

No Lutheran/Catholic Consensus...

What follows is a translation of a very important German evaluation of the JDDJ, first released in January 1998, which is being widely circulated and debated among Lutherans in Germany.

A Critical Evaluation. Never before have German professors of Protestant theology, in such numbers and representing every field and speciality, produced a critical evaluation of a theological question. To date 165 professors from practically every theological faculty in Germany have signed the following text. A critical evaluation of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) was first suggested by Gerhard Ebeling, systematician and Luther scholar, and then took concrete form through the initiative of Eberhard Jüngel, another systematician. Numerous professors of theology collaborated in the process, asking whether in the JDDJ a consensus exists between Roman Catholic and Protestant churches on the doctrine of justification. Their evaluation does not concern itself with the mutual condemnations because they are rarely debated today. This "critical evaluation" is being circulated in every German Lutheran synod prior to their vote on JDDJ in the Spring of 1998. (See *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1/29/98).

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A Critical Evaluation by Professors of Protestant Theology

Mindful of their responsibility for theology and for the church, the undersigned professors of theology declare:

I. Justification of the sinner only by faith, according to Protestant doctrine, establishes what is basic reality for Christian life and the life of the church. The doctrine, structure, and practice of the church are to be determined and judged by the doctrine of justification. Therefore the JDDJ cannot be limited to one component of theology. To the contrary, justification has to do with what is basic, with the whole of theology, with the article about which "nothing ... can be given up or compromised" (Smalcald Articles II, I), by which the church stands and falls. Consensus on the doctrine of justification, therefore, must (1) make evident that the truth of justification by faith alone has not been abridged, and (2) immediately affect the relationship between the consenting churches, so that

they mutually recognize each other as the church of Jesus Christ and mutually recognize each other's ministerial office of publicly proclaiming justification.

II. Because the doctrine of justification has to do with the basis and the whole of Christian truth, we are sending this evaluation of the JDDJ to the synods and leadership of the Lutheran churches of Germany, which are currently debating the JDDJ. The JDDJ claims to establish "a consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification" (#5) between Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic church. All remaining differences in this doctrine are considered to be variations "of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis" (#40). But the JDDJ presents no such consensus:

- No consensus has been reached concerning the theological insight, decisive for Lutheran churches, that justification by grace alone is rightly proclaimed only when it is made clear that (1) the God who deals with the sinner by grace alone justifies the sinner only through this Word and through sacraments administered according to his Word (Augsburg Confession 7), and (2) the sinner is justified by faith alone.
- No consensus has been reached concerning the theological insight, decisive for Reformation churches, that faith is the certainty of salvation.
- No consensus has been reached concerning the sinful nature of the one justified.
- No consensus has been reached concerning the importance of good works for salvation.
- Only an inadequate consensus has been reached concerning the relationship between law and gospel.
- Completely inadequate is the way the JDDJ uses the Old Testament. Nowhere does the JDDJ bring out how the Reformers held that the gospel of the justification of the sinner is also clearly in the Old Testament. Indeed, the JDDJ gives the impression that the opposite is the case.
- No consensus has been reached concerning the function of the doctrine of justification as criterion for the doctrine and life of the church. Even though the JDDJ affirms that "Lutherans emphasize the unique significance of this criterion" (#18) and that

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“Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria” (#18), these statements are mutually exclusive.

III. If Lutheran churches accept the claim by the JDDJ that it establishes a doctrinal consensus, this could be used as the norm for interpreting the Lutheran confessional writings. In the future the Lutheran Confessions would be interpreted according to a doctrine of grace which, although presenting justification “by grace alone,” does not include the basic Reformation insight that this gracious event takes place precisely and only through faith. Thus the Lutheran Confessions would be interpreted by a presupposition already refuted by the understanding of justification recovered at the Reformation.

IV. At the same time communion with German churches that do not belong to the Lutheran World Federation would be jeopardized. The same is true for the Leuenberg fellowship.

V. The consensus claimed by the JDDJ has no ecclesiological and practical consequences. Lutheran churches are not recognized as belonging to the church of Jesus Christ (footnote 9). Nor is their public ministry accepted as valid. Nor is there any effect on sacramental sharing. On the one hand, this brings out the significance of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has other criteria for the life and teaching of the church besides the doctrine of justification (#18). On the other hand, this shows how the JDDJ is a building block in a larger ecumenical plan which is to lead to full recognition of Protestant Christianity by the Roman Catholic Church and full communion with it. According to this plan, after a series of doctrinal agreements Protestant ministers will be integrated into the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Only then will Protestant Christianity be recognized by Roman Catholics and communion fellowship become possible.

VI. Protestant churches already welcome their Catholic fellow Christians to the Table of the Lord because the sacrament affirms that we are justified by faith alone.

VII. On the basis of concerns raised above, we urge that in its present form the JDDJ be rejected. If, however, the JDDJ is not rejected completely, at least Lutheran churches have to deny that the JDDJ represents “a

consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification” (#5).

Albrecht Beutel
Karin Bornkamm
Gerhard Ebeling

Reinhard Schwarz
Johannes Wallmann

The Doctrine of Justification

Avery Dulles –

“In the present atmosphere Christians find it all too easy to declare that the doctrinal disagreements of the past have lost their church-divisive character. Pervasive though the present climate of agnosticism and relativism may be, Lutherans and Catholics must resist it. One of the most precious things we have in common may be our conviction that pure doctrine is crucially important and that ecclesial unity should not be purchased at the expense of truth. I sincerely hope that we can continue to learn from one another’s insights, and correct one another’s oversights. By prematurely declaring the process already accomplished, we could easily drift into a false complacency.” (“On Lifting the Condemnations,” *dialog* 35 (1996) 219-220.)

Pope John Paul II –

“Fundamental problems about Luther’s views on faith, scriptures, tradition, and the church have not yet been sufficiently clarified.” (June 22, 1996, in an ecumenical prayer service at Paderborn, Germany.)

Council of Trent –

“Whosoever does not faithfully and firmly accept this Catholic doctrine on justification cannot be justified.” (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, ch. 16.)

ELCA Presiding Bishop Anderson –

“Now it will be possible to approach the remaining points at issue from the standpoint of a basic consensus on justification.” (July 16, 1997, in an address to the LWF Ninth Assembly, Para. 34.)