

ESSAY #3

This essay assesses the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), issued in 1999 by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church considering its historical background. The essay illustrates how the Joint Declaration understands justification by faith and merit. The essay also describes these same topics from Luther's perspective in *The Freedom of a Christian* and the Council of Trent's perspective. Furthermore, the essay treats how the document highlights previously unseen common ground and where it leaves space for unresolved questions.

In the preamble of the JDDJ, the importance of the doctrine of justification for the Lutheran Reformation is recalled as the "first and chief article and at the same time as the "ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines." This doctrine, different in the Catholic Church, was asserted and defended to the point that doctrinal condemnations were mutually imposed. "These condemnations are still valid today and thus have a church-diving effect."¹ However, the document includes an agreement on basic truths of the doctrine and indicates that the remaining divergences in its explication are no longer the basis for doctrinal condemnations;² recognizing that both churches have come to new insights on their own journeys.³

This common understanding of our justification is grounded in Sacred Scripture both in the Old and in the New Testament. Particularly relevant from the Reformation period is Rom 3:23-25 that treats the "justification" of sinful human beings by God's grace through faith.⁴ Justification becomes ours through Christ Jesus "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Rom 3:25; see 3:21-28). "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your

¹ Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, 1999, 1.

² Ibid, 5.

³ Ibid, 7.

⁴ Ibid, 9

own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works" (Eph 2:8 f)⁵. Number 11 in the document describes what justification is and how it works:

"Justification is the forgiveness of sins (cf. Rom 3:23-25; Acts 13:39; Lk 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (Rom 5:12-21) and from the curse of the law (Gal 3:10-14). It is acceptance into communion with God: already now, but then fully in God's coming kingdom (Rom 5:1 f). It unites with Christ and with his death and resurrection (Rom 6:5). It occurs in the reception of the Holy spirit in baptism and incorporation into the one body (Rom 8:1 f, 9f; I Cor 12:12 f). All this is from God alone, for Christ's sake, by grace, through faith in "the gospel of God's Son (Rom 1:1-3)."

After describing how the common understanding of justification sprang from both parties listening to Holy Scripture and maintaining theological conversations, the JDDJ presents the agreement reached in faith, "we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God." ⁶How sweet for Christians longing for unity are the lines at the end of number 15: "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works." The common understanding of justification goes beyond being one part of Christian doctrine. It is essential to all truths of faith. It is an indispensable criterion to orient our teaching and practice to Christ.⁷

In 1520, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther expounds his doctrine of justification by faith backed up by his biblical beliefs that humans had no ability to earn their own salvation. This idea was the basis for his doctrine of Christian liberty or freedom. Since faith is a gratuitous gift of God, Luther argued, Christians required no acts or works to be saved; contrary to what seemed to be the religious requirements of the medieval church of his time. Luther was not dispensing Christians of doing good works or freeing them to do whatever they wanted. He maintained that the same love of God that had freed them also bound them to act according to His will.⁸

⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁷ Ibid, 18.

⁸ Tryntje Helfferich. *Martin Luther, On the Freedom of a Christian*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Indianapolis, Cambridge. 2013, p. 1-3.

Luther differentiated between the internal (spiritual, new) and the external (physical, old) man.⁹ Nothing from the external realm can make the spiritual man pious or free. All external things like health, food, illness, thirst, etc. do not reach the soul therefore cannot help nor harm the soul.¹⁰ It is only the holy gospel, the word of God preached by Christ through, which the soul can live and be pious, free, and Christian.¹¹ The only work Christians must do is to establish the word and Christ in themselves.¹² Luther affirmed the commandments do not contain on them the strength to live them but faith.¹³ Faith depends on the divine word, not good works.¹⁴ Faith makes possible for believers to fulfill all commandments.¹⁵ One of Luther's concerns was to give all glory to God which consisted in attributing to Him all truth and everything good. He insisted "no good works can accomplish this, rather the faith of the heart alone. Works are dead things, which can neither honor nor praise God, no matter how they are done or even if they are intended to honor and praise God."¹⁶ However, the external man awaiting Judgement Day should not be idle, but busy disciplining and training his body to make it "obedient in conformity to the internal man and to faith"¹⁷ not expecting these good works will make him pious and righteous before God but doing them freely out of love just to please God.¹⁸ "Therefore, the person must always be good and pious first, before all of his good works, and good works follow and proceed from the pious, good person."¹⁹

A few decades later the Council of Trent in 1546 ordained, confessed, and declared that the first man, Adam after his transgression, lost the holiness and justice in which he had been created, incurred the wrath and indignation of God, death, and captivity. He also was changed in body and soul for the

⁹ Ibid, 19, #2.

