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# LUTHERAN COMMENTATOR

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## Lutheran Leaders Out of Touch

**“JUSTIFICATION: Lutherans, Vatican agree – Joint declaration virtually ends the Reformation argument.”** This is how *The Lutheran* (8/98, p.38) heralded the adoption of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*. But the celebrated “agreement” does not stand up to these claims.

**Consensus Claimed; Consensus Denied.** On June 16, 1998, the Executive Council of the Lutheran World Federation voted unanimously to approve the *JDDJ*. On June 25, 1998, the Vatican responded that there is “a consensus on basic truths of justification.” But the Vatican also issued an Explanatory Note that empties the consensus of meaning.

Dr. Harding Meyer, a principal Lutheran drafter of the *JDDJ*, said of the Vatican response, “This is the worst news I’ve received during my whole career. This is not a basis for continuing the dialogue” (*Time*, 7/6/98).

**Tuning Out Rejection.** Despite the Vatican’s clear rejection, Presiding Bishop Anderson seemed intent on declaring agreement:

This does more than just open a new chapter in Lutheran-Roman Catholic relations. It really starts writing a new book.... Justification is one more area of faith where we now can say Lutherans and Roman Catholics agree (ELCA News Service, 7/2/98).

How can the Bishop be ecstatic when Dr. Meyer sees the Vatican response as not even offering “a basis for continuing dialogue”?

**Mistaken About the Issues.** What precisely does Bishop Anderson see as the great advance made in the

*JDDJ*? He says:

I believe an historical step has been taken. We have enlarged the circle of agreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics beyond the historic creeds to include God’s taking the *initiative* in our salvation. (Dial Bishop Anderson, phone message, July 1998)

But the truth is Lutherans and Catholics have not disagreed about who takes the *initiative* in salvation. Even the arch-heretic, Pelagius, agreed that God *initiates!*

if this consensus on God’s initiative in salvation is the “historical step” taken in the *JDDJ*, then the significance of the *JDDJ* is greatly exaggerated.

**The Vatican Response: Not A Surprise.** That the Vatican response was so negative should not have surprised anyone. After all, the 1994 revised *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the “current, official and systematic exposition of the Catholic faith,” affirms merit:

No one can *merit* the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion, but, moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can *merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification and for the attainment of eternal life (¶2010).

Bishop Anderson could have read this 1994 official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which both affirms God’s *initiative* in salvation and insists on *merit*.

**Pope John Paul II.** Another sign that the *JDDJ* would be rejected by the Vatican came in 1996, at an ecumenical prayer service in Paderborn, Germany, at which the Pope said, “Fundamental problems about

### The Vatican Response: Two Lutheran Reactions

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Luther's views on faith, scriptures, tradition and the church have not yet been sufficiently clarified" (*Lutheran World Information* #14/96). That's a diplomatic way of saying, "Luther's theology is not acceptable."

**Follow the Leader.** Despite these warning signs, as well as direct criticism of the *JDDJ* by the eminent American Catholic, Avery Dulles, Bishop Anderson strongly endorsed the *JDDJ*. The ELCA Conference of Bishops, the ELCA Church Council, and the ELCA Ecumenical Committee formed a solid flank, echoing Anderson's endorsement of the *JDDJ*. These top leaders seemed out of touch with Catholic theology.

**Red Flags.** From the Lutheran side, the problems with the *JDDJ* were identified in detail in a lengthy response by the faculty of Luther Seminary. Philadelphia Seminary also urged delay. German Lutheran scholars wrote extensively about the problems in the *JDDJ*. In January 1998 over 160 Lutheran professors of theology in Germany signed a statement urging that the *JDDJ* not be adopted by the LWF. (See *Lutheran Commentator*, March/April 1998 for a copy of this statement.)

Bishop Anderson chose to ignore these voices and push forward with the *JDDJ*.

**Bypassing the Congregations.** In addition, ELCA leaders never produced study materials for congregations and synods. ELCA members were never told about the compromises, conflicts, and ambiguities in the *JDDJ*. ELCA leaders simply ignored critics, bypassed the congregations, and put the *JDDJ* before the 1997 Assembly to be endorsed. Without discussion, except for one delegate's short speech praising Catholic schools, the Assembly endorsed the *JDDJ* by a vote of 958-25.

**Unity At Any Price?** "It is virtually a denial of the faith not to try to enhance the visible unity of the church," writes Pastor Edgar Trexler (*The Lutheran* 8/98, p.58).

If this were true, then Luther himself "virtually" denied the faith. To be sure, he was concerned for the unity of the church. But he found it in the Word and sacraments, not in mitered popes and bishops. His position wasn't politically correct in 1530 and it isn't politically correct in 1998. Should we give it up?

Our Confessions claim that the unity of the church is not so much invisible and visible, as *hidden* and *revealed*. It is *hidden* under the cross to nonbelievers but *revealed* under the cross in the Word and sacraments, that is, in proclamation, water, bread and wine to those who confess Christ as Lord (Apology 7,8:17,18; BC 171).

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