

**A Response to the U.S.**  
**Lutheran—Roman Catholic Dialogue Report VII**

**"Justification by Faith"**

**1. Introduction**

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod participates in ecumenical dialogues because it regards confession of the biblical Gospel and the effort to achieve agreement in the confession of the apostolic and catholic faith not as an optional matter but as a scriptural mandate.<sup>1</sup> For the sake of the truth of the Gospel, the Synod therefore remains committed to doctrinal discussions that provide an occasion for identifying points of agreement and disagreement that exist between the partners in dialogue. The Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations stated in 1975:

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod carries out ecumenical studies and participates in dialogs with other denominations for the purpose of identifying areas of agreement and of disagreement and for the sake of giving a Lutheran witness to the truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran Symbols.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of such doctrinal discussions is especially evident in the case of the Lutheran—Roman Catholic Dialogue. Our partner in this dialogue is the largest Christian tradition in the world, and the topic of discussion is the justification of the sinner before God by grace, through faith, on account of Christ alone. That Lutherans and Roman Catholics should sit down specifically to discuss what is for Lutherans the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* (the article upon which the church stands or falls) is indeed an occasion of historical moment.

We may caution, to be sure, against an exaggerated assessment of the achievements of the Lutheran—Roman Catholic Dialogue in its statement on justification by faith under consideration here, but we certainly rejoice that Lutherans and Roman Catholics are talking about something so central as this and that they have uncovered a considerable degree of agreement.

## 2. Background

In 1983 the Lutheran—Roman Catholic Dialogue in the United States completed its seventh round of bilateral dialogues. This round concluded with the adoption of a "Common Statement" on "Justification by Faith," which was first published in *Origins*, Oct. 6, 1983, and in vol. 7 of *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue* in 1985 (Augsburg Publishing House). This latter volume also included 16 of the background papers that had been used by the dialogue as it worked on the topic.

In the "Common Statement" the participants of the dialogue have reported that Lutherans and Roman Catholics have reached a "fundamental consensus" (§ 164) in the Gospel. This "consensus" is summarized in the following statement:

§ 4. We emphatically agree that the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ is the source and center of all Christian life and of the existence and work of the church. In view of this agreement, we have found it helpful to keep in mind in our reflections an affirmation which both Catholics and Lutherans can wholeheartedly accept: *our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known; we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ.* This excludes ultimate reliance on our faith, virtues, or merits, even though we acknowledge God working in these by grace alone (*sola gratia*). In brief, hope and trust for salvation are gifts of the Holy Spirit and finally rest solely on God in Christ. Agreement on this Christological affirmation does not necessarily involve full agreement between Catholics and Lutherans on justification by faith, but it does raise the question, as we shall see, whether the remaining differences on this doctrine need be church-dividing. Our intent in presenting this statement is to help our churches see how and why they can and should increasingly proclaim together the one, undivided gospel of God's saving mercy in Jesus Christ.

Concluding that it has achieved a "fundamental consensus" in the Gospel, the dialogue has further suggested that whatever remaining differences there may be on this doctrine need not be church-dividing. A responsible evaluation of the work of the dialogue will need to assess whether,

or to what extent, these conclusions can be sustained.

### **3. Summary of the Document's Contents**

The "Common Statement" consists of five parts: "Introduction" (§§ 1-4), "Chapter 1: The History of the Question" (§§ 5-93), "Chapter 2: Reflection and Interpretation" (§§ 94-121), "Chapter 3: Perspectives for Reconstruction" (§§ 122-60), and the "Declaration" (§§ 161-65).