¹⁰ Ibid, 19, #3.

¹¹ Ibid, 20, #5.

¹² Ibid, 22, #7.

¹³ Ibid, 23, #8.

¹⁴ Ibid, 24, #10.

¹⁵ Ibid, 26, #13.

¹⁶ Ibid, 26-27, #13.

¹⁷ Ibid, 31, #20.

¹⁸ Ibid, 32, #21.

¹⁹ Ibid, 34, #23.

worse and all his posterity as well; this sin is one, and by propagation, transmitted to all; the only remedy is the merit of the one mediator, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has reconciled us to God in his own blood, made unto us justice, sanctification, and redemption. In baptism we are saved by no other than Christ. Baptism is the means for man's regeneration, "putting off the old man and putting on the new one who is created according to God."²⁰ Baptism as the first of the seven sacraments is what begins all true justice; the other sacraments either begin or being begun increase justification or being lost restore it.²¹ The sacraments are necessary for salvation; the council declared anathema anyone saying that faith alone, without sacraments or the desire of them, obtains the grace of justification.²² They also declared anathema those saying that in the Roman Church "there is not the true doctrine concerning the sacrament of baptism".²³ Anathema were considered also those who say baptized persons are made "debtors to faith alone, but not to the observance of the whole law of Christ" or that the baptized are free from all the precepts of the church, written or unwritten.²⁴

The JDDJ highlights beautifully previous unseen common ground. For example, the Catholic understanding of "cooperation" to justification is an effect of grace not natural to humans.²⁵ In the other hand, the Lutheran teaching of human incapability to cooperate in their salvation does not deny that a person can reject the working of grace nor that believers are fully involved personally in their faith²⁶.

The unified confession regarding justification by faith and through grace fits well with the Lutheran understanding of *sola fide*. Sinners place their trust in the Creator and Redeemer. God acts in them a new creation leading them to a life in hope and in love which follows and is distinct but not separated from justification.²⁷ This renewal of life by justifying grace is the emphasis of Catholics with

²⁰ Council of Trent, 5.

²¹ Council of Trent, Decree concerning the sacraments, foreword.

²² Council of Trent, Canons on the Sacraments in General, 4.

²³ Council of Trent, Canons on Baptism, 3.

²⁴ Council of Trent, Canons on Baptism, 7-8.

²⁵ Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, 1999, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 26.

the understanding that it “is always dependent on God’s unfathomable grace and contribute nothing to justification.”²⁸ Both not only agree that good works “follow justification and are its fruits” but are “an obligation they must fulfill.”²⁹ The Catholic affirmation of the “meritorious” character of good works has biblical support for a heavenly reward. It “emphasizes the responsibility of persons for their actions, not to contest the character of those works as gifts or to deny that justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace.”³⁰ This concept is also held by Lutherans’ emphasis in “righteousness as acceptance by God and sharing in the righteousness of Christ is always complete”, but there can be growth reflected in Christian living which good works are the fruits and signs of justification and not as one’s own “merits”. Lutherans also expect the unmerited “reward” of eternal life promised in the New Testament.

The Joint Declaration recognizes there are other concerns of varying importance in need of additional clarification. Including, “the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, as well as ecclesiology, ecclesial authority, church unity, ministry, the sacraments, and the relation between justification and social ethics.”³¹ The JDDJ ends with a prayer for the visibility of unity which is Christ’s will.

Five hundred years after the Reformation we can hear Catholics and Lutherans singing a very similar melody since the beginning but not until recently they stopped to hear each other and try to sing together looking to harmonize their voices amid a cacophonous background.

²⁸ Ibid, 28.

²⁹ Ibid, 37.

³⁰ Ibid, 38.

³¹ Ibid, 43.