

March 5, 1997

TO: The ELCA Synod Bishops of Regions 1 and 3

FROM: Gerhard Forde, Patrick Keifert, Mary Knutsen, Marc Kolden, James Nestingen,
Gary Simpson (Professors at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN)

RE: The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (hereafter JDDJ)

Since the final revision of JDDJ has reached us only within the past few days, the faculty as a whole has not had time to react to it. Several of us, however, are working on a more extensive response than is possible in the little time we now have prior to your meeting. So we send this short memo to indicate in preliminary fashion something of our apprehensions. We are greatly worried that the Declaration will slip through without the careful examination it needs. Even though we are all dedicated to the cause of greater unity in the church, we are not convinced that such unity can or should be purchased at the price demanded by this document. So we send this hurried response cautioning against easy or quick acceptance of JDDJ. It must be very carefully and painstakingly analyzed. In our opinion, the entire heritage of the Reformation hangs in the balance here and must not simply be ignored. So we write to request your consideration of some of the following issues.

The fundamental problem with JDDJ is that it seems to subsume the Lutheran understanding of justification under a Roman Catholic understanding of justification as a process whereby the soul is progressively transformed through “grace.” The key here is the focus in the document on “justification by grace through faith” where “grace” is understood as an infused power of holiness within the soul and “faith” is understood merely as the passive potency to receive this transforming power of “grace.” Virtually absent is the Lutheran understanding of “justification by faith alone without works of the law” in which faith is understood as an active relationship to God of simply trusting in God’s eschatological Word of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, a faith relationship which is created by God’s Word and which is the “right” or “just” relationship to God: crediting God as truthful. ***The document presents an understanding of justification in terms of the soul’s progressive internal transformation by infused grace, and never refers in a vital or critical way to the Lutheran insistence on justification by faith alone (sola fide) in God’s Word of promise, no doubt because such insistence would undermine the entire structure of the doctrine of justification proposed by JDDJ.*** We believe that careful analysis of the document will substantiate this judgment and hope to provide such substantiation shortly. The differences noted are not just of “academic” concern but have serious implications for the whole ministry of the gospel in the life and mission of the church.

We find ourselves unanimous in our opposition to this document since it does not do justice to the Reformation and implies more a repudiation of it than an agreement or consensus incorporating its basic teaching. By consistently ignoring specific Lutheran claims and speaking in broad generalizations of agreement in “basic truths” the document implies that Lutheran claims are more or less anomalies better left behind. Even the American Lutheran-Catholic dialogue concluded that there were basic unreconciled differences here. JDDJ does not mention them. We are of the opinion furthermore that the document does not even represent the best of contemporary Roman Catholicism after Vatican II (which did begin to be open to a relational understanding of faith as trust in God’s promise, and so the need to address the mass audibly to the assembly, for instance), but returns rather to a substantialist and almost mechanical doctrine of justification akin to that of Trent and the Counter-Reformation.

Lutherans have always insisted that justification by faith alone is the chief article and **the** criterion, the “plumb line” by which all doctrine and practice is to be judged. There were weighty reasons for making that claim. It cannot simply be swallowed up as one criterion among many without losing its critical function. The ecumenical movement still has not properly understood or adjudicated this issue. Lutherans cannot allow themselves simply to be swallowed up in a species of generic Christianity. Lutheranism will then simply lose the witness it has to make in the ecumenical community. We urge serious discussion and deliberation on these and related issues before this document is passed on to the church for its approval.