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the history of the doctrine of justification from the time of St. Augustine to the present. The purpose of this chapter is to place the Lutheran—Roman Catholic disagreement on justification in the 16th century within its wider historical perspective. The focus and principal point of reference in this chapter is the debate over justification in the 16th century (§§ 21-63). This chapter seeks to review "in their historical setting the salient aspects of the Reformation doctrine and the history of the controversy," in order to make the point that "what was central to the Reformers was often secondary to their opponents" and that "perhaps neither side fully considered the claims of the other" (§ 21). Efforts at "rapprochement" are reviewed, including specific reference to the Regensburg Colloquy (Spring 1541), with its compromise formula of a double justification (*iustitia inhaerens* and *iustitia imputata*) (§§ 45-49). In its discussion of the Council of Trent (1545-63), chapter 1 concludes that "the Tridentine decree on justification . . . is not necessarily incompatible with the Lutheran doctrine of *sola fide*, even though Trent excluded this phrase" (§ 56).

This chapter continues with a survey of Roman Catholic and Lutheran developments since the 16th century, with brief reference made to a number of Protestant and Catholic theologians in the 19th and 20th centuries who addressed the topic of justification. The chapter attaches "primary importance" (§ 72) to the treatments given the doctrine by the Second Vatican Council and by the

Lutheran World Federation in its 1963 Helsinki Assembly. Maintaining that Vatican II "reflects the general character of Catholic theology since the Second World War," the "Common Statement" concludes on the basis of its examination of this period that "the adequacy of polemical statements made in the atmosphere of the Counter Reformation can no longer be taken for granted" (§ 78). Noting the criticism "that at Helsinki Lutherans failed to agree or say anything significant about justification" (§ 85), the "Common Statement" suggests that "perhaps the main importance of the Assembly is that it alerted Lutherans to a need for further consideration of the cardinal theme of justification" (§ 87). This chapter concludes with observations regarding "A Lutheran Hermeneutical Perspective," according to which "justification can be termed forensic but not in the sense that it gives exclusive primacy to one image for the saving action of God in Christ over others" (§ 90).

Chapter 2 (§§ 94-121) seeks to "describe and interpret the historic concerns and thought patterns of Lutheran and Catholic understandings of justification" (§ 94). Six questions related to the doctrine of justification are chosen to demonstrate how different concerns and thought patterns of Lutherans and Roman Catholics "entail different ways of speaking and thinking" (§ 97): forensic justification (§§ 98-101), sinfulness of the justified (§§ 102-4), sufficiency of faith (§§ 105-7), merit (§§ 108-12), satisfaction (§§ 113-16), and criteria of authenticity (§§ 117-20). The dialogue participants then submit that if it is correct that many of the divergent teachings of Lutherans and Roman Catholics can be explained as the result of different concerns leading to different patterns of thought and discourse, then they can "to some degree acknowledge the legitimacy of the contrasting theological perspectives and structures of thought" (§ 121). At the same time, the participants acknowledge that "some of the consequences of the different outlooks seem irreconcilable,

especially in reference to particular applications of justification by faith as a criterion of all church proclamation and practice" (§ 121). Nevertheless, as the introduction to chapter 2 already presupposes, Catholics and Lutherans affirm that "the development of ecumenical dialogue, historical research, and new modes of theological thinking enable us to consider the possibility that these patterns may in part be complementary and, even if at times in unavoidable tension, not necessarily divisive" (§ 94).

Chapter 3 (§§ 122-60) is divided into two sections. In the first section (§§ 122-49) the dialogue summarizes the biblical data regarded as having a "bearing on righteousness/justification by faith and its relation to the love and good works expected of a Christian" (§ 123). It is noted at the outset that recent developments "in the study of Scripture have brought Catholics and Lutherans to a fuller agreement about the meaning of many passages controverted at least since the sixteenth century" (§ 122). The use of the historical-critical method for some time by Protestants, and more recently by Catholics, has brought about more attention to the context of books and passages and the theology of individual writers. This chapter then proceeds to accent a number of "emphases" and "new insights" drawn from the biblical data. On the basis of its study of the pertinent texts, the dialogue concludes: ". . . Scripture has a Christological center which should control the interpretation of those parts of the Bible which focus on matters other than the center itself and which are therefore of secondary rank in the canonical hierarchy." Moreover, agreement exists "that the biblical witness to the gospel of God's saving work in Christ is richer and more varied than has been encompassed in either traditional Catholic or Lutheran approaches to justification" (§ 149).

