
ERCDOM and ARCIC II: A Brief Survey

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Do you know what the letters **ERCDOM** refer to? They denote the **Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977—1984** and a report of its work, edited by Basil Meeking and John Stott, was published by Paternoster in 1986.

You may be surprised that such a dialogue, particularly on mission, ever took place at all. ERCDOM involved three main conferences, at Venice in 1977, Cambridge in 1982 and Laudevenne in France in 1984. These details of the conferences need to be appreciated:

The Evangelical participants included John Stott, Peter Savage, Martin Goldsmith, David Wells, Harvie Conn and Peter Beyerhaus. They were not official representatives of any church or group but came from a wide spectrum of evangelical life as either theologians or missiologists from different parts of the world.

The RC participants were chosen by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Both Evangelicals and RCS have devoted considerable attention to the subject of evangelism since 1974. For Evangelicals an important milestone was the International Congress on World Evangelization in Switzerland in July 1974 with its now famous 'Lausanne Covenant'. Later the same year the Third General Assembly of the RC Synod of Bishops studied the subject, then Pope Paul VI issued his exhortation, 'Evangelization in the Modern World' in December 1975.

Dialogue can assume, of course, different forms as well as serving different purposes. ERCDOM for example, was **not** committed to organic unity; it was rather, 'a search for such common ground as might be discovered between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics which harm our witness to the gospel, contradict our Lord's prayer for the unity of his followers, and need if possible to be overcome' (p.10).

The ERCDOM Report is **not** an agreed statement but a record of ideas shared in the three conferences. It is honest and, at times, detailed in indicating areas of disagreement as well as of agreement.

There are seven sections in the Report and these can be summarised briefly.

In *Section 1*, the subject is **Revelation and Authority**, pp.14-26. We are not surprised to learn that the participants deemed the discussion of this subject essential and urgent because of the Reformation 'formal' principle, namely, *Sola Scriptura* and because of its greater relevance to mission. Important areas

of disagreement emerged, including the process of interpreting the Bible and also submission to the Bible.

The Nature of Mission, pp.29-35, is the theme of *Section 2*. Here again, long-standing tensions exist between both sides but it was felt that the Lausanne Covenant and Paul VI's exhortation, 'supplied some evidence of growing convergence in our understanding of mission', p.29. Vatican II defined the Church for RCs as 'the sacrament of salvation', the sign and promise of redemption to each and every person. For them, 'mission' includes not only evangelisation but also 'the service of human need and the building up and expression of fellowship in the Church', p.30. In addition to questions such as the basis, authority and initiative of Mission, discussion touched upon socio-political involvement as well as God's work outside the Church. The latter 'is a question of major missiological importance', p.34. Roman Catholics are more optimistic in believing that most people will be saved but the Evangelicals rightly argued that this view 'has no explicit biblical justification', p.35.

Section 3 concerns **The Gospel of Salvation**, pp.39-52. The word 'gospel' means different things for both sides. 'For Evangelicals it is the message of deliverance from sin, death and condemnation ... for Roman Catholics the gospel centres in the person, message and gracious activity of Christ. His life, death and resurrection are the foundation of the Church, and the Church carries the living gospel to the world. The Church is a real sacrament of the gospel', pp.43-4. The crucial question of the relationship between the gospel and the Church highlights the deep doctrinal divisions which exist between the two sides. For example, 'it is in the context of salvation that Evangelicals have the greatest difficulty with Mariology', p.49.

Our Response in the Holy Spirit to the Gospel is the theme of *Section 4*, pp.55-62, and once again basic disagreement emerges here, this time concerning baptismal regeneration, church membership, proselytisation and the sacraments.

Section 5 deals with **The Church and the Gospel**, pp.65-69, and while these 'belong indissolubly together' yet again there are differences in understanding and definition. Concerning **The Gospel and Culture** in *Section 6*, pp.73-78, it is acknowledged that Evangelicals and RCs 'start from a different background. Evangelicals tend to stress the discontinuity and Roman Catholics the continuity between man unredeemed and man redeemed ... the Lausanne Covenant declares: because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he is fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic', pp.73-4.

Surely, with such deep cleavages concerning major doctrines, there can be no co-operation between the two sides. Well, the ERCDOM participants are more hopeful although they acknowledge that 'divisions continue, even in some doctrines of importance', p.82. *Section 7* therefore is entitled **The Possibilities of Common Witness**, pp.81-92, and claims 'there is therefore between us an initial if incomplete unity'. What can be done together? The Report suggests co-operation in Bible translation/publishing, the use of media, community service, social thought and action, dialogue, informal co-operation in small

groups for prayer etc. but avoiding the Mass.

ARCIC II: Salvation and the Church is an agreed statement by the second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. It may be helpful if we briefly survey the historical background to ARCIC II.

Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsey issued a **Common Declaration** in 1966 aimed at 'a restoration of complete communion of faith and sacramental life' between their two churches. One major decision by these two leaders concerned the creation of ARCIC. It has met in three important stages:

- a) the **Preparatory Commission** in 1967-68
- b) **ARCIC I** in 1970-81
- c) **ARCIC II** which first convened in 1983 after the impetus provided by the Pope's visit to Britain in 1982.

Following the Common Declaration of 1966 there was a further Declaration by Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Donald Coggan in 1977. At Canterbury in May 1982 Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Robert Runcie signed another Common Declaration aimed at 'the restoration of full communion' and 'the fulfilment of God's will for the visible unity of all his people'. This organic unity is envisaged as involving:

- a) agreement 'on essential matters where doctrine admits no divergence', **THE FINAL REPORT**, p.38;
- b) a mutually recognised ministry;
- c) councils of bishops and 'a universal primate as servant and focus of visible unity in truth and love', *idem* pp.97-98;
- d) a 'communion of life, worship and mission';
- e) gradual integration 'by stages', **ARCIC I**, p.66;
- f) union with other churches as well. The 1982 Common Declaration affirms, 'Our aim is not limited to the union of our two Communion alone, but rather extends to the fulfilment of God's will for the visible unity of all his people'.

The Church of Ireland cautiously welcomed the **FINAL REPORT OF ARCIC I** but with some important reservations. For example, it rejects Papal infallibility and then Mariology as 'lacking sufficient support in Scripture'.

Further discussions have continued for over 25 years, too, between the Orthodox and Anglican Churches. The culmination of these discussions was the **Dublin Agreed Statement 1984**, its predecessor being the **Moscow Agreed Statement** of 1976. The Dublin Statement is published by SPCK under the title, **ANGLICAN-ORTHODOX DIALOGUE** and contains 'important agreements on the mystery of the Church, the Trinity, prayer and holiness, worship and tradition' as well as suggesting ways of reconciling long-standing differences.

ARCIC II was published in February 1987 and represents 'the first published work of the second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. It represents over three years' study of the doctrine of justification begun in Venice (1983), continued in Durham (1984) and Graymoor, New York State (1985) and now completed at Llandaff, Cardiff ... Justification is considered in the context of the doctrine of salvation as a whole, which in turn involves

discussion of the role of the church in Christ's saving work.'

Membership of the Commission is international; it also includes three lay people, two of whom are women and the Commission has a higher proportion of Anglicans of an evangelical emphasis than did ARCIC I.

The General Synod of the Church of England immediately welcomed ARCIC II in February 1987 and the document has received generally warm approval from the secular and religious press. *The Times* (24 Jan 87) welcomed it, for example, emphasising that the Reformation was 'only a misunderstanding about certain words' and that ARCIC II 'Should be enough to bury the Reformation's principal theological hatchet, once and for all.' A more penetrating and biblical response was made by the Rev Dr David Samuel in the *Church of England Newspaper* (30 Jan 87); 'ARCIC II obscures that message of salvation which is at the heart of the gospel ... the biblical teaching is compromised'. Certainly the definitions provided by ARCIC II of both justification and sanctification are misleading and inadequate. 'If justification is confused with regeneration or sanctification,' wrote John Murray, 'then the door is opened for the perversion of the gospel at its centre. Justification is still the article of the standing or falling church.' (Redemption Accomplished and Applied, p.121).

However, the confusion amongst some evangelical Anglicans and others concerning the orthodoxy and value of ARCIC II continues. The editorial of *Evangel* (Summer 87, p.1) states that ARCIC II 'has already been welcomed by many evangelicals, who have said that, in the crucial area of justification, the Roman Catholics now agree with the rest of us.'

In the same issue of *Evangel*, five views of ARCIC II are published. Tim Bradshaw of Trinity College, Bristol, provides the context for an understanding of ARCIC II but warns that 'Modern Catholic thought, using biblical categories subtly to re-interpret Catholic theology, has proved a googly which, it seems, Anglican evangelicals are unable to deal with' (p.8). An evangelical member of the ARCIC II Commission, the Rev Julian Charley has no hesitation in accepting the Report but, by contrast, the Rev Roger Beckwith argues, 'There was misunderstanding in the Reformation period, as the Commission says; but it was not so much a misunderstanding of each other as a misunderstanding of the New Testament on the part of Trent ... The theory of mutual misunderstanding is of particular importance to Roman Catholics, because it allows them to correct the mistakes of the past, without having to abandon the claim that the Church is infallible' (p.13).

These penetrating observations are confirmed by the Rev Hywel Jones of London who concludes his detailed, well-argued article with the words, 'this Report sounds the death knell for justification by faith as Luther, Calvin and more importantly the Bible teach it' (p.20). Earlier he insists that ARCIC II 'dislodges justification by faith from its prime position, hermeneutically and theologically, and deprives it of its clear and exclusive message to sinners' (p.19). I share his difficulty in being unable to 'understand how evangelical Anglicans can be even generally content with it' (p.15).