



# Ecumenical Discussions on Justification

– the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

---

LEADER'S GUIDE

---

© 2018 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
1333 S. Kirkwood Road  
St. Louis, MO 63122  
888-THE LCMS • [lcms.org/ctcr](http://lcms.org/ctcr)

This work may be reproduced by churches and schools for their own use in the study of the Scriptures. Commercial reproduction, or reproduction for sale, of any portion of this work or of the work as a whole, without the written permission of the copyright holder, is prohibited.

Art illustration provided by Concordia Historical Institute, [concordiahistoricalinstitute.org](http://concordiahistoricalinstitute.org).  
Used with permission.



# Ecumenical Discussions on Justification

## – the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

### LEADER'S GUIDE

#### Introduction

Have you ever attended a Roman Catholic funeral? How was it similar to a Lutheran funeral? What was different? How did the people and the priest talk about salvation? Did the topic of justification (how we are righteous before God) come up?

Alternatively, or additionally, a clip from the funeral service of Justice Antonin Scalia can be used, if it is deemed appropriate and will not lead the class into a different direction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIq1fYzMhcc>, from 10:20 to 12:55. What strikes the participants as different from what they hear at a Lutheran funeral? According to this sermon, what is the basis for entering heaven?

The difference in preaching at a funeral in a Lutheran and a Roman Catholic Church has to do primarily with the different beliefs on justification. But haven't we overcome these differences?

A breakthrough between Lutherans and Catholics? Almost 20 years ago, a major announcement went through the news: Lutherans and Roman Catholics had overcome their differences in the doctrine of justification, so that there was a common answer to the question: How is a person

saved? Some Lutherans hoped that, after this important step, unity between the churches or least intercommunion (i.e. that both churches would freely allow members of the other church to go to Communion at their altars) would be near. However, neither of these things have happened.

The "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (JDDJ) in 1999:

It would have been a great step toward Christian unity if the document at the center of this news story had accomplished such agreement. Called the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," the statement announced a new agreement on the doctrine of justification between the members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), an international community of Lutheran churches, and the Roman Catholic Church. In this Bible study we will look at the background and some of the key content of this ecumenical document. We will seek to explain why The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod maintains that the Roman Catholic teaching on justification still contradicts the biblical teaching and that therefore the divisions of the time of the Reformation are still necessary for the sake of the Gospel.

## 2. The Ecumenical Movement

The witness of a divided Christianity on the mission field: The ecumenical movement is one of the important movements in the history of the church in the twentieth century. It was born in part out of the frustration of the mission field. Many denominations were sending missionaries to the same area, competing with each other. Non-Christians were asking: Which of you is the true Christian? If you Christians do not even agree on this, how and why should we choose? It was also born out of the new situation after World War I, when the churches were confronted with aggressive atheist communism, bent on destroying all religion. Thus, the question was: Can different Christian churches cooperate? But in order to cooperate, churches had to discuss their theological differences.

### Lutheran-Roman Catholic conversations:

As part of the ecumenical movement, there have been dialogues on a national level between Lutheran Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The LCMS participated in these conversations for some time. Internationally, the LWF, an organization that encompasses a large number of Lutheran churches (but not the LCMS) also had a dialogue. In the 1990s, an effort was made to bundle the results of all these dialogues into one document that would be officially adopted.

On October 31, 1999 (Reformation Day), the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ), was signed in Augsburg, Germany, by the LWF and the Papal Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity as an official agreement. Although this document is now almost 20 years old, it is still important. In July 2017, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches signed JDDJ, and some Anglicans have given their assent.<sup>1</sup> Many Lutherans in the LWF — this includes the ELCA in the United States — are convinced that JDDJ has solved the disagreement on the doctrine of justification between Roman Catholics and Lutherans.

When JDDJ was signed, the euphoria was great. “Lutherans and Catholics Agree on Justification” was the headline in the news. President Alvin Barry of the LCMS published advertisements in newspapers declaring that the LCMS did not agree with JDDJ and that not all Lutherans agreed with it. What were the issues? Why could the LCMS not agree with it?