The second part of chapter 3 (§§ 150-60), which is entitled "Growing Convergences,"

begins by stating with respect to the "use of the criterion" of justification by faith as a hermeneutical principle, that complete convergence does not exist between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. However, "Lutherans . . . do not exclude the possibility" that teachings such as purgatory, the papacy, and the cult of saints "can be understood and used in ways consistent with justification by faith." And if they are preached and practiced according to this doctrine, they need not be church divisive "even though Lutherans do not accept them" (§ 153).

This chapter then concludes by identifying 12 elements of "material convergence" presented in thesis form, which "constitute a very significant agreement" (§ 155). These statements present the "common convictions" of the Roman Catholic and Lutheran participants and return to the "fundamental affirmation" given already in the introduction to the "Common Statement" (§ 4; noted above).

This affirmation, it is said, expressed a "central concern" of the Reformation doctrine of justification (that is, "God accepts sinners as righteous for Christ's sake on the basis of faith alone"), but at the same time "does not exclude the traditional Catholic position that the grace-wrought transformation of sinners is a necessary preparation for final salvation" (§ 157).

The final section of the statement, the "Declaration," briefly commends the statement to the participating churches for their study, having declared: "A fundamental consensus on the gospel is necessary to give credibility to our previous agreed statements on baptism, on the Eucharist, and on forms of church authority. We believe that we have reached such a consensus" (§ 164).

#### **4. Evaluation**

The "fundamental affirmation" of the "Common Statement" begins with a formulation to which Lutherans committed to the *sola gratia* (grace alone) and *solus Christus* (Christ alone)

principles of the Reformation can indeed give their wholehearted consent: "our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known" (§§ 4, 157). That the Lutheran and Catholic participants could join in this basic affirmation, in spite of differences that remain, is reason for thanksgiving and cause for hope for progress in future discussions.

Moreover, the illuminating discussion on the "contrasting concerns" and "patterns of thought" that have given rise to different ways of speaking about justification by faith and the doctrinal points related to it (§§ 94-121) represents, in our judgment, a concerted effort on the part of the dialogue participants to overcome terminological hindrances that often frustrate ecumenical dialogue. The effort is clearly being made by the dialogue members to speak and listen to one another. As is often the case, participants gain new insights into the concerns of their partners in dialogue and into what informs *their* witness to biblical truth. The mutual understanding that results from these discussions is in itself a worthy goal, and the knowledge gained can only assist the churches involved in articulating more precisely their understanding of the Gospel of justification.

The post—World War II effort of Catholic theology "to renew itself through a return to biblical categories" (§ 78) is an encouraging development, and the "Common Statement" should be commended for its emphasis on the importance of biblical studies in the achievement of theological agreement. Furthermore, the joint affirmation of "a Christological center" as a hermeneutical assumption for a proper reading of the biblical texts, however much Lutherans and Catholics may wish to qualify its use, should also receive our commendation.

These encouraging aspects of the "Common Statement," however, do not prevent us from

registering basic concerns about the nature and content of this agreement. We do not doubt that some differences between Roman Catholics and Lutherans may be attributed to contrasting "patterns of thought" or degrees of "emphasis." But this should not, and in fact cannot, hide the fact that fundamental doctrinal differences still exist between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism on the doctrine of justification. While it may be possible to speak of a kind of "theological convergence," it is not possible in our view to speak of "doctrinal consensus," or "consensus in the Gospel." In the discussion that follows, we cite the principal reasons for this judgment.

**a. "Sufficiency of Faith" (*Sola Fide*)**

The dialogue participants agreed that "our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known" (§§ 4, 157). They go on to state, however, "we do not place our *ultimate* trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ" (emphasis added). Accordingly, regarding the "sufficiency of faith" for the justification of the sinner, it is agreed by both sides that "faith is now recognized . . . as incomplete without trust in Christ *and* loving obedience to him" (§ 107; emphasis added).

