

Do Lutherans and Roman Catholics Agree on Justification?

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As a boy, I lived on the campus of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Our neighborhood was made up entirely of German Lutherans except, of course, for my family, which was Norwegian Lutheran. On the other side of the ally were the Irish Catholics. We would meet on neutral ground and exchange insults. They insulted Luther and we insulted the pope. We argued about who belonged to the true church. We argued about how a sinner is saved. We talked about faith and works and how to get to heaven. We also insulted one another, misrepresented one another's beliefs, and, at times, got into fights. Isn't it nice how times have changed?

Well, yes and no. Yes, it's better to listen to one another than to paint an unfair caricature of someone else's position. It is better to speak kindly than to exchange insults. On that I think we will all agree. But there was something very precious about those rather crude confrontations in the ally separating Concordia Seminary from the houses on Arundle Avenue. There was conviction. At times misled, always undisciplined, and frequently just plain wrong, but there was religious conviction. Is it not interesting that during the past generation when both Lutherans and Roman Catholics have become more ignorant than ever about their respective church's teaching folks are suddenly treating one another with Christian charity? Isn't it interesting that these wonderful breakthroughs in ecumenical dialogue are occurring at the same time that the laity from both Roman Catholic and Lutheran congregations have become less and less certain of what they believe? Over 90% of the ELCA in convention voted to declare full Altar and Pulpit fellowship with Reformed churches that teach that Christ's body is as far removed from the sacramental bread as heaven is removed from this earth. According to polls, well over 50% of Roman Catholics in America don't believe in the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. The doctrinal ignorance and apathy of Lutherans and Roman Catholics in our country is profound. In times past both Lutherans and Roman Catholics were able to defend what their churches taught. Today, they don't even know what their churches teach.

On October 31, 1999, representatives from the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican signed a "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (JDDJ) which concludes:

The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics.

Thus the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration. (JDDJ, par 40-41)

Is this true? Was the schism of the 16th Century one big misunderstanding? Do the Roman Catholics really teach essentially the same thing as the Lutherans on how a sinner is justified by God? Is it true that "The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration"? No, it is not true.

Now it is true that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification – hereafter I will call it the JDDJ – does succeed in correcting certain misconceptions such as we had in our rather exuberant arguments in the ally about thirty five years ago. That is for the good. On the other hand, one reason Lutherans and Roman Catholics can be persuaded that their churches teach basically the same thing on justification is because they don't really know what their churches teach, and, what is worse, they don't particularly care. What is celebrated as an ecumenical breakthrough of huge significance may rather be the tired gasp of combatants too weary to fight over lost convictions. To quote a pop icon of my youth, "When you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose." I say this in genuine sadness as one who loves Christian theology.

The JDDJ has been called "an important milestone for the ecumenical movement." What does this mean? It does not mean that it will be used to teach the faith to prospective members of anyone's church. Lutherans will continue to use whatever catechetical materials they have, as will Roman Catholics. An authoritative source of Roman Catholic teaching is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. For Lutherans, Luther's Small Catechism remains the chief text for catechesis. What, then, is the JDDJ for? It is not for teaching the faith. The Vatican's involvement in the production of this document has been through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, not through the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Lutheran World Federation –

which claims to speak for Lutherans worldwide – clearly is not in agreement with itself on the doctrine of justification, nor has it been since its meeting in Helsinki, Finland in 1963. Put into plain English, the JDDJ is a church political document. It isn't intended for use in catechesis, worship, or any other churchly activity. It is rather intended to make Lutherans and Catholics feel good about the fact that their children aren't insulting the pope and Martin Luther in the neighborhood ally. But today's ecumenical climate does not signify a change in the sinful, judgmental, and careless words we speak against one another. Rather, our generation has chosen to stop fighting over words since it no longer takes the words literally.

