



THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2009

THE JDDJ 10 YEARS ON

In Augsburg, Germany on October 31, 1999, representatives of Lutheran churches from all around the world and representatives of the Roman Catholic Church signed a document called the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. This declaration was prepared between 1995 and 1997 by Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians under the auspices of the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation.

It was hoped that both churches could be in agreement by 1997, so that a signing could take place to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Lutheran World Federation. However, this was not to be. It would not be until 1999 that the document would be signed.

According to this document, those signing it declared that they had reached a consensus on the doctrine of justification and that the condemnations which the two churches had directed at each other during the 16th century no longer apply to the way the churches understand this teaching today.

The Roman Catholic Church and representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia also issued their own “*Common Statement*” about this central teaching of the Christian faith. This statement claimed that there was ‘substantial agreement.’

The *Common Statement* is not based on the primary passages of the Bible that deal with justification through faith. Scripture has not fulfilled its proper role. The RC-LWF statement and the Australian one are betrayals of genuine Lutheranism.

Ten years on, and the *Joint Declaration* and *Common Statement* still stands today, however, something that hasn’t been made clear is the teaching of God’s grace. What is the *true* definition of grace?

Lutherans define grace as the free and undeserved favour of God, whereby without any merit or worthiness on our part, God declares sinners righteous and just in His sight for the sake of the all-sufficient life, suffering, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

According to the Lutheran view, justification is *forensic* and takes place outside of us. It is not something that happens in us. It is rather a declaration of God upon us. “*For the sake of what My Son Jesus Christ has done as your Substitute, keeping all My law perfectly on your behalf, bearing your sin and guilt, while on the cross, enduring God’s wrath upon your sin, dying your death and rising again to life, because*

of what He has done, I declare you just, righteous in My sight, innocent of all guilt.”

This is not by any means the Roman view of grace and justification. The Roman view of grace teaches that through His suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ merited grace for mankind. Grace is a power or virtue or quality which is *infused* by God, poured by God, so to speak, into the sinner. This grace, which is a quality or power from God, is an action whereby God pours into the human heart the gifts of faith, hope and charity, and thus gives humans the ability to please God with their good works and thus merit His favour. Thus justification takes place, according to the Roman view *within* the human being. And grace in the Roman view does not exclude works but makes possible those works which merit salvation. The Church of Rome opposes the Christian doctrine of grace so vehemently that it anathematizes all who define justifying grace as God’s gracious disposition in Christ and so exclude infused grace as a cause of justification.

To put it in another more simple way, Lutherans believe that the work of Christ *is* man’s justification (objective justification); Rome believes that the work of Christ *makes possible* man’s justification. Grace, according to the Roman view makes it possible for human beings to do those works which merit God’s favour and aid in attaining salvation. Grace comes from God but works also merit salvation. Lutherans reject all works as meriting salvation. Lutherans believe St. Paul who says, “*Therefore by the deeds of the law, no flesh will be justified in His sight*” (Romans 3:20). “*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law*” (Romans 3:28). “*...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified*” (Galatians 2:16). “*By grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast*” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Quite clearly, Lutherans and Roman Catholics have very different definitions of the word ‘grace.’ And the classical Roman view is not biblical.

But the *Joint Declaration*, which claims that Lutherans and Roman Catholics have arrived at consensus on the doctrine of justification, scrupulously avoids defining the word ‘grace.’ Why? In order that

agreement may be declared, an agreement which both parties know very well does not exist. As Robert Preus noted in his book, *Justification and Rome*, the participants in the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogues appear to have agreed, but not openly expressed or understood a dialogue process which involved massive equivocation, in order that an artificial and entirely misleading consensus might be declared.

Thus, the objective of the dialogue process was not that the participants might together arrive at the truth. The objective was to declare agreement, even if such a declaration had to ignore the fact that words were being defined differently. The objective of the dialogue process was not to promote doctrinal harmony in the church which is the body of Christ and thus hidden from the eyes of the world. The objective of the dialogue process was to declare doctrinal harmony to the entire world, knowing that such a declaration was not based on agreement on the truth, but on a common commitment to an objective. In other words, we wish to be united; therefore, we will declare ourselves to be united.