For Lutherans committed to the biblical teaching that faith *alone* is the *means* through which one receives the justification before God earned by Christ on the cross, such formulations allow an intolerable ambiguity to stand about the nature and role of faith. We would ask: Do such expressions mean that there may be some penultimate (as opposed to "ultimate") basis for our trust other than God's promise and saving work in Christ? If so, what would constitute such a basis? If this is not so, then how are we to understand that it is the "grace-wrought transformation of sinners" that becomes "necessary preparation for final salvation" (§ 157), and this especially in light of the



customary Catholic view that "faith, to be justifying, must be accompanied (or, perhaps better, *intrinsically qualified* [emphasis added]) by the gift of love (*caritas*)" (§ 105)? Even granting the primacy of God's grace at work, is not the possibility of human performance as meritorious for salvation in fact left open (see the careful discussion of merit in §§ 143 and 145)?

Lutherans recognize and readily affirm the necessity of good works as "*fruits of faith*." But to imply in any way that the sanctified life of the sinner must somehow "intrinsically qualify" justifying faith to accomplish justification before God is not only to misunderstand the nature of faith, but also to call into question the all-sufficient work of Christ itself. According to the Lutheran Confessions, the "faith alone" which saves is "such true faith as believes that we receive grace and forgiveness of sin through Christ" (CA XX 23). It is "confidence in God, assurance that God is gracious to us . . ." (CA XX 26). *Before* such faith, we are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:5) and therefore unable to do good works in the sight of God.

The dialogue has observed that "in recent decades the common approach to exegesis and the shift from Scholastic to modern categories of thought . . . have greatly narrowed the differences" (§ 107) between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. But it goes on to state that "the theological differences regarding the relation of faith to love have not been fully transcended, even though faith is now recognized on both sides as incomplete without trust in Christ and loving obedience to him" (§ 107). We question, however, whether the dialogue in coming to this conclusion has really advanced much beyond the historic impasse between the churches on the role of faith *alone* in the justification of the sinner before God.

#### **b. Justification as "a Critical Principle"**

The "Common Statement" repeatedly takes up the question of the use of justification by

faith as a hermeneutical guide or criterion by which to test "practices, structures, and theologies of the church" (§ 153; cf. §§ 28: 92; 118-20; 149; 153-54). On this question tension is said to exist between the Catholics and Lutherans. On the one hand, Lutherans affirm the "continuing validity" of the use of justification as "a critical principle by which to test what is authentically Christian," even while also granting that "the principle of justification by faith alone must not be employed to erode the fullness of the apostolic heritage and of the means whereby this heritage is to be mediated in any given time and place" (§ 117). On the other hand, Catholics "are wary of using any one doctrine as the absolute principle by which to purify from outside, so to speak, the catholic heritage" (§ 118), even while they "admit the legitimacy of the test" (§ 153). Both Lutherans and Catholics find it possible to agree, however, that justification may be used as a hermeneutical criterion, stating that "for purposes of theological interpretation Scripture has a Christological center which should control the interpretation of those parts of the Bible which focus on matters other than the center itself and which are therefore of secondary rank in the canonical hierarchy" (though this "lesser rank . . . does not mean that they lack all importance or authority . . .") (§ 149). It is at this point that we must raise a concern.

If by affirming justification by faith as a critical principle "to test *what is authentically Christian*" (emphasis added) the dialogue partners mean to say that the Gospel of justification is the criterion by which Christianity is distinguished from every other religion and (in keeping with the Reformers) "practical abuses and false theological teachings" are corrected, we would have no objection to such an understanding and use of justification by faith as an interpretive principle. It is the manner in which this principle appears to be applied to the Scriptures themselves, however, that we find objectionable.