The JDDJ is divided into 44 paragraphs comprising a preamble followed by five parts. In paragraph three of the preamble we are directed to the various reports that Lutherans and Roman Catholics have produced over the past thirty years mostly in Germany and the United States. In paragraph six, the JDDJ makes it plain that this declaration continues the work of the previous reports. Part 1, which is paragraphs 8 – 12, entitled, "Biblical Message of Justification," is a fine summary of just that. Part 2, which is paragraph 13, entitled "The Doctrine of Justification as Ecumenical Problem," is the shortest part of the document, but it is very important. We read: "By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma," a "notable convergence" on justification has occurred between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. What are these "insights of recent biblical studies" and what are these "modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma"? A study of the previous joint agreements to which the JDDJ refers, in particular, "A Common Statement on Justification by Faith," produced by leading Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians in the United States in 1983, makes it clear what the "new insights" are. The "insights" are the modern notion that the biblical teaching on justification cannot be taken literally, but that when the Bible uses such words as redemption, atonement, justification, and so forth, it is using picture language. It is speaking in metaphors, or figures of speech, that mustn't be taken literally. So Lutherans will teach the doctrine of justification in a way that directly contradicts the way that Roman Catholics teach it, but the contradiction is not a contradiction at all. It is simply two different images that complement each other. When dealing with images, we must find the underlying truth that the images are designed to illustrate. Let me give you an example of how this works. Lutherans have traditionally taught that God justifies us by crediting to us the righteousness of Jesus (that is, by giving us the credit for what Jesus did). Traditional Roman Catholic teaching, on the other hand, is that God justifies us by changing us into righteous people. These two positions would appear to the average person to be in conflict. The "new insights" that both Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians have "discovered" get rid of the conflict. Neither the Roman Catholic nor the Lutheran position needs to be taken literally. Rather, we are dealing with images that picture a deeper concern. These "new insights" further assure us

that even the Bible itself has conflicting teachings, if you take its theology literally, but when theological assertions are taken metaphorically, as images or pictures of a deeper concern, why then the conflict goes away. So when Lutherans say that God justifies us by crediting to us the righteousness of Jesus, they simply want to express that God's love is unconditional. Roman Catholics can agree with that. And when Roman Catholics say that God justifies us by changing us into righteous people, they simply want to express that God's love is powerful in our lives. Lutherans can agree with that. So, both Lutherans and Roman Catholics can join together in affirming that God's love is unconditional and that God's love is powerful in our lives. Now when they confront differences in doctrine between the churches, they will try to find the underlying concern that a particular doctrinal statement intends to convey. If both sides can agree on the underlying concern, we have found consensus, even though our doctrinal statements appear to be in conflict.

In other words, words don't really mean what words say. The Bible, creeds and confessions, doctrinal statements, all are using picture language that can't be taken literally. This has huge implications for every topic of Christian teaching. This approach to the Scriptures, known as the Historical Critical Method, no longer views the Bible as the inerrant word of God, but simply assumes that it contains myths and historical inaccuracies. It is interesting to note that those Lutheran church bodies in America that have rejected the JDDJ all affirm the inerrancy of the biblical text, and those Lutheran church bodies around the world that have embraced the JDDJ have long ago given up the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

Part 3 of the JDDJ is entitled, "The Common Understanding of Justification" which is further explained in Part 4, the longest part of the document, which is entitled, "Explicating the Common Understanding of Justification." Part 5 concludes the JDDJ with the claim that Part 4 has resolved the issues sufficiently so that the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th Century no longer apply.

Let us briefly review the historic teaching of the Lutheran Church and how it differs from the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church as it is presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II personally approved of this Catechism. On October 11, 1992, he wrote.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which I approved June 25th last and the publication of which I today order by virtue of my Apostolic Authority, is a statement of the Church's faith and of catholic doctrine, attested to or illumined by Sacred Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition, and the Church's Magisterium. I declare it to be a sure norm for teaching the

faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument of ecclesial communion.
(CCC p. 5)

Naturally, the Vatican takes the position that nothing in the JDDJ conflicts with the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The Roman Catholic teaching and the Lutheran teaching differ quite radically on the topic of sin and the justification of the sinner. Both churches teach that original sin makes it impossible for a man to save himself. Both churches teach that sinners need God's grace if they are to receive the divine verdict of justification. Both believe that the foundation for the sinner's justification by God is the work of Jesus Christ, the Savior. Let us examine more closely what the two churches mean by some of the common terms they use.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that original sin has left man spiritually wounded and weak. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, original sin "is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted." (CCC par. 405) While "the devil has acquired a certain domination over man" still, "man remains free." (CCC par. 407) This "free will" in spiritual matters is essential to Roman Catholic theology, especially on the doctrine of justification. According to Rome, the righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus is "the rectitude of divine love. With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts and obedience to the divine will is granted us." (CCC par. 1991) So the righteousness by which the believer is justified is something within the believer. It is a righteousness that includes the believer's obedience.