One wonders what would have happened had the Lutheran participants in the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogues insisted that a proper distinction between Law and Gospel be an essential part of the discussions and any subsequent agreements. For this distinction, which was at the heart of the Reformation, is one which Rome to this very day does not understand.

But would a heavier emphasis on objective justification during the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogues have resulted in a clearer agreement on the article of justification than that which was achieved? Quite the contrary! Had the Lutherans insisted on presenting the actual Lutheran view on justification, that in Christ God truly reconciled the entire world to Himself, it is probable that a more honest conclusion would have been reached – that is, we are clearly not in agreement on the article of justification. And indeed, while liberal Lutherans around the world cling feverishly to their *Joint Declaration*, believing it to be a true ecumenical breakthrough, we hear Rome saying, “*that the Roman Catholic condemnations, made at the time of the Reformation, might still apply to points of Lutheran doctrine as outlined in the joint declaration.*”

As we consider how we can witness to the world most effectively today, it would be wise for us especially to listen to the voice of C.F.W. Walther, who, in a Reformation sermon preached in 1858, gave the following words of warning and encouragement:

“But, my friends, the fact that the Lutheran Reformation was an actual and therefore a complete one is ...important for us... because it comforts and encourages us in the face of the deterioration under which the church of the Reformation suffers at the present time. For if the Reformation was a work of God, which anyone

can easily see who compares it with God’s Word, why should we be discouraged? Men may mock and despise such a work, but they cannot destroy it. People may forsake the fortress of our church and rob themselves of their heavenly treasures, but they cannot destroy this fortress. It stands in the midst of the ocean of the world, exposed to the waves of unbelief and error, assailed by the most fearful weapons of the mighty and wise of the world, hidden by the very clouds of heaven, withdrawn from the eyes of men by the smoke of battle, covered with offences, yes already seeming to totter. But, take heart! It does not fall, because it is built on a rock which lies deeper than the ocean of the world, upon the rock of the words of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ the cornerstone, upon the rock of the eternal Word of God itself. For God’s Word is nothing else than Luther’s doctrine, and Luther’s doctrine is nothing else than God’s Word. Why then should we despair? For “all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away, but the Word of the Lord endureth forever.” Therefore, Hallelujah! Hallelujah! “God’s Word and Luther’s doctrine pure Shall to eternity endure!” Amen.

THE BASIC EVENTS OF THE GOSPEL

“We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28)

Writing to the Church at Corinth, Paul said, “*What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. . . .*” (1 Cor. 15:1-8)

These are the basic events of the Gospel. But what do these events mean? The answer to that question is called the *Doctrine of Justification*, and if you get justification wrong, you get the Gospel wrong.

When we are talking about the doctrine of justification, we are talking about the Gospel itself. We’re talking about the saving work of Jesus on the cross, and if you get the Gospel wrong, the rest of your theology will be skewed as well. The churches of the Reformation have held that God justifies sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Jesus alone. Without Justification rightly taught, the church cannot exist.

The *Doctrine of Justification* is also the centre of gravity for all Christian theology. Other teachings always relate in some way to the Gospel. The point is, regardless of what particular doctrinal differences exist between Christians, the Gospel is always at stake. The *Doctrine of Justification* is ultimately the blueprint for the Gospel. It specifies the exact nature, shape and boundaries of the Gospel. The *Doctrine of Justification* teaches that man is declared righteous by

God alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, for the sake of Jesus alone.

We cannot overestimate the importance of the *Doctrine of Justification*. It is the teaching upon which the church stands or falls. It is the centre of gravity for all Christian doctrine. It is as Paul tells us, “...*the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes,*” (Rom. 1:16).

FAITH and JUSTIFICATION

In both Romans and Galatians Paul appealed to the statement in Genesis 15:6, “*Abram believed the LORD and He credited it to him as righteousness*” (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6). The “it” that God credited was Abram’s faith. A bank “credits” you with funds only if you have funds available. Sinful human beings have nothing available in themselves to make a claim on God. Paul wrote, “*When a person works, his wages are not credited as grace, but as a debt. However, to the person who, instead of working, believes in God, who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness*” (Rom. 4:4-5). A person is not righteous in himself to earn God’s verdict of credited righteousness. As Paul says, He is ungodly. That applied to Abram, too.

