

ive understandings of ministry do define us but do not divide us.

THE CRITICAL RESPONSE OF GERMAN THEOLOGICAL PROFESSORS TO THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

By Gerhard Forde

What follows here is the text of what Michael Root terms the "infamous letter signed by a large minority of German Lutheran theology professors" (*dialog* 37/4 [1998] 309). Since it has gotten relatively little press in "official circles," it is appropriate to *dialog's* name and sense of mission that it be published again here (it was published earlier in the Summer '98 number of *The Lutheran Quarterly*) so that one can actually see what is being dismissed mostly without a hearing this side of the Atlantic. As the introduction indicates, two of the most prominent Lutheran theologians, Gerhard Ebeling and Eberhard Jüngel, initiated the move toward a critical response to the Lutheran/Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. After editorial polishing and reworking it was eventually ratified by some 160 German theology professors—a remarkable fact in its own right!

The critical response of the German theologians centers around the question of justification as criterion for critically measuring all doctrine and practice in the church.

Lutherans have always insisted that justification by faith alone is *the* criterion by which all is to be judged. Since, however, Lutherans and Roman Catholics live in two different hermeneutical worlds, largely without knowing it, Roman Catholics balk at the claim that justification is the *only* criterion. There are, they claim, many other criteria in scripture to which they feel themselves beholden. So the battle rages. We cannot begin to lay it all out here but just a few instances will have to suffice to indicate the flow of things. Eberhard Jüngel found the formulations suggested by the ecumenical drafters to be ambiguous

and unclear. Thinking to ease matters, the had suggested that justification could be called an "indispensable" criterion. But that in turn suggested that other criteria might be regarded as "dispensable." But what in the world, Jüngel asked, could a dispensable criterion be? In his exasperation at the linguistic manipulation characteristic of most ecumenical discussion Jüngel wrote an essay begging for clarity: "Um Gottes willen—Klarheit!" [For God's Sake, Clarity! *ZThK* 94 [1997] 394-406].

Related to the battle about criteria was the claim by the ecumenical drafters that the *Joint Declaration* proposes a consensus only on the doctrine of justification. But if one operates from the perspective which sees justification as criterion for *all* doctrine and practice, such arbitrary limitation would be impossible. As Luther was wont to claim, get the doctrine of justification wrong, you got it *all* wrong. Hence one should note especially the insistence throughout the German "letter," the insistence that justification is the "basic reality" for all of Christian life, and that doctrines are not to be treated as disparate "components." The later listing of doctrines (part II) where there is no consensus is simply a sampling of how things go wrong throughout.

The ELCA, which ratified the *Joint Declaration* at the Churchwide Assembly in Philadelphia by 97% without so much as a hint of discussion might at least ponder what these theologians are telling us. What is at stake here is the fundamental doctrine of the Lutheran Church. One would think more care would be taken in these matters.

*No Consensus on the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification": A Critical Evaluation by Professors of Protestant Theology**

Introduction: For the first time German professors of Protestant theology—in such numbers and representing every field and specialty—have 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

*Translation by Oliver Olson.

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) was first suggested by Gerhard Ebeling, systematician and Luther scholar, and then took on fixed 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. They do not deal with the question of mutual condemnations because it is rarely debated today. This "critical evaluation" is being circulated throughout German Lutheran synods prior to their vote on JDDJ in the Spring of 1998 (cf. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1/29/98).

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

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basic truths of the doctrine of justification" (#5) between Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church. All remaining differences in this doctrine are to be 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 assurance 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 sinners 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 "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 justifi-

fication "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 be 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 the 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."

(A list of the signatories may be obtained by calling dialog at 651-641-3482 or email to dialog@luthersem.edu).

Book Reviews

ON BEING A THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS.

Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518.

By Gerhard O. Forde. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. 121 pp. \$20.00 [paper].

Gerhard Forde has filled a major theological void with this succinctly argued study of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation. Many who have studied Luther's theology will recognize the Heidelberg Disputation as the textual source for the theology of the cross, but anyone who has attempted to teach it knows that simply directing students to read the Heidelberg Disputation will accomplish little in helping them to understand what the theology of the cross is all about. Other books have addressed the subject from a historical perspective and within the context of Luther's overall theological development. Forde's book limits its focus to the theological theses of the Heidelberg Disputation itself, and in doing so, it functions not only as an exposition of Luther's theology but as a practical manual for doing the theology of the cross today.

Forde's title, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, clearly conveys his interpretation of the thrust of the Heidelberg Disputation. The title rests on a series of distinctions. First and most basic is the distinction between a theology of the cross and a theology of glory. Next Forde argues that a theology about the cross is not the same as a theology of the cross, for the latter designates not simply a subject matter but a comprehensive methodology; in Forde's view, a theology that is only about the cross will always devolve into another theology of glory. Finally Forde shifts the focus from