The Catholic and Lutheran participants express agreement that the "Christological center" (including the "image" or "metaphor" of righteousness/justification) "should control the interpretation of those parts of the Bible which focus on matters other than the center itself and which are therefore of *secondary rank in the canonical hierarchy*" (§ 149; emphasis added). If, however, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is allowed to function as a device to sanction a view of the Bible and/or a method of interpreting it that reduces the authority of any part of the Scriptures as God's inspired, authoritative Word (on all matters concerning which it speaks), then we regard such an approach as contrary to the Scriptures themselves and the Lutheran confessional writings. To be sure, the Gospel is norm in the Scriptures in the sense that it serves to provide for us "the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures . . . and alone opens the door to the entire Bible" (Ap IV 2, German text), but not in the sense that parts of the inspired Scriptures may have "lesser rank" as normative texts for what is to be taught and believed in the church (normative authority, as distinguished from causative authority).

Regarding the "wariness" of Catholics to use "any one doctrine as the absolute principle by which to purify from outside, so to speak, the catholic heritage" (§ 118), it must be said that the doctrine of justification, when properly understood, is not from outside "the catholic heritage." Rather, it is grounded and rooted in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures and is of the very essence of the Gospel itself, from which the church lives and upon which it is built and by which it is corrected when necessary. The doctrine of justification through faith therefore is deeply imbedded in the church's heritage, in its creeds and confessions, and in the writings of the church's fathers. The doctrine of justification comes "from outside" only in the sense that the Gospel is given by God through His self-revelation in His Son. It is presented in the inspired Scriptures, its justifying

benefits are mediated through the means of grace, and thus this doctrine will always be a defense against human beings finding any ground of salvation in themselves.

**c. Justification as "Primary" Metaphor**

Both the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic participants hold in the "Common Statement" that "justification" must be viewed as one "metaphor" among many others in the Scriptures that speak of God's saving action in Jesus Christ. The Lutheran participants admit that "exclusive primacy" cannot be given to the "image" of justification as a forensic act, even while "prime importance" can be given to it when emphasizing the "proclamatory character of justification" (§ 90). Similarly, Catholics "hesitate to trace everything to justification considered simply as a forensic act" and "are often inclined to emphasize other images or concepts such as the remission of sin, adoption, redemption, regeneration, healing, sanctification, reconciliation, new creation, and salvation" (§ 99). Thus, both Catholics and Lutherans agree to the following affirmation:

. . . That it is God in Christ alone whom believers ultimately trust does not necessitate any one particular way of conceptualizing or picturing God's saving work. That work can be expressed in the imagery of God as judge who pronounces sinners innocent and righteous (cf. § 90), and also in a transformist view which emphasizes the change wrought in sinners by infused grace (§ 158).

In response to this affirmation, we readily grant that there is a sense in which justification may be regarded as one among many rich "metaphors" used in the biblical texts to describe God's saving action. When we refer to justification as the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, however, far more is entailed than a mere word study of *dikaio* and its cognates. As a doctrinal term justification is a shorthand way of referring to *all* the fullness and richness of the biblical language of God's saving grace in Christ. The *doctrine* of justification, we hold, is not for Lutherans merely one "metaphor" among many, for within that term the wholeness of the Gospel itself is contained,

including all biblical metaphors for it—including even the "metaphor" of "justification" itself. It is in this "doctrinal" sense that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations in its 1983 report *Theses on Justification* affirmed the following concerning the "centrality and function" of justification: "The doctrine of the sinner's justification before God by grace for Christ's sake through faith is the central and most important teaching of the Christian faith" (p. 7). We therefore reject as contrary to Scripture any understanding of the doctrine of justification that would include in God's forensic justification of the sinner "a transformist view which emphasizes the change wrought in sinners by infused grace" (§ 158). The doctrine of justification, strictly speaking, has to do with what God has done in Christ *for* us, not what He does *in* us. To be sure, as the Lutheran Confessions clearly emphasize, "after a person has been justified by faith, a true living faith becomes 'active through love' (Gal. 5:6). Thus good works always follow justifying faith and are certainly to be found with it, since such faith is never alone but is always accompanied by love and hope" (FC Ep III 11). In this connection, we question whether the statement adequately or accurately represents the attempts of the authors of the Formula of Concord to distinguish clearly between "the reckoned righteousness of faith" and "the inchoate righteousness of the new obedience" (FC SD III 32; cf. §§ 50-63).