God’s crediting of righteousness depends on His justice. When we think about God as just or righteous, we can do it in three basic ways. One is His standard, that only those people who keep His Law perfectly are righteous. The second is that, as the Judge, He does not ignore sin, but punishes it, as sinners deserve. The third is the all-important one, that “righteousness” is often a Gospel word in books like the Psalms and Isaiah, alongside other Gospel words such as “salvation”.

The “law-court” associations of the word “justify” are absolutely basic. Before God we do not think of a jury, as we do in Perry Mason movies and the rest. However, we have a JUDGE, an ACCUSED person, an ACCUSER, who bases his demand for condemnation on the LAW, we have a DEFENCE COUNSELLOR, who pleads the case of the accused. And we have a surprising VERDICT, which on the face of it seems to be unjust, because the accused is guilty. The verdict is “Not guilty.”

Verbs in Greek that end in o-o often mean to make a thing such and such. For example, “*typhlos*” means “blind,” and “*typhlo-ō*” means “make blind.” However, this “factitive” or “making” idea is not so with the Greek verb “*dikaio-ō*,” the verb for “justify.” When God declares the sinner righteous, He does not make him holy in the sense that the person stops sinning from that point. God declares him righteous in spite of his sin. He credits him as being righteous.

If you think of a coin as having two sides, heads and tails, think of “justification” as the heads side, and “forgiveness” as the tails side. The obverse of crediting righteousness to a person (justifying) is not

crediting his sin against him (forgiving). Wiping off debts is a New Testament picture of forgiveness. Though a person does not have the money to repay a debt, when his debt is forgiven, he is reckoned, considered, regarded, as if he did not have a debt. The notion of crediting is basic to a right understanding of the verb “justify” or “declare righteous.”

We get a right understanding of some basic words if we ask what their opposites are. The opposite of “approval” is “disapproval.” The opposite of “justification” is “condemnation.” This, too, is a law-court word. Justification is much more than getting God’s “approval.” It is very important to see that in Romans the section from 1:18 to 3:20 is about “the wrath of God”, and the section from Romans 3:21 to 4:25 is about “the righteousness of God.” Both are revealed from heaven. Both are God’s ways of acting. The opposite of sin is grace. The opposite of Adam’s disobedience is Jesus Christ’s obedience. The opposite of death is life.

There are the two great opposing principles, both coming from God and both having a counterpart in human beings. There are God’s Grace and God’s Law. Faith in human beings is related to God’s grace, and works in human beings are related to God’s Law.

Not all the writers of the New Testament use the basic concept of “justification” as Paul does. The same idea can be expressed in another way as “reconciliation,” and in another way again as being made God’s dear children, by adoption, or by re-birth.

One of the great problems for many people who have the name “Christian” is the assumption that a person cannot be righteous and unrighteous at the same time. The fact that we have a sinful nature and continue to sin after we come to faith in Jesus the Saviour has to be faced. What is the relationship between the righteousness of God that is reckoned to the sinner through faith to the requirement throughout the word of God that God’s people should also live righteously? Lutherans have expressed this relationship in several short sentences: 1) “A Christians is justified and a sinner at the same time.” 2) “Faith justifies alone, but faith is not alone.” 3) Good works are necessary, but good works are not necessary for salvation.

Abram believed. A very important additional question is “What, then, is faith?” 1) Is it a virtue, a good work? 2) Is it making decisions, which an adult can do and an infant cannot do? 3) Is faith simply receiving God’s gift?

In the New Testament faith is sharply contrasted with works of the Law. Paul wrote: “*When a person works, his wages are not credited as grace, but as a debt*” (Rom. 4:4). The conclusion is very clear: Saving faith is not a work. It is not a virtue like faithfulness. In addition, because Paul also wrote, “*An unspiritual person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know*

them because they are discerned spiritually” (1 Cor. 2:14), there can be no talk about an unconverted person’s preparing himself for God’s grace, or deciding for it. Faith that can move mountains is a charismatic gift, and not every Christian has it, as with the other charismatic gifts. However, though saving faith is a human response, the Holy Spirit powerfully works saving faith through the Gospel, and every believing child of God has saving faith.