## 3. The Reformation Background

Discussion Question: How was the doctrine of justification controversial in the time of the Reformation?

First, let’s review the Roman Catholic position at the time of the Reformation.

The controversy about indulgences was central to the Roman Catholic position on justification during this time. Indulgences were sold because even after sins were forgiven, there was still a stain — namely, temporal punishment for sins. If one did not bear this temporal punishment on earth, one had to bear it after death, in purgatory. But (said the church) an indulgence can remove the temporal punishment after death. The question on justification was: Was the blood of Christ alone a sufficient means to free man from sin and its consequences?

Maybe this statement will come up in the class discussions: “Roman Catholics thought they could earn salvation.” Strictly speaking, this was not quite true in the time of the Reformation — but the idea of merit *was* important. Merit means that one has to do something, and then God will give what is needed. Some theologians at the time of the Reformation said: If an unbeliever does what he can, then God will give him grace to become a Christian. James Kittelson, in his biography of Martin Luther, describes it thus:

The theology that Luther was taught therefore amounted to a contract between God and human beings. God graciously initiated the contract for the sake of Christians, the elect. God did so by creating a world that included the church and human beings who strove for self-preservation. In this way, grace was protected by locating it both in the church and in the makeup of human nature. At the same time, a place was found for human initiative. Individual Christians had active roles to play in their own salvation. All that was necessary was to fulfill the human side of the contract. This theology made such good sense and was so pervasive in Luther’s day that everyone encountered it. It appeared not only in depictions of God’s righteousness and mercy, but also in a slogan that at least university students knew by heart: ‘God will not refuse grace to those who do what is within them.’ It appeared in sermons for lay people as well. One preacher commonly exhorted his congregation, ‘Do what is within you. Use well your natural powers and whatever special gifts God has given you!’ Salvation would follow.

<sup>1</sup> The Anglican Consultative Council affirmed key elements of JDDJ in 2017.

Christians could earn the grace of God by simply doing their best.<sup>2</sup>

All Roman Catholic theologians said that if a Christian does good works, then he merits from more gifts (grace) from God. And all Roman Catholic theologians believed that man had a free will by which he could do *something* in regard to salvation.

Roman Catholics believed in salvation by faith plus works, Lutherans believed in salvation by faith alone. This was one of the core issues. On Judgment Day, what will be the basis of God's acquittal? Will our works be included as the basis of forgiveness? Rome said yes, the Lutherans said no.

What does it mean that a Christian is just or righteous before God? For Rome, this meant the inner transformation of persons by which they are conformed to God's will (Lutherans would call this sanctification). The Lutherans said: No, the righteousness of the Christian is simply the righteousness of Christ. Christians are righteous because of Christ's righteousness: His perfect life, His suffering and death in our stead, and His resurrection are counted as our righteousness. Thus, to find one's righteousness, the Christian does not look to himself, he looks to Christ.

The Lutheran teaching was summarized in the Augsburg Confession, presented in 1530:

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3:[21-26] and 4:[5]. (AC IV)<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. Trent: Rome's Answer to the Reformation

The Roman Catholic Church held a council (an assembly of bishops) in Trent (now northern Italy), and later at Bologna to resolve issues coming from the Reformation and also to

change some of its practices. This council met, with some long breaks in between, from 1545–1563. This council taught that man cannot be justified by his own works, without grace. However, the word “justified” in this context means *becoming* a Christian, not being saved in the final judgment. Trent rejected the key teachings of Lutherans on justification:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone in the sense that nothing else is required by way of cooperation in order to obtain the grace of justification and that it is not at all necessary that he should be prepared and disposed by the movement of his will, let him be anathema.<sup>4</sup>

Justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) is rejected in this canon of Trent. (“Canon” means a rule, a statement that marks the boundary between truth and error concerning the faith.) Instead of faith alone, cooperation between human beings and God in justification and the importance of the human will in justification are emphasized.

Read Galatians 2:14–21. How does this text address the question of whether one is justified by faith alone?

In this passage, the righteousness of the law and justification by faith in Christ are opposed as alternatives. Justification by faith in Christ rules out anything else that justifies.