The Lutheran Church teaches differently than the Roman Catholic Church both on the topic of original sin and on the justification of the sinner. While Rome teaches that human nature has not been totally corrupted and that after the fall man remains free, the Lutheran Church disagrees quite emphatically. We read in the Formula of Concord:

Original sin in human nature is not only a total lack of good in spiritual, divine things, but that at the same time it replaces the lost image of God in man with a deep, wicked, abominable, bottomless, inscrutable, and inexpressible corruption of the entire nature in all its powers, especially of the highest and foremost powers of the soul in mind, heart, and will.
(Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article I, paragraph 11)

We believe that in spiritual and divine things the intellect, heart, and will of unregenerated man cannot by any native or natural powers in any way understand, believe, accept, imagine, will, begin, accomplish, do, effect,

or cooperate, but that man is entirely and completely dead and corrupted as far as anything good is concerned. (II 7)

The Lutheran Church clearly rejects the teaching that man has a “free will” in spiritual matters. The Lutheran Confessions reject the Roman Catholic doctrine that fallen man still has a “free will” and does so on the basis of clear Scriptures. Romans 8:7, “Because the carnal mind is enmity against God.” 1 Corinthians 2:14, “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Ephesians 2:5, “Even when we were dead in trespasses.” These and similar biblical texts are cited in the Lutheran Confessions to show that the doctrine of the “free will” is simply unscriptural.

While the Roman Catholic Church teaches that original sin leaves man wounded and weak, confessional Lutherans insist that original sin leaves man dead and helpless. There is a difference between wounded and dead. There is a difference between weak and helpless.

This difference in the doctrine of sin is reflected also in the difference in the doctrine of justification. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the sinner is justified on account of the change that God works within him. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that justification “conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy.” (CCC 1992) The Lutheran Church rejects this teaching and claims that the sinner is justified solely on account of God reckoning to the sinner the righteousness of Jesus Christ. That is, God credits to the sinner the obedience of Jesus and this is the only righteousness by which the sinner is justified. It is stated this way in the Formula of Concord.

For faith does not justify because it is so good a work and so God-pleasing a virtue, but because it lays hold on and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel. This merit has to be applied to us and to be made our own through faith if we are to be justified thereby. Therefore the righteousness which by grace is reckoned to faith or to the believers is the obedience, the passion, and the resurrection of Christ when he satisfied the law for us and paid for our sin. (FC, SD, Art. III, par 13-14)

Now fair is fair. Lutherans should not accuse Roman Catholics of denying that salvation is by grace. Recently, the Rev. Al Barry, President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, placed an advertisement in newspapers all across America in which he said that the Roman Catholic Church “teaches that we are able to merit, through our works, eternal life for ourselves and others.” Well, I

don't know about that. What Rome actually teaches is stated this way in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. (CCC 2010)

Surely the Rev. Barry did not intend to misrepresent the Roman Catholic teaching. But he did. It is not fair for Lutherans to describe the Roman Catholic teaching and neglect to say that the Roman Catholic Church teaches the necessity of divine grace, especially when one is citing a source that mentions grace four times in a single paragraph. On the other hand, honesty also requires us to point out that the Roman Catholic Church means something entirely different by grace than does the Lutheran Church. When Lutherans teach that the sinner is justified by grace alone, they mean that good works have absolutely nothing to do with the sinner's justification. Human merit –whether acquired by grace or not – simply plays no role at all in the justification of the sinner. This is in direct conflict with the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 3:23-25. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by his blood, through faith.” Good works do not help us. This is fundamental to the Lutheran doctrine of good works. Indeed, we would insist that if good works helped those who did them they would no longer be good works, for good works are not done for the one doing them but for the neighbor.

The Roman Catholic view of grace is radically different. Here is how the JDDJ puts it.