Abram’s faith was not faith in himself. He believed God’s promise about blessing all nations through His Descendant (Gen. 22:18). There is a very tight relationship between faith and its object. Everybody has faith of some kind, faith in themselves, in their money, in their cleverness, in luck, in their strength, in their good looks, in their sporting ability, and so on. Saving faith is not a natural endowment of a human being. However, it is a truly human response to God’s promise, and worked by the divine power of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the faith that justifies is bound up with its object, Jesus Christ. The relationship of faith to its object means that saving faith is not an attitude of the soul that is complete in itself, not an independent virtue, not piety, and a general trust in God as Creator and Provider and Protector. A person who believes directs his faith away from himself to His Saviour, Jesus Christ.

When God credits righteousness, He “declares righteous,” or “justifies.”

We have to ask, therefore, how God can be righteous in this sense, when He threatens punishment on all sinners, and yet declares sinners righteous. It is because the defence advocate in God’s law-court, Jesus Christ, has Himself paid the cost. In Romans 3:24 and 25 the words “redemption” and “atonement cover” express this cost. In addition, God is not unjust to allow someone else, who is innocent, to suffer the penalty of those who are guilty, because Jesus Christ willingly took on Himself the sin and death of human beings. He took this world’s suffering, sin, and death on Himself, and laid down His life, willingly, for them.

Some people make a distinction between “propitiation” and “expiation.” When human beings try to turn God’s wrath away by their own efforts, that is “propitiation.” The blood of Christ was a sacrifice for sin that God Himself provided. That was making “expiation.”

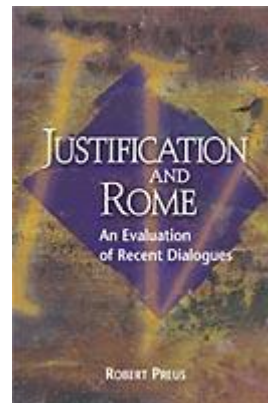
When we consider the substitutionary, or vicarious, death of Jesus Christ for us, we see that God’s wrath and God’s grace come together in Christ’s payment of the cost. God’s justice has been taken care of by Christ’s redemption the shedding of His blood in sacrifice, and in this way we undeserving sinners receive His grace, mercy, compassion, and love. Because of Christ’s work there is no condemnation for the sinners who believes in Him.

The righteousness of the Law through human beings’ efforts to gain God’s favourable verdict though keeping the Law, is excluded as a principle of gaining God’s favourable verdict and escaping His condemnation. However, a righteous life should be the response of the person whom God declares righteous through faith in Jesus Christ’s obedience. The believer is free from sin to serve righteousness. God credits righteousness independently of human efforts at a sanctified life. Nothing can supplement Christ’s all-sufficient atonement. God alone receives the glory because justification is through faith alone.

DARLING DOWNS PARISH DAY

On Sunday, the 27th of September, members of the AELC congregations based on the Downs met at Trinity Oakey for a parish service. Pastor Owen Ohlson was invited to be the guest preacher for the day. He preached on the Gospel for the day, Mark 9:38-50, and followed the theme: Anyone not against us is for us. After a short break for morning tea after divine worship, everyone went back into the church where Pastor Ziebell led a discussion on Membership and Fellowship.

It really was a wonderful day, and it is hoped that more of these days will be held in the future.



This study does more than simply restate the respective positions of the Lutheran Church and Roman Catholic Church of the 16th century, it also examines the pertinent materials of our generation on the same issues. Preus clearly explains where Lutherans and Roman Catholics have equivocated and in the process presents a succinct and honest evaluation of the current Roman Catholic doctrine of justification. It also evaluates some of the various efforts of Lutherans and Roman Catholics to reconcile their differences and achieve consensus or “convergence” on the doctrine. Available from Living Word Oakey. (07)46913446, aelcbookshop@westnet.com.au.

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