If anyone says that men are justified either by the imputation of Christ's justice alone or by the remission of sins alone, excluding grace and charity that is poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit and inheres in them, or also that the grace that justifies us is only the favor of God, let him be anathema.<sup>5</sup>

With this statement, the Roman Catholic Church rejected the Lutheran position that the righteousness of the Christian before God in justification is the righteousness of Christ and that it is ours only because God reckons or imputes it to us (cf. *EPH. 1:7*). Instead, the basis of justification is what Christ did *and what we do*. It is a combination of the righteousness of faith and the righteousness of works.

<sup>2</sup> James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 73.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations of the *Book of Concord* are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), Decree on Justification, can. 9. DH 1559.

<sup>5</sup> Decree on Justification, can. 11, DH 1561.

How does this compare to the Lutheran view of the righteousness of the Christian in justification?

## 5. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

From your experience, are these issues still relevant? Have you had conversations with Roman Catholics on the topic of justification?

Have you ever had a conversation in which someone said something like this: “If I do the best I can, God will be gracious to me and I will be saved”? How is this similar to the view that Luther was taught in his day?

Sometimes people think that all this talk about justification is abstract and has nothing to do with their lives. How would you answer?

The question of justification is important because it describes who God is and how He relates to us. If someone says he believes in God but does not care about justification, he still has an implicit view of justification.

The important questions for our lives are: What is God like? How does he interact with us? The doctrine of justification answers both questions. It states first that God is holy and that human beings, if they are not holy, cannot live in the presence of God. Thus, God interacts with us first: He reveals His holiness and goodness, and He reveals to us our unholiness and sin. But God is also love, and thus He saves us from our unholiness and sin. Because we are incapable of saving ourselves, God does it all. The doctrine of justification thus identifies God as the one who is holy and who is also love. Out of love, God saves us through Christ’s death and resurrection.

The doctrine of justification shows how God’s love comes to us: in Christ. The fruits of Christ’s death and resurrection come to us in the Gospel and the Sacraments.

Where the doctrine of justification is rejected, God is seen differently. He is not the one who has done everything for our redemption. He has only done His part, and we have to complement or complete it. This is justification as “team work.” God is no longer seen as the holy one, but rather as a benign power who will not be so critical of us and our sins. Then, of course, one does not really need to be justified.

The lines between Lutherans and Roman Catholics had been drawn quite clearly for centuries. Could there ever

be unity? Years of dialogue seemed to promise that a basic agreement in the central points was possible, even though there might be differences in how the central points are expressed. This was the method of JDDJ.

Is justification the forgiveness of sins or is it making an individual righteous? Here is an excerpt from JDDJ. This is rather complex, so one needs to read it slowly and carefully:

22. We confess together that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from sin’s enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ. When persons come by faith to share in Christ, God no longer imputes to them their sin and through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love. These two aspects of God’s gracious action are not to be separated, for persons are by faith united with Christ, who in his person is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30): both the forgiveness of sin and the saving presence of God himself. Because Catholics and Lutherans confess this together, it is true to say that:

23. When Lutherans emphasize that the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness, their intention is above all to insist that the sinner is granted righteousness before God in Christ through the declaration of forgiveness and that only in union with Christ is one’s life renewed. When they stress that God’s grace is forgiving love (“the favor of God”), they do not thereby deny the renewal of the Christian’s life. They intend rather to express that justification remains free from human cooperation and is not dependent on the life-renewing effects of grace in human beings.

24. When Catholics emphasize the renewal of the interior person through the reception of grace imparted as a gift to the believer, they wish to insist that God’s forgiving grace always brings with it a gift of new life, which in the Holy Spirit becomes effective in active love. They do not thereby deny that God’s gift of grace in justification remains independent of human cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

What does this section of JDDJ say about the controversy concerning whether justification is the forgiveness of sins alone or also the inner transformation of the Christian?

