

LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AT PHILADELPHIA

FACULTY EVALUATION

US Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue: Justification by Faith

December, 1985

1. The statement on Justification by Faith is a noteworthy achievement which we commend. We rejoice in the common insights that have been achieved and believe that the document helps significantly in understanding the differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on this central doctrine. These differences have been honestly confronted and analyzed without searching too hastily for a least common denominator.

2. We are especially pleased with the thoroughness of the theological work that lies behind the document and is expressed in the statement itself. In our opinion, the history of the doctrine is summarized for the most part accurately and adequately. One can question the interpretation of this event or that period, but the historical summary well reflects the insights of modern research.

3. We also applaud the attention devoted to the new biblical perspectives on justification. We note some ambiguity in the summary statement (paragraph 146) where it claims that, in spite of the diversity in the biblical evidence, "a faith-centered and forensically conceived picture of justification is of major importance to Paul and, in a sense, for the Bible as a whole..."

To what extent is that "picture of justification" of major importance for the Bible as a whole? Is it important because Paul is so important? 1

4. The Common Affirmation (paragraphs 4 and 157) is both exciting and tantalizing. If its counterpart is in fact "Christ alone" (solus Christus; paragraph 160), then it does provide a Christocentric criterion for judging church practices, structures and traditions. A question remains, however. The statement itself concedes that this affirmation "is not fully equivalent to the Reformation teaching on justification" (paragraph 157). What does this concession mean for the sola fide of Reformation theology? Does solus Christus add something to sola fide or does it only express sola fide in a different way?

5. In the common affirmation, the adjective "ultimate" that qualifies trust makes us uneasy. Does it imply that "penultimately" our hope of salvation rests on something else besides Jesus Christ, for example, on the "grace-wrought transformation of sinners" as "a necessary preparation for final salvation" (paragraph 157)? Even though both churches affirm the necessity of external means of grace, we would not want to leave room for any meritorious works to be claimed, even penultimately,

1. The majority of the faculty felt it important to press for greater clarification of in what sense and to what degree both the forensic and the faith-centered understandings of justification in Paul might be compatible with or normative for other sections of Scripture and with the Bible as a whole. However it should be noted that in the opinion of some the Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement is already as clear on this as it can be.

as necessary for salvation. The helpful discussion of merit in terms of recompense and retribution (paragraph 143-145) does not appear to settle the question.

6. This ambiguity in the affirmation goes back to the contrast between the Catholic tradition of using transformationist language and the Lutheran model of simultaneity. Although Part II of the statement discusses these "different thought structures" (paragraph 154) in a very helpful way, we suspect that a more serious theological difference is present.

7. First, the two traditions have very different expectations of what is possible in the Christian life. Lutherans have asserted that justification indeed produces change in the believer:

We are justified for this very purpose, that, being righteous, we might begin to do good works and obey God's law. For this purpose we are reborn and receive the Holy Spirit, that this new life might have new works and new impulses, the fear and love of God, hatred of lust, etc. (Melanchthon, Apology IV. 348-349).

The "grace-wrought transformation of sinners" as "a necessary preparation for final salvation", however, is too strong a phrase to describe the constant struggle with temptation that besets even the justified person as, e.g., Luther describes it in the Large Catechism:

Moreover, although we have acquired forgiveness and a good conscience, and have been wholly absolved, yet such is life that one stands today and falls tomorrow...Forgiveness is needed constantly, for although God's grace has been won by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet because we are encumbered with our flesh we are never without sin. (Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, paragraph 100 and Creed, paragraph 54).

In spite of the change that occurs in the Christian life, sin is so powerful that it not only requires constant repentance (semper penitens) but it also forces the justified to put their trust only in Jesus Christ at every step along the way to that "final salvation." The statement (paragraph 102 and 104) recognizes clearly these different expectations of the Christian life. That recognition is not, we hope, weakened by the use of the word "ultimate" in the common affirmation.

8. Second, the history of the Lutheran movement in the sixteenth century demonstrates that, while Lutherans and Catholics could go far toward a common statement on justification (at Augsburg and Regensburg), they disagreed on how the doctrine "serves as a criterion for judging all church practices, structures and traditions" (paragraph 160). For example, although consensus was reached on how to articulate many of the theological topics addressed in the first part of the Augsburg Confession, the negotiations at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 broke down over the Lutheran insistence on correcting the "abuses" discussed in the second part of the Confession: allowing priests and religious to marry, abolishing private masses, dispensing religious from their vows, denying bishops the

authority to make rules that would bind consciences. In Lutheran perspective these corrections were applications of the doctrine of justification to worship and piety. Even though human traditions that did not conflict with the Gospel were retained, those forms of worship, church authority and piety which were presented in such a way that hindered faith in Jesus Christ had to be abolished.

9. These considerations lead us to ask whether or not the present statement really goes beyond the points of agreement and disagreement reached in the sixteenth century. The "convergence (though not uniformity) on justification by faith considered in and of itself" (paragraph 152), is agreement on the formulation of the doctrine contained in the affirmation with its ambiguous "ultimate." Although the statement claims a "significant though lesser convergence on the applications of the doctrine" (paragraph 152), this has not yet resolved major tensions between the churches concerning purgatory, the papacy, and the cult of saints (paragraph 153). While we recognize the common statement of the dialogue on the papacy, it is still an overstatement to suggest that "Lutherans...do not exclude the possibility that such teachings can be understood and used in ways consistent with justification by faith" (paragraph 153).

10. Therefore, a central issue in evaluating the statement is the question whether the first sentence in paragraph 159 is true: "Wherever this affirmation is maintained, it is possible to

allow great variety in describing salvation and in interpreting God's justifying declaration without destroying unity." Is the affirmation a sufficiently clear and unambiguous statement of the Gospel? Is it formulated in such a way that it can serve as "a criterion for judging all church practices, structures and traditions" (paragraph 160)? How much variety on such issues as purgatory, the papacy, and the cult of saints can be allowed by such a criterion?

11. The last line of paragraph 159 is certainly true in one sense: "But where the affirmation is accepted, Lutherans and Catholics can recognize each other as sharing a commitment to the same gospel of redemptive love received in faith." We do affirm that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in both churches and that sometimes it has not been preached with purity in either church. But in the Common Affirmation the Gospel is not defined with sufficient clarity, particularly in the affirmation with its use of "ultimate" or in the declaration with its offer of "creative graciousness" (paragraph 161).

12. Consequently, we question whether on the basis of this statement there exists sufficient consensus in the Gospel to support full Eucharistic sharing and mutual recognition of ministries, although there may be enough consensus to allow for interim arrangements for Eucharistic sharing. The extensive groundwork laid here enables the churches to see where some real differences lie and which issues still need to be treated in

depth or lived with in patience. Examples of such issues, in addition to Mary and the saints (currently under discussion), are: 1). the Christian life and the church's teaching authority in regard to ethics; 2). ministry and priesthood, with special consideration of celibacy and the role of women; and 3). the authority of bishops.

13. We agree that a fundamental consensus on the gospel is necessary to give credibility to the previous statements that have emerged from the dialogue. But while we applaud the insights that have been gained through the dialogue on justification, we do not believe (para. 164) that such a consensus has been reached already in this statement and urge the churches to keep working toward that goal.