According to Catholic understanding, good works, made possible by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, contribute to growth in grace, so that the righteousness that comes from God is preserved and communion with Christ is deepened. (JDDJ par. 38)

A confessional Lutheran simply must reject this view. It is impossible that works – even works made possible by God's grace and the working of the Holy Spirit – could contribute to growth in grace. Furthermore, a confessional Lutheran rejects any notion that communion with Christ could be deepened by the good works of the Christian. Communion with Christ is established by God when he gives to the sinners the righteousness of Jesus, which the sinner receives simply through faith, that is, simply by believing this gospel.

When Lutherans speak of God's grace in his justification of the sinner, they mean God's favor, his attitude of undeserved kindness. They are not referring to anything within the believer. God doesn't justify us by what he does in us. He justifies us by what he does for us on Calvary and what he gives to us in the gospel and sacraments. God says to us in our baptism, in the absolution, in the Lord's Supper that all of our sins have been taken away by Jesus. It is this saying, this speaking that actually imparts to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ so that simply by believing it, we have it.

Are good works necessary? Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans say yes. Are good works necessary for justification or for salvation? Lutherans answer emphatically. No! Good works cannot possibly be necessary for the sinner's justification because he is justified precisely by God imputing to him Christ's righteousness, and our works may not become a part of this righteousness or the entire doctrine of justification is overthrown. Lutherans appeal to such texts as Romans 4:5, "But to him who *does not work* but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness."

Rome on the other hand, operates with a different understanding of what justification is. Here is how the Catholic understanding is put in the JDDJ. "In justification the righteous receive from Christ faith, hope, and love *and are thereby* taken into communion with him." (JDDJ par. 27, emphasis added) This is precisely the teaching that the Lutheran Church rejected in the 16th Century. Love is a virtue. It is a work. It is a good deed. Thus, our love cannot bring us into communion with God.

Paragraphs 29 and 30 show once again that Lutherans and Roman Catholics don't agree on what sin is. The Roman Catholics still insist that the sinful inclination, which goes by the name "concupiscence" (sometimes simply translated as lust), is not really sin. Lutherans insist that the sinful inclination is itself sin. On this historic difference, nothing has changed.

In paragraph 36, we see that the key Reformation issue of whether or not a Christian can be certain of his salvation remains a point of clear disagreement. Lutherans say yes and Roman Catholics say no.

How can Lutherans and Roman Catholics continue to teach different things and claim that they agree with one another? Lutherans teach that the sinful inclination is sin, Rome says no. Rome teaches that fallen man is "free" and Lutherans deny it. Lutherans teach that God justifies the sinner by imputing to him the righteousness of Christ, Rome teaches that God justifies the sinner by transforming him into an inherently righteous person. On grace, Lutherans teach that grace is God's goodwill toward sinners by which he gives them eternal life freely for Christ's sake. Rome teaches that grace is the help that God gives to

enable the believer to use his “free will” in cooperation with grace and thus to become more and more righteous. How can they still claim to agree? They use the same words but assign different meanings to the same words. ***Thus, both sides can say the same words – grace, justification, faith, etc. – and yet mean entirely different things by them. The JDDJ makes this clear. They mean different things while they use the same words.***

The desire for agreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics is a good desire. And surely, the desire to understand one another and to listen to one another is to be commended. When we desire agreement and understanding, we must also ask ourselves if we truly desire the truth. If the Bible is to be taken seriously and if truth is to be taken seriously then we must admit that the Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church cannot and do not agree on this fundamental teaching.

Ah, but does it really matter? I think so. I am a poor, helpless, sinner who can point to nothing in me except my sin from which I cannot set myself free. I haven't got a prayer for salvation unless my salvation depends entirely on what happened on Calvary when Jesus died for me. If my salvation depends on what is going on inside of me, I am doomed. So my faith as a confessional Lutheran looks only and always outside of what is happening within me, always and only to what Jesus Christ, my only righteousness, has done for me. I am righteous before God. I am perfectly and entirely righteous, and I am righteous this very moment as I stand before you, guilty of countless sins. I know that I am saved eternally because the righteousness that I have is entirely the doing and the dying of Jesus. If his righteousness were not imputed to me, I would be lost forever. But his obedience has been reckoned to my account and this *alone* is my righteousness before God. This is the truth that I believe, and this is the truth that the Lutheran Church may not compromise to any degree or she will have forsaken the right to be called Lutheran.

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