<sup>6</sup> Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *The Joint Declaration on Justification* (1999): Section 4.2, 22–24, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

This section of JDDJ does not define justification either way. It says that there is agreement that when God makes a person a Christian, two things happen: God forgives sins and He transforms them (effects in them an active love). But that was never controversial. Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics have always affirmed that God forgives and also renews. The questions are: In what does the Christian's righteousness consist? On what basis is a Christian acceptable to God? On the basis of what Christ has done, or also because of what the Christian does with the help of the Holy Spirit?

Did the Roman Catholics (in the section above from JDDJ) change their view that justification is not the remission of sins alone or the imputation of Christ's righteousness, as it was defined in Trent?

No, they did not. The question is avoided. They emphasize that forgiveness and renewal go together. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1994, states quite clearly: "Justification includes the remission of sins, sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man."<sup>7</sup> Roman Catholics only deny that man can acquire the initial grace through cooperation. They do not deny that there is cooperation in salvation in general.

This is just an example. Unfortunately, JDDJ did not solve the disagreements. Both, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind. were asked to decide if JDDJ was a breakthrough. Their answers were summarized:

Although change has taken place in the Roman Catholic church since Vatican II, JDDJ shows how very little headway has been made toward a genuine resolution of the difference between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on Justification. This statement is not a 'breakthrough.'<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), no. 2019, p. 489.

<sup>8</sup> *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1999), 10. It should be noted that not even all Roman Catholic scholars and theologians would characterize JDDJ as a "break-through" — or as a break with traditional and official Roman Catholic doctrine. Some would agree with the basic assessment of Leonardo De Chirico that the new description of justification in JDDJ "does not give the impression of changing the theology of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), according to which grace is sacramental and seen inside of a synergistic dynamic of the process of salvation. This understanding of grace appears to be more in line with the Catholic heritage of the Council of Trent, in an updated form, than with the classic Protestant theology. In this sense, JDDJ is a clear exercise in an increased catholicity (i.e. the ability to absorb ideas without changing the core) on the part of Rome, which has not become more evangelical in the biblical sense." ("Is the Roman Catholic Church Now Committed to 'Grace Alone'?" at <http://vaticanfiles.org/en/2017/08/140-is-the-roman-catholic-church-now-committed-to-grace-alone/>. See also "Ecumenical Impasse" in the Letters section of the January 2018

## 6. Conclusion

Divisions among Christians are sad, but unity without truth is even worse. Instead of papering over differences, Christians are to be honest about what separates them. As Lutherans, we rejoice in the Gospel: the free forgiveness we receive on account of Christ alone, through faith alone, by grace alone. It is a source of continual sadness that large parts of Christianity have rejected this joyous and freeing message. Therefore, continued conversations with Roman Catholics, be it on an individual level or in ecumenical dialogues, are important. Our prayer as we engage in this task is that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, will create unity in His Word.

### GLOSSARY OF IMPORTANT TERMS

**Grace – Lutheran:** Though grace can mean gift, in the context of justification, grace is the unmerited favor of God. "It is that merciful, affectionate disposition or goodwill of God toward people according to which He forgives sins to those who deserve eternal death. It is the unmerited love of God toward all people (JOHN 3:16; TITUS 3:4–5). All consideration for the merit of people must be excluded from this concept of grace. God's grace is not in the least affected, motivated, or influenced by any worthiness in us."<sup>9</sup>

**Grace – Roman Catholic:** Grace can mean several things. It can mean that an individual looks with favor on another person, or that someone because of that receives a gift ("party favor"). In regard to God, God's grace means that He looks at man favorably and then does something that changes man. God's grace is therefore a gift that changes us. The initial grace that makes a person a Christian cannot be merited, but after that a Christian can merit more grace by doing good works.

**Justification – Lutheran:** Justification is the conferring of Christ's perfect righteousness on Christians so that they are righteous before God and do not lack anything. This righteousness does not need to be complemented by anything to be saved.

**Justification – Roman Catholic:** Justification is the beginning of the Christian life. God makes people righteous, that is, He forgives them their sins and transforms them internally so that they can do His will. Justification is not the same as salvation.

issue of *First Things* (pp. 4–5). <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/01/letters>.

<sup>9</sup> Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 130.

