess the right doctrine. Protestants do not recognise themselves in this caricature, which they call ‘easy-believism’ or ‘cheap grace’ and they reject it, but the Catholic misunderstanding is possible because to them, justification, grace and faith mean different things in the overall context of salvation. The heart of the matter is that Evangelicals believe that we are saved by the ‘alien righteousness’ of Christ. It is not because we have done anything to merit our salvation that God has redeemed us, but purely because of his free gift of grace, which is given to us by faith. We do not use the word ‘imputation’ as a spiritualised, non-material equivalent to ‘infusion’ or ‘impartation’ but as a means of expressing our dependence on something which is essentially foreign to us. Catholics agree with Evangelicals that we have to start this way (it is called ‘prevenient grace’ in their theology), but they do not accept that that is the end of the story. For Evangelicals, the Christian life is growth in the awareness of the depth of our sinfulness and of our absolute dependence on divine grace; it is not a change of being or status before God. For Catholics, on the other hand, the Christian life is a progression towards perfection, which involves real change in the believer and may be (but is usually not) completed in this life. Hence the need for purgatory, which is a logical impossibility in Evangelical thought. Here again, it is not merely the absence of clear biblical evidence which makes us reject that idea, but our whole understanding of salvation. Purgatory finds no place in that, and a common affirmation of 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 gets us nowhere.

The participants in ECT are convinced that they are doing a good work, and it would be churlish to deny that there have been some useful spin-offs from it. It is always good to

be made to reflect more deeply on our theology and on the reasons for believing what we do, and if we can do this with Roman Catholics in a spirit of charity, then so much the better. But Evangelicals need to understand that Rome has a coherent and comprehensive theology which serves as its unalterable benchmark in all such discussions, whereas they do not—at least not in the same way. The term ‘Evangelical’ covers a wide variety of beliefs, some of which cannot easily be harmonised. Calvinists and Arminians (for example) cannot point to a common body of theology to which they are both equally happy to subscribe, with the result that Evangelicals often find it difficult to get beyond quoting Scripture (on which they agree) to interpreting its meaning in particular instances. This situation favours the Catholic side in dialogue, as the ECT documents make painfully clear. Perhaps the real lesson which we all have to learn is that the word ‘Evangelical’ is too broad for such purposes, and a narrower, more coherent theology is required if genuine interaction with Rome is ever to take place. The Evangelical members of ECT might be better advised to set to work on that task before they launch into yet another round of ‘common affirmations’ which lack real substance behind them.