



Ecumenical Discussions on Justification

– the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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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?

The “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ) in 1999: A breakthrough between Lutherans and Catholics?

2. The Ecumenical Movement

The witness of a divided Christianity on the mission field.

Lutheran-Roman Catholic conversations.

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 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)¹

4. Trent: Rome's Answer to the Reformation

The Council of Trent (1545–1563)

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.²

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

¹ 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).

² Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. (San Francisco:

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.³

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 where somebody said something like: "If I do what I can, then 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 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.⁴

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?

Did the Roman Catholics (in this section of 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?

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.'⁵

⁴ 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.

⁵ *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->

Ignatius Press, 2012), Decree on Justification, can. 9. DH 1559.

³ Decree on Justification, can. 11, DH 1561.

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.”⁶

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.

alone/. See also “Ecumenical Impasse” in the Letters section of the January 2018 issue of First Things (pp. 4–5). <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/01/letters>.

⁶ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 130.

