

DOCUMENTATION
Action taken by the LWF Council
on the recommendation of the Standing Committee for Ecumenical Affairs

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification'

(Adopted by the LWF Council 16 June 1998)

NOTE: *Section references [§] throughout this document refer to paragraphs in the text of the "Joint Declaration."*

A. BACKGROUND

1. *Development of the "Joint Declaration"*

Informal conversations between Catholics and Lutherans were occurring in some places already before the Second Vatican Council. Only in 1967, however, after the Council, did the official dialogue mandated by the churches begin.

Renewed common listening to the good news proclaimed in the Bible, and the reception of insights of biblical, theological, and historical study, led to a significant convergence in the understanding of the justification of the sinner by God's grace, through faith in the saving act of Christ.

The possibility of expressing agreed understanding of justification became clear already in the first phase of the dialogue with its final report "The Gospel and the Church" (1972).

Two national Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues made decisive contributions: the dialogue--in the USA ("Justification by Faith," 1985) and the dialogue in Germany ("The Condemnations of the Reformation Era," 1986). The latter of these reports was given a binding response in 1994 by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany.

The international Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue was able to conclude its third round with the report "Church and Justification" (1994).

Also in dialogues with other churches, regional and international, the central significance of the doctrine of justification for the content of right preaching of the gospel has been the object of specific focus.

Within the LWF itself, the theme of justification has been an important topic. The LWF Assembly in Helsinki (1963) sought to address this theme in all its complexity. Later developments led to fruitful deepening of reflection on various aspects of the message of justification. The ecumenical dialogues in which Lutheran churches of the LWF have been a part have been important in this process.

The time is now ripe for a Lutheran-Roman Catholic joint declaration on the doctrine of justification. A balance of the dialogue results has been drawn, and the results summarized and formed into a declaration to which the churches can officially respond.

2. *Nature of the "Joint Declaration"*

The intention of the "Joint Declaration" is formulated by the document in the following terms (§5):

"The present 'Joint Declaration' has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations."

The "Joint Declaration" is not a new and separate presentation of justification... . Nor is it formulated with an intention that it should be adopted as a new creedal statement in the churches.

The "Joint Declaration" affirms "a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification." These agreements presented in the common statements of the "Joint Declaration" are asserted although there are differences as mentioned in §§18-39.

In the "Joint Declaration" the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are encouraged to recognize mutually that if the two churches teach justification as formulated in the "Joint Declaration," then the mutual condemnations on justification in the sixteenth century do not apply.

In the letter from the General Secretary to the LWF member churches of February 1997 the question raised only refers to the Lutheran condemnations with regard to the teaching on justification of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the exposition of justification in the "Joint Declaration" is also intended as a basis for the Roman Catholic Church to make a similar affirmation regarding the Roman Catholic condemnations of the Lutheran teaching of justification.

The mutual character of the "Joint Declaration" is essential to its method, and is therefore basic to a proper understanding of the project. The "Joint Declaration" is an ecumenical agreement, i.e., an agreement between the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church on a traditionally church-dividing issue.

The "Joint Declaration" is a statement, also, to the effect that the agreement in the understanding of justification "must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches. Here it must prove itself." (§43).

The acceptance of such an agreement, therefore, does not mark the end of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue on justification and its significance. On the contrary, it implies an obligation to continue the dialogue on the basis of the agreements reached. The "Joint Declaration" itself names important issues where further clarification is called for. Specifically mentioned are the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, as well as ecclesiology, authority in the church, ministry, the sacraments, and the relation between justification and social ethics. (§43).

The doctrine of justification has, in recent years, become the focus of increased theological attention along with a deepening discussion of its ecumenical meaning. The "Joint Declaration" must be read in this context. In addition to the need for further common investigation of the consequences of this doctrine for specific areas of teaching and practice in the church, there is also a need to continue the fundamental theological study of the doctrine of justification as such.