The dialogue, in our judgment, has failed to present the role which the doctrine of justification plays in Lutheran theology in its full radicality. For Lutherans, this article is at the center of all the other articles of faith and it is at the center of each article. The doctrine of justification is the glue that holds the entire *corpus doctrinae* together, making Christian doctrine an undivided, organic whole. It is the article from which all the other articles flow and which all the others serve. This is what makes Lutheran theology "evangelical" theology: it has the chief article

of the Gospel, the doctrine of justification, at its heart. It is the article upon which the church stands or falls, and therefore, it is not, nor can it be, merely one "metaphor" among many (even if granted a "primary" role).

## **5. Conclusion**

The participants in this dialogue have prepared a careful and thorough document in which they have posed the right questions and addressed the critical issues. Moreover, in our opinion they have presented evidence to substantiate their conclusion that Lutherans and Catholics "are now closer on the doctrine of justification than at any time since the collapse of their last extended official discussion of the topic at Regensburg in 1541" (§ 151).

At the same time, we must also agree with the conclusion of this report that "what has emerged from the present study is a convergence (though not uniformity) on justification by faith considered in and of itself, and a significant though lesser convergence on the applications of the doctrine . . ." (§ 152). We agree that "the conflict between thought structures raises a number of issues we have not resolved and points to the need for further dialogue" (§ 154).

It is with these significant points of continuing disagreement in mind that the claims for "convergence" on the doctrine of justification between Lutherans and Roman Catholics must be heard. Convergence is not consensus. Consensus on the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, the article on which the church stands or falls, is still the absolutely necessary requirement for the resolution of disagreements between Roman Catholics and Lutherans.

In this connection we note that the dialogue participants began their "Common Statement" by stating with reference to the "Christological affirmation" agreed upon by both sides (§§ 4, 157)

that this affirmation "does not necessarily involve full agreement between Catholics and Lutherans on justification by faith." They further raise the question "whether the remaining differences on this doctrine need be church-dividing" (§ 4). The answer to this question is given in the concluding section of the "Common Statement": "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" (§ 159). Thus, the "Christological center" in the form of this "fundamental affirmation" is made to function hermeneutically in such a way as to permit "differences on theological formulations and on the relation between theology and proclamation" (§ 157; cf. §§ 88, 154).

Having reviewed carefully the "Common Statement" we have come to the conclusion that beneath the "differences on theological formulations" often noted, there remain substantive differences between the churches that go to the very heart of the Gospel itself and are therefore divisive.

Our larger concern here, of course, is not theological consensus (or convergence) for its own sake, but that the *pastoral* significance of the doctrine of justification remain preeminent and in no way be diminished. The twofold concern of the Lutheran Confessions is that Christ be given the full glory and that troubled sinners be given the full comfort that can be obtained from this precious doctrine, as the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states so clearly:

In this controversy the main doctrine of Christianity is involved; when it is properly understood, it illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings to pious consciences the abundant consolation they need. (Ap IV 2)

Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
Adopted Feb. 25, 1992

**Notes**

1. The commission recognizes with appreciation the service of the LCMS representatives on the Lutheran—Roman Catholic Dialogue during the preparation of the "Common Statement" on "Justification by Faith." Serving on the dialogue were Dr. John F. Johnson, St. Petersburg, Fla., and the late Dr. Fred Kramer of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Ill.
2. "Guidelines for LCMS Participation in Ecumenical Dialogs," *Convention Workbook*, 1975, p. 50.