3. *Summary of the analysis of the responses by the LWF member churches to the "Joint Declaration" by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg*

(NOTE: The numbers below reflect the responses received and made available to members at the time of the Council's vote, though for production and translation reasons they were not part of the original document.)

a. At the time of the writing of this analysis (June 12, 1998), 89 member churches out of the total 122 member churches and 2 associate member churches have responded to the General Secretary's letter of February 1997. These churches represent 54,716,821 Lutherans, i.e., 95% of the Lutherans within the LWF. They come from all regions of the LWF: Africa (19), Asia (23), Europe (33), Latin America (11), and North America (3).

b. The responses were analyzed in relation to the conclusions of the "Joint Declaration" (§§40 and 41) and the question posed in the General Secretary's letter.

c. Of the 89 churches responding to the "Joint Declaration," 80 have answered "yes." Five churches have answered "no." One answer is difficult to interpret but seems to be a "yes." Three answers are difficult to interpret, but seem to be "no."

d. The 80 "yes" answers represent 89.9% of the responses received (91% if the "difficult to interpret but seems to be yes" answer is included). In addition, these answers represent 45,137,913 Lutherans or 78.3% of the Lutherans in the LWF (48,470,654 Lutherans and 84.1% of the Lutherans in the LWF if the "difficult to interpret but seems to be yes" answer is included). Churches representing a solid majority of the Lutheran communion have thus endorsed the "Joint Declaration".

e. The 5 negative answers represent 5.6% of the responses (9% if the "difficult to interpret but seems to be no" answers are added). They represent 1,598,287 Lutherans or 2.7% of the Lutherans within the LWF (6,246,167) (10.8% of the Lutherans within the LWF if the "difficult to interpret but seems to be no" answers are added). By any count, the negative answers are vastly outweighed by the positive answers.

f. According to the Strasbourg analysis an affirmation of the conclusions of the "Joint Declaration" by the Council would be fully in line with the consensus indicated by the responses.

4. *Some points arising from, and related to, the study process in the churches*

a. The majority of the replies received from member churches express, in one way or another, their appreciation for the "Joint Declaration" process. Also, some churches have already at this stage found the study and reception process fruitful in ecumenical relationships.

b. Certain topics were, nevertheless, found especially difficult, and have been the object of intense discussions. Such topics were noted as problems even by some churches which have affirmed the "Joint Declaration" and will need to be the focus of continued discussion between Lutherans and Catholics. The most significant difficulties related to the status of the doctrine of justification as criterion (§18), concupiscence and sin in the justified (§§28-30), and the relation of good works to the preservation of grace (§38).

c. In addition to these issues directly related to justification, the debate has shown the need for further exploration of an adequate concept of ecumenical consensus. The "Joint Declaration" sets forth what may be called a differentiated consensus, i.e., a consensus sufficient for a specific purpose and thus compatible with remaining differences. The agreement "does not cover all that either church teaches about justification." It is compatible with remaining differences in that these differences "are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations" (§5).

d. The hope has been expressed by many that a successful conclusion of the "Joint Declaration" as a mutual, ecumenical agreement in the area of justification and the non-applicability of the condemnations from the 16th century, will have pastoral consequences in the future for the relationship between Lutherans and Catholics even on the parish level, among other things in the area of common prayer and worship. Although the "Joint Declaration" does not as such solve remaining differences regarding ministry and sacraments, it is hoped that the "Joint Declaration" will be an important basis for progress also in those areas.

B. RECOMMENDATION

1. Premises

a. By 12 June 1998, 89 member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) have responded to the General Secretary's letter of February 1997, which asked if they could affirm the conclusions of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification."

b. 80 churches, representing 89.9% of the LWF constituency, have affirmed the differentiated consensus displayed in the "Joint Declaration." The consensus claimed by the "Joint Declaration" has three aspects. First, the content of the consensus is contained in the jointly affirmed assertions in Chapter 1 (§§8-12), Chapter 3 (§§14-18), and Chapter 4 (§§19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37). To affirm these agreements is itself to affirm the consensus. Second, the "Joint Declaration" claims that the "remaining differences" related to these themes "do not destroy the consensus regarding basic truths" (§40), i.e., that the differences are compatible with the joint affirmation of the common statements in the "Joint Declaration." Third, this consensus also "shows that the remaining differences are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations" (§5). If a church affirms the agreements in the "Joint Declaration" and declares on the basis of these agreements that the relevant condemnations are not applicable, even if differences remain, then it has affirmed the sort of consensus the "Joint Declaration" claims.

c. An even greater number of churches than the ones mentioned in point b., have affirmed that the condemnations in the Lutheran confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in the "Joint Declaration."

d. The LWF General Secretariat maintains the list of member churches which have endorsed, or will endorse, the conclusions of the "Joint Declaration." The statements received from the churches are, and will remain, available for study. As the discussion continues, churches which have not replied or which have replied negatively can add their names to the list of affirming churches. Negative answers are, however, fully respected within the communion.

e. An action of this type by the Council on behalf of the LWF is a concluding moment in an integrated process of consultation and deliberation involving the member churches and the bodies of the LWF. Specifically, the Lutheran affirmation of the "Joint Declaration" is the result of a process involving both the action of the affirming churches and the action of the LWF Council.

2. *Affirmation*

On the basis of these premises, the Council VOTED:

- to thank the member churches which have studied and given their response to the "Joint Declaration" for their effort,
- to commend the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg for contributing the analysis, requested by the Council in 1997, of the responses from the churches,
- to receive the responses from the member churches to the "Joint Declaration" and the analysis of these responses by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg,
- to recognize the positive response to the "Joint Declaration" by the great majority of the responding churches, representing a significant majority of the LWF constituency,
- to affirm, on the basis of the positive responses of the said majority, the agreements regarding the doctrine of justification as presented in the "Joint Declaration," and to declare that, on the basis of these agreements, the doctrinal condemnations in the Lutheran confessional writings regarding justification do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church as presented in the "Joint Declaration,"
- to encourage exploration of pastoral consequences of the agreements in the "Joint Declaration" jointly with the Roman Catholic Church,
- to emphasise, in light of the comments and concerns expressed by the churches in their responses, the need for further common investigation, both of the consequences of this doctrine for specific areas of teaching and practice in the church, and also of the controverted topics within the doctrine of justification that arose during the reception process,
- to ask the General Secretary to prepare and present to the Council in 1999 a plan of action by which the issues listed in §43 of the "Joint Declaration" and additional controversial questions that have arisen within the "Joint Declaration" process can be addressed within the LWF and together with the Roman Catholic Church,
- to request the General Secretary, when the response from the Roman Catholic Church is published, that he in consultation with the President and the Executive Committee, and in coordination with the Roman Catholic Church, determine how the "Joint Declaration" might most appropriately be jointly confirmed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church.

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**Responses to the 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification'
from the LWF Member Churches**

(Received as of 12 June 1998)

"Yes" without qualifying comment

Christian Protestant Angkola Church [Indonesia]
Church of Norway
Church of Sweden
Church of the Augsburg Confession of Alsace and Lorraine [France]
Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Congo
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Angola
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa
Evangelical Lutheran Church of France
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe
Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Central African Republic
Evangelical Church of Eritrea
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Madhya Pradesh [India]
Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia
Evangelical Church of the River Plate [Argentina]
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Suriname
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria [Germany]
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia
Evangelical Lutheran Church - The National Church of Iceland
Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Slovak Republic
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovenia
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Italy
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi
Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN)
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (DELK)
Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur and Assam [India]
Hong Kong and Macau Lutheran Church
Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church
Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria
Lutheran Church in Guyana
Lutheran Church in Malaysia
Lutheran Church in Great Britain
Protestant Christian Batak Church [Indonesia]
Salvadoran Lutheran Synod [El Salvador]
Silesian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Czech Republic
Simalungun Protestant Christian Church [Indonesia]
Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in SR Yugoslavia
Taiwan Lutheran Church
The Nicaraguan Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope

The Lutheran Church in Hungary
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Venezuela
The Indonesian Christian Church
The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus
The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong
United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India - (seven churches):
 Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church
 India Evangelical Lutheran Church
 Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church
 Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church
 South Andhra Lutheran Church - Telugu
 The Arcot Lutheran Church
 The Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church
United Evangelical Lutheran Church [Argentina]

"Yes" with qualifying comment

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Natal-Transvaal)
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile
Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Austria
Evangelical Church of Pomerania [Germany]
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mecklenburg [Germany]
Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Cape Church)
Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brunswick [Germany]
Evangelical Church in Württemberg [Germany]
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony [Germany]
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thuringia [Germany]
Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Switzerland
 and the Principality of Liechtenstein
Indonesian Christian Lutheran Church
Lutheran Church in Chile
Lutheran Church in Liberia
Lutheran Church in the Philippines
Lutheran Church of Australia
North Elbian Evangelical Lutheran Church [Germany]

Difficult to interpret but seems to be "yes"

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover [Germany]

Difficult to interpret but seem to be "no"

Church of Lippe [Lutheran Section][Germany]
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Schaumburg-Lippe [Germany]

"No"

Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad [Canada]
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baden [Germany]
Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church [Japan]
Malagasy Lutheran Church [Madagascar]
The Lutheran Church of